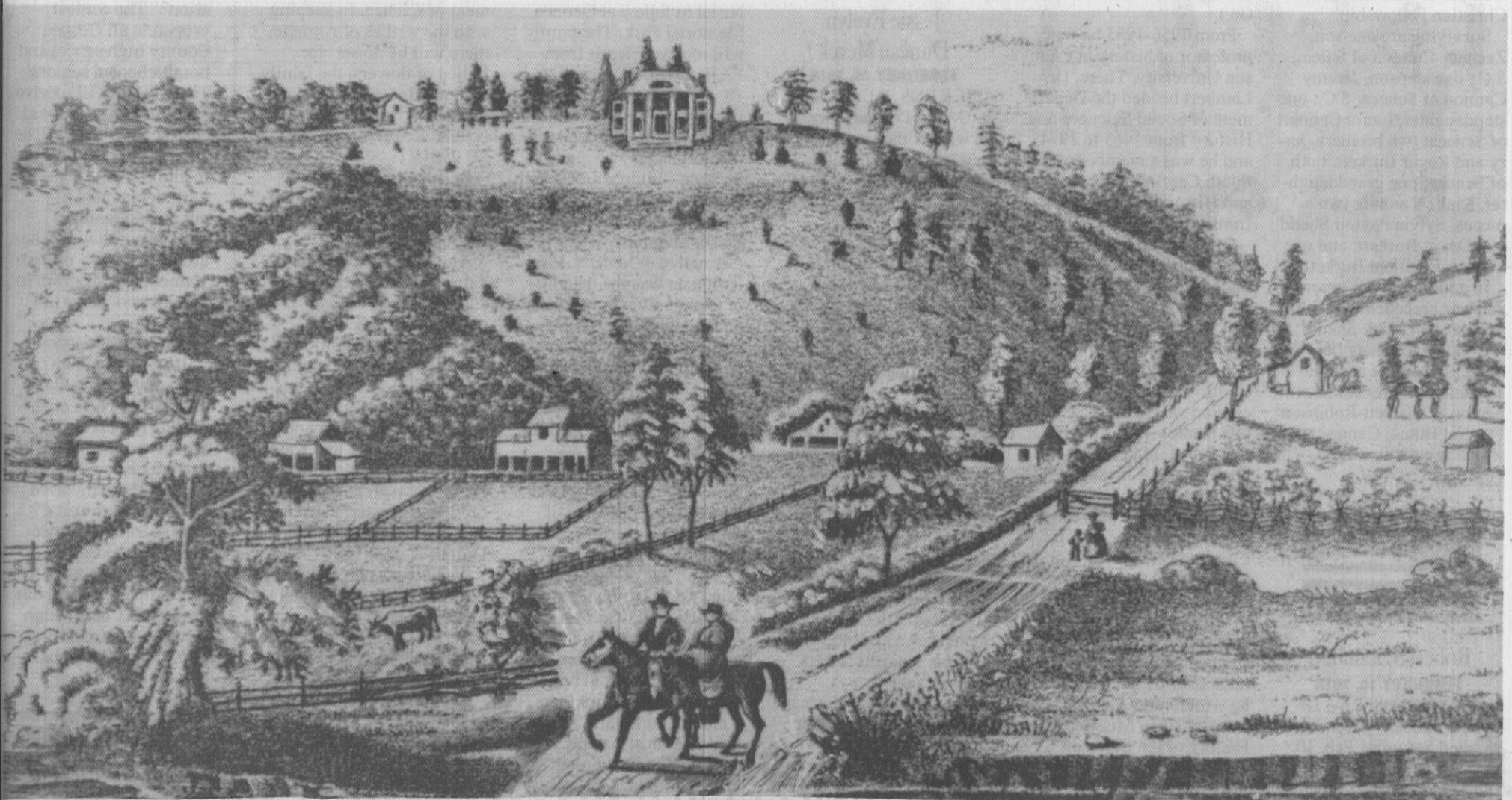
1790s Keowee Plantation

A shining antebellum castle on a hill



Beautiful and majestic, the 1792 Keowee Plantation home was situated atop a high knoll above the confluence of the Keowee and Twelve Mile rivers near today's Clemson. Keowee River entered from the left in this image, and Twelve Mile River came from the right. They gave life to the fabled Seneca River. All three today are inundated by Lake Hartwell. This view is from today's U.S. Highway 123 bridge over Lake Hartwell and looks north over the Southern Railway trestle.

COURTESY JERRY L. ALEXANDER

BY JERRY LAMAR ALEXANDER
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Sharp, staccato gunshots from many long-barreled Revolutionary War flintlocks echoing across the blue mountains of upper South Carolina have long died away. Brave, bold Cherokees, forced by war to forever abandon their centuries-old homeland in a 1785 treaty, have left this state. Up and down and alongside the bluish green waters of Keowee River, hand-swung axes are felling trees for erecting cabins. The peopling of Pendleton District is setting a pace not unlike an onrushing whirlwind. Friendly new faces are everywhere.

Seemingly overnight, they began crowding the sleepy little village of Pendleton. It is the new district seat for an area covering Anderson, Pickens and Oconee Counties. Freshly filled with local supplies, settlers guide swaying white-topped wagons crammed with families and squealing babies outward along winding paths through the forests.

These newcomers, armed with a grant in one hand and a loaded rifle in the other, would quickly be clearing and farming land given them by state government. This undeveloped tip of South Carolina was everybody's destination in the 1780s, it seems.

One remarkable man among this tsunami of settlers, standing tall and straight was Col. John Ewing Colhoun. He has already chosen a prominent spot for his palatial new home. It crowned a large acreage overlooking the junction of Keowee and Twelve Mile rivers, where the Seneca River is formed. Born in Virginia in 1751, he came to the mountains from the South Carolina low country about 1792. A wealthy planter, he also was a state legislator, attorney and was then a U.S. Senator.

Col. Ewing Colhoun was a brother to Revolutionary War General Andrew Pickens' wife, Rebecca Colhoun Pickens. His daughter, Floride, years later would wed her famous cousin, John C. Calhoun. The latter was also an attorney, mid-1800s U.S. Senator, vice president and otherwise the most famous early owner of Fort Hill Plantation.

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KEOWEE:

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It was built a few years later a couple of miles south down Seneca River from Col. Ewing's "Keowee." John C. Calhoun's son-in-law, Thomas Clemson, would give the Fort Hill property to start Clemson University at his death. Fort Hill today basks in the center of that large learning institution.

An article by Alice Watson in an Anderson newspaper Aug. 3, 1961, briefly described Colhoun's mountaintop abode. "The lovely colonial home, situated high up on a wooded area, sloping on all sides, looked down on the Keowee River."

Huge, stuccoed brick columns along the front porch made the home glisten from atop the highest hill unlike any other. Brick for these columns were handmade there from native clay and sand and baked in a kiln located on the Twelve Mile River. Thousands of v-shaped bricks made up the columns.

The smaller, pointed end of each brick was placed facing the interior of the column and the wider, opposite end made up the rounded outer perimeter. When the last bricks were laid at the top, each cylinder of cemented bricks was then stuccoed and painted or whitewashed. These sizeable columns could easily be seen for two miles adorning this white palace.

Today thousands of automobiles speed daily across the Highway 123 bridge spanning Lake Hartwell between Clemson and Oconee County. Most drivers may never know about this spectacular home site seen in the 1790s, directly north over the railroad trestle and across the lake. The property is now owned by Clemson University. A historic marker erected alongside a nearby bridge over Lake Hartwell on the road to Daniel High School goes into detail about Colhoun and his life for all to see.

From its perch on high there for decades beginning in the late 1790s, Keowee was indeed a working plantation. The two-storied home commanded a sweeping, all encompassing view of the beautiful Keowee, Twelve Mile and Seneca rivers. When at home from political office and duties in Washington, and relaxing on his porch, Colhoun especially enjoyed the wide downriver vista.

In summer, it revealed his literally hundreds of fertile acres bathed in snowy cotton while other land glowed with mile long swaths of dark green corn. The streams dissected his bottoms perfectly.

Shouts of sweating, hardworking slaves busily plowing fertile soil reverberated daily across this pancake-flat terrain. Voice commands directed teams of sturdy oxen. Workers were also plowing a half-mile away. They were often hidden by the high rows of corn loaded with full ears almost ready for harvest. Other luscious crops of beans, cabbage, tomatoes, okra, squash, melons, Irish and sweet potatoes were nearing ready.

This bounty would be stored in nearby, large barns and cribs of Keowee Plantation. A number of storage buildings as well as some slave homes were situated closer together down at the work fields and river junction. Barns housing working stocks of mules, oxen, horses, beef and milk cows were conveniently located near river water sources as well. Large gardens of vegetables for the plantation's kitchen were nearby and fenced in from wild animals.

Up the winding dirt road at the main house, additional slaves would be preparing meals and churning rich milk into butter for the expansive dinner table. Gallons of milk were stored at the foot of the hill behind the antebellum home in a rock-walled spring house, designed for keeping food cool until needed. Remains of it still can be seen there today.

Pork, lamb and beef were salted and stored in "smoke houses" nearby. Chickens, geese and other poultry clucked contently throughout the farmyard.

A sunken area at the rear of the house reveals the former location of a large cellar. Its constant coolness was needed to store not only vegetables, but some meats not consigned to smokehouses. Several good hunters called Keowee home. They regularly supplied supplemental food for the "big house" tables such as venison, bear meat, raccoon, rabbit and squirrel. At any time fresh fish and plump turtles were needed, they could easily be found just a few steps away in the swirling eddies of Keowee and Twelve Mile. Elsewhere on the property were small orchards producing delicious apples, grapes and peaches for desserts.

Squeals of playful Colhoun children and other cheerful young cousins often filled the air at Keowee. They all enjoyed a happy, well-balanced family life there. Another important aspect of living at Colhoun's plantation was the couple's pursuit of an active social agenda. Especially since the senator was deeply engaged in local and national politics. He and his wife enjoyed presiding over a home often filled with visitors.

Most large plantations saw their share of visitors. Keowee was no exception. The Colhouns were gracious hosts to everyone who came. Even a grand piano was played for visitors after dinner on many occasions. From time to time, special guests included such close kinfolk as Gen. Andrew Pickens and his wife, Ewing's sister, Rebecca.

Beginning after the Cherokee treaty of 1785, they established Hopewell Plantation just a couple of miles downriver. During the daytime, their visits were for only a few hours. Other local neighbors were always dropping in. Some were from nearby plantations while a few came from Pendleton, Abbeville or even parts of the downstate. Rooms at Keowee were kept ready for overnight guests who had miles to travel on yon morn.

Still others dropped by completely unannounced simply to discuss political issues of the day. These topics especially interested senator Colhoun as he strove to monitor the political pulse of voters in his district.

Parties and early dances were frequently held at Keowee, These were a welcome form of local entertainment on a raw frontier that saw few other dalliances such as were very common in Charleston. In fact, in their very early years at Keowee, The Colhouns missed those social gatherings routinely held every couple of weeks at various friends' low country homes.

For these events, handsome carriages binging well-dressed couples began arriving with the gathering darkness. They were decked out in their best garments with smiles all around. Several vehicles with fringe on top, driven by tophatted drivers managing beautiful teams of horses called "matched greys" or glistening pairs of beautiful blacks, lined up at the front door of Keowee.

Each visitor was graciously and personally greeted by their hosts before being ushered into the large living room where festivities were being held. Strains of string music wafted from open windows and across the lofty landscape.

