

Chapter 10. Drought of 1738

COLONIAL GEORGIANS

The fountain of the poor in London making a success of it in Georgia eroded as living conditions worsened in the colony among freeholders who could not own their land in fee simple title, use slave labor, or compete against South Carolina in the exportation of timber to the northern colonies.

Thomas Causton came under question again because lands were not being cultivated. He justified himself to the Trustees by saying that he was encouraging development, but that the people were too stubborn and idle to plant.

A group of disenchanted citizens began to have regular meetings at the house of Mr. Townsend, along with Mr. Aglionby, who was considered to be one of the great mischief-makers in the town. William Stephens was aware of these meetings of the grippers in the local saloons, however, his own son, Thomas, who would later be Judge of the Inferior Court of Liberty County and Speaker in the Georgia Legislature, was quickly becoming a popular zealot to the cause, telling the Trustees that every man was entitled to pass his property to his heirs.

Meetings occurred not only in Savannah, but in Darien and Ebenezer as well until finally the poor, bedraggled and desperate freeholders decided to take direct action by sending a petition to their English benefactors. The petition was first circulated at Savannah, then Ebenezer and New Inverness (Darien), the southernmost portion of the State. The petition plainly set forth their dilemma – that they could not succeed without the use of slaves to plant and cultivate their lands; they were in considerable debt and unable to make further improvements; and they made half of what Carolinians made in trade to the northern colonies. Careful comparisons were made to the Carolinian neighbors, who used cheap labor to clear land and export commodities, such as timber. Only twenty miles away, timber was readily transported by Carolinians on the River May. Thus, Georgians could not trade their vast timber wealth into the northern provinces. Merchants, especially English merchants, were unwilling to supply the settlers with goods upon commission – because freeholders could not give security on their lands or improvements (as was the practice in other places to promote trade).

Therefore, they asked for free title or fee-simple title to their lands, which would also encourage new settlers, as well as the use of Negro laborers within proper limitations.

The Trustees first responded by chastising the magistrates who forwarded the petitions to England; and secondly, by reiterating their stubborn belief that the introduction of slavery into the colony would further endanger the southernmost borders and cause the Spanish to steal away Negroes for insurrections. They then exhorted the magistrates to encourage the people to cultivate and improve their land, upon which they were to depend for their support. Orders were given that the idle servants were a burden, and those who did not cultivate would be denied commodities from the stores. However, they did make a slight land concession – that daughters may be successors to land (by last Will and Testaments) within eighteen months after the death of the landholder.

When the colonists received the reply, Andrew Grant and others drafted a letter directly to the Trustees, expressing disappointment, and telling it like it was. “We have received a letter signed by your Secretary of the 25th March last owningin which we set forth the expense we had been at in prosecuting our settlement on the Ogeechee River, together with the impossibility of carrying on any settlement with success in this colony according to the present constitution.....We have seen...every paragraph...which in our humble opinion is no answer at all but rather an absolute refusal of demands to which we are legally entitled...Whereas, the people of this place, duly sensible of the miseries and calamities they have suffered and do still labour under freely and voluntarily put their hands to the representation of this part of the province. No artful means were used to induce them to it. Dismal poverty and the most absolute oppression were the true fountains from whence our complaints proceeded. But how miserably were these inconsiderate, deluded wretches rewarded? They were soon after carried against St.

Augustine, placed on a dangerous post where they were all or most of them cut off and taken prisoners by the enemy.

COLONIAL GEORGIANS

Theysimplythead and faithless left in the Trustees, and fearing Spanish invasion and defeat, expressed themselves vividly: "We should be sorry to write disrespectfully of any one of The Trustees when distressed and oppressed people arrive at The last extremity, it must be supposed they will neither be ashamed to publish their misfortunes or afraid of imputing their calamities to the fountain from which they sprang."

With nothing being done to relieve the hardships of the complainants who signed the petition, William Stephens continued the business of the colony, spending the year visiting sundry settlements and plantations, noting improvements, or lack thereof. He wrote in his journal that William Horton's plantation on Jekyll Island contained a large number of servants; that he had made considerable improvements, and had fenced 20 acres for his garden. Horton build a 2-story tabby house and planted 200 acres in English rye and 22 acres in hops in order to produce beer for the troops and residents on St. Simon's Island. ¹

But Horton, along with Mr. Causton and Capt. Gascoigne had received some letters from a Spanish launch of an officer and 19 men. The letters were written in Spanish, and thus were taken to the Secretary for translation by one of the Jewish settlers²

The complaint was that of some of the colonies' friendly Indians had surprised and killed some Spanish Indians and taken their wives as prisoners.

Causton had already written the Spanish commander at St. Augustine that they had no knowledge of it, and apologized. In the meantime, Causton, Gascoigne and Secretary Stephens conferred on the matter, deciding to take a scout boat to the south, to appraise the colonies defensive conditions. Going southward, they landed on Skidoway Island where they spent the night, and awaited the tide to pass through the narrows of the marshes. As the morning light arose over the Vernon River, they rowed to the Ogeechee, where they were met by William Horton who accompanied them further south to visit forts and settlements.

Lieutenant Delegal, the commandor at Ft. St. Simons, greeted them. From there they traveled to Jekyll Island, then Cumberland Island (Fort St. Andrew). At Amelia Island a scout boat was stationed to keep guard, having 13 or 14 men. This area was scarcely more than a guardhouse, having a palisade, hut, two swivel guns, two pateraroes, and one cannon, which was a 6-pounder. No threats by the Spanish had occurred, so they accepted Lt. Delegal's invitation to dine with him (he crossed Jekyll Sound from Ft. St. Simon's to join them on Amelia Island).

They then visited Darien and saw substantial improvements made by the clan leader, John Mohr Macintosh, from Darien to Old King George's Fort. All the lands from town to the fort were under cultivation, and they received a kind reception.

On 6 February their tour took them to Thunderbolt to visit Mr. Lacy who was dangerously ill. They wanted to see the cultivation of land among his next neighbors, and were very disappointed when no improvements were found.

As they returned to Savannah, they visited Mr. Causton's plantation at *Ocstead*, and Stephens wrote that it stood in "fair eminence." Actually Causton had waited about two years to improve his land grant while he attended to the affairs of the colony, but now his "working" plantation bloomed with prosperity, even at this very early time period in the history of the colony when most freeholders could scarcely survive. Even when settlers failed for lack of stores and cultivation, Causton's political position as Magistrate at Savannah, favored his success.

¹ In 1743, Major William Horton served as the commander of the military forces in Georgia after Oglethorpe left.

² Journal of William Stephens

As they approached land, Capt. Gascoigne and Mr. Hugh Anderson stood on the Bluff. A good dinner awaited them. When he was not occupying his lodgings in Savannah, Thomas Causton frequently entertained guests at *Ocstead*.

After dinner, Stephens was agreeably amused in viewing the fine improvements, which consisted of a very handsome house "after the modern taste, neatly furnished, with convenient Offices and Out-houses adjoining near, in a uniform Manner; as also a large Garden and Orchard laid out elegantly, planