

Chapter 3. The Death Voyage. 10 January 1734

COLONIAL GEORGIANS by Jeannette Holland Austin

The crops had scarcely been planted when crimes of violence – murders, rapes, etc. began to occur. However, there was a voyage completely overlooked by historians, one of mystery to this day. A death voyage.

It all began with the sudden stormy arrival of a sloop containing Irish servants. It was a cold, wintry night when 6 women and 34 men climbed Yamacraw Bluff into the virgin settlement of Savannah's palmetto huts and clapboard houses. They said that they had suffered from inclement weather and lack of food. No one knows for certain where they came from. It was generally thought this sloop of derelicts might be the basis for the claim of historians that Georgia was settled by convicts. They did not fit the desired assertive industrious poor of England.

When the sloop washed to shore, many dead passengers were lying on the deck. Those who lived to tell the story, 40 persons, told how treacherous winds took control of the vessel and drove it into the harbor. Some of the passengers described a harrowing voyage of storms across the Atlantic seas, with persons falling overboard. Others said that a fever spread aboard the ship, and while many lay sick, corpses were left unburied. As the sloop neared the Georgia coast, the unhallowed winds swept it into shallow waters. There was no wharf to tie up to, so they jumped into the river and waded ashore, leaving the sloop adrift. Although no one identified their origin, or purpose, they spoke a celtic dialog, and it was assumed the embarkation occurred in Ireland.

Something had to be done with them. As they had nothing, they were indentured into service; 5 persons were sent to help Mr. Lafond build a saw mill, 4 to the Trustee's Garden, and 4 to nearby Hutchinson's Island. ¹

As days passed and overseers found them unwantonly disruptive, it was suspected that all of them were Irish convicts.

Another Irishman from the same voyage, Michael Gaffney, a servant to the Widow Hodges, was convicted of theft and for running away afterwards. Then, John Fox, a servant to Noble Jones, was sentenced to sixty lashes for theft; and Isaac Fling, one hundred lashes for stealing on 31 May 1735. ² On 4 July another crime occurred as Henry, Joseph and Richard Rone were fined for stealing clapboards and then selling them.

In October of the same year, Simon Welsh, a servant to Roger Lacy, who had arrived in January the year before, was condemned to death for robbery, but before they could execute him, he ran away. Then, several months later, other members of his family, Michael and Mary Welsh, vagabonds, were whipped for stealing.

The Irish had made their distinctive mark by bringing crime into the colony, and convict-labor.

While settlers prepared to plant, spring brought an unexpected heavy freeze. This shift in weather conditions caused restlessness and a mood of sickness to prevail.

On March 1st, a murder happened on Hutchinson's Island where three of the servants had been sent. It was the first murder to occur in the fledgling colony. An Irish woman named Alice Ryley and two men, Nicholas and Richard White, killed a sick oldman, William Wise. All three persons denied culpability, protesting their innocence all the way to the gallows.

No time was wasted in dispatching the prisoners to jail. In those days, the trial and sentence all occurred in the same day, and this is what happened. A hasty verdict of guilty was rendered and then the prisoners were herded across the street into Percival Square. A large rope

¹ Egmont Papers, Phillips Collection, Hargrett Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, University of Georgia

² A List of Early Settlers of Georgia by Coulter

was pitched across the limb of a sprawling live-oak tree. The three stood firm, proclaiming innocence while a noose was drawn tightly around their necks.

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A woman had not been hung in the colony, and as she squirmed, the bailiffs feared that the presence of a woman hanging in the square might be upsetting. So they strung her higher than the White brothers, so that her limp body might not be readily seen. Later, the corpses were cut down, and buried in a nearby turf, several feet away, - the first burial ground. Today, this site bears no visible evidence of these graves, and is only recalled by local legend. No Spanish moss grows in tree where Alice was hanged.

Later that year another shipped arrived containing a woman, who, on her voyage, was said to have slept naked between two men. The captain promptly reported her conduct upon arriving in Savannah and she was taken into custody. The punishment was sixty lashes. This seemed harsh for a woman, but males generally received one hundred. This was performed swiftly and publicly and then she was tied to a cart and paraded down Bull Street. She was made to promise future good conduct.