Ladies were outfitted in colorful, billowing, hooped dresses so popular in the antebellum era. They were escorted by well-dressed gentlemen in bow ties, exuding a happy, anticipating demeanor. Perhaps Gen-

eral Pickens and Rebecca riding in a carriage along with General Robert Anderson and his bride would be among the early guests to arrive. After all, it was party time in the upcountry. These events continued until midnight and, sometimes, early morning.

An aggressive early boat trade plied this far up the Seneca arm of the Savannah River from Augusta, Ga., and points southward to the sea. Early on, this involved light boats with flat, shallow bottoms because of problems getting over Portman Shoals several miles south down the Seneca River. Heavier, deeper draft boats could not be used at that time.

A contract to sluice the river down three-fourths of Portman Shoals by neighbors James and Elisha Lawrence was finished in 1824. And Archibald Bowman had sluiced the stream through the last fourth of Portman down to Andersonville by 1824 or 1825. Soon, from Old Pickens Courthouse Town, which would become a reality upstream on the Keowee in 1828, farmers would be able to ship local goods by the ton downriver on larger barges.

A sturdy wharf located on the Seneca River at Keowee Plantation would facilitate the shipping of Col. Colhoun's commodities of cotton, corn and produce of other sorts on smaller barges to Augusta and beyond. Other plantations along the way, such as nearby Fort Hill and even Hopewell, would be doing the same. General Robert Anderson's plantation, 2 miles below and opposite Hopewell, also would have a wharf along the Seneca River. It was indeed a busy tributary in those days.

Much of the power to move the flat bottom barges back upstream against the current was supplied by raw muscle, sweat and tears, Strong oarsmen poled or even sometimes pulled the shallow drafted watercraft upstream with ropes while walking stream banks in certain areas.

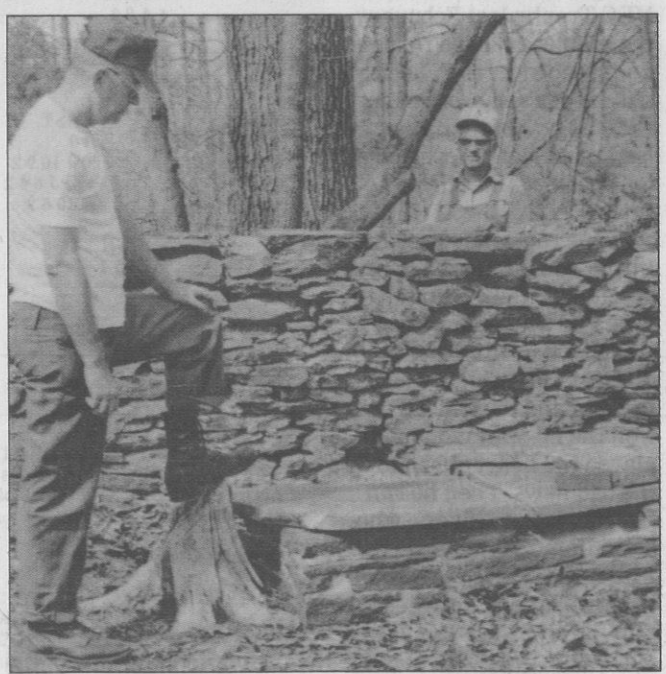
Carrying goods and commodities produced at Keowee Plantation, upriver neighbor James W. Lawrence made a few trips down to Hamburg, S.C., in his loaded flat bottom boat. These goods would be sold or traded there.

Local residents, always desperate for news of the outside world, were delighted when boatmen would arrive upriver, camping overnight down near plantation wharves. While awaiting downriver cargo, often by the flickering light of after supper campfires, these strangers were happy to reveal the latest happenings in the low country.

News even came from the thriving port of Savannah and beyond. While some tales obviously were of second and third hand, almost any tidbit was entertaining to locals. These tales often conjured up dreams of faraway lands and people. At the least they were informative. Starry-eyed people eagerly passed them along to neighbors at first chance.

Unfortunately, Col. Col-

tion home burned on Sunday, Oct. 10, 1880



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In this photo made decades ago, Harry Bodiford, left, and Don Curtis pay their respects to the memory of Col. John Ewing Colhoun at his gravesite.

houn's time on earth ended at 51 years of age on Oct. 26, 1802. His death occurred at Keowee Plantation while he was still serving as a sitting United States Senator in Washington. Ironically, nearly five decades later, his cousin, U.S. Senator John C. Calhoun, died while residing in Washington.

Details of Col. Ewing's demise are rather scarce now. He was buried a short distance to the northwest behind his palatial home. The family burying ground is protected by a waist-high, thick rock wall. Members of his family are interred here as well. His grieving widow placed an inscribed granite slab covering the tomb that focuses a closer insight into the colonel's personality and his life's accomplishments.

Although vandalized years ago, it still reads, "Sacred to the memory of the Honorable John Ewing Colhoun. He was born in the year 1751 and died on the 26th October, 1802. He was a man of sound understanding, improved by liberal culture, mild in his temper and moderate in his desires. He was but little disturbed by the ordinary casualties of life, compassionate to the distresses and indulgent to the failings of others. He regulated his own conduct by the rigorous rules of justice. Deservedly in the confidence of his country he filled at the time of this death the high station of Senator of the United States. He died tranquilly in the bosom of his family, loved, honored and lamented with humble confidence in God to a happy immortality. By the side of their father repose the mortal remains of three beloved infants, Benjamin Colhoun. William Sheridan Colhoun, Carolina Colhoun. This monument is erected by the afflicted widow and the bereaved mother, Floride Colhoun, 1803."

Following the untimely death of his father, John Ewing Colhoun Jr. took over operation of the plantation and it prospered for years under his direction. The junior Colhoun was also quite an entrepreneur for his day. Not only was he a forward-thinking farmer, but a pioneer who dabbled in local industry. One early venture involved his start-up operation in 1829 of a wool factory near the plantation. It was located on shoals of Twelve Mile River providing the local water-power needed.

In this venture, young Colhoun had formed a partnership with a Thomas Elliot to operate his small wool factory. He furnished the building and labor while Elliot supplied machinery and management. This was one of the earliest factories in the Upstate.

One newspaper description said it was located at Colhoun's Mill site five miles north of Pendleton Village. The factory opened in May 1829 and flourished for several years. During the opening on May 6 of that year, Colhoun advertised that within five days his factory would be fully open for business, "where carding, spinning, weaving, filling, dying and dressing will be carried on by a gentleman from the north well-acquainted with the business."

The younger Colhoun quickly won acclaim for his products, especially his blankets, which were made of a cotton and wool blend. These won prizes at local fairs and also at an exhibition held at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia. They were pronounced "by competent judges, to be equal, if not superior to London Dufils."

However, in spite of this happy beginning, Colhoun would decide within a few short years to give up manufacturing, indicating he had insufficient time to attend his mill. In 1837, he advertised the machinery for sale. It had operated for some eight years.

A brief summary printed over a half century later in the Pickens Sentinel issue of Oct. 14, 1880, conveyed even more sad news. "The plantation home of "Keowee" burned on Sunday, Oct. 10, 1880. The former residence of John Ewing Colhoun, known as "Keowee," located in this county, burned last Sunday. The property is now owned by Dr. O.M. Doyle of Toccoa, Georgia, and occupied by Benjamin C. Crawford."

The splendor and majestic era of the fabled colonial Keowee Plantation home had come to an end.

Nothing remains recognizable there among the leafy underlay today but a few deteriorating brick remnants from the columns. Some decaying, white-washed areas of clay still peek from the old porch foundations. Frisky squirrels play among the tall oaks as the morning sunlight chooses various paths through the leafy Clemson Forest umbrella. After this one such famous era of prominence had now faded into oblivion, old mother earth as always, is yet again gradually reclaiming her own.

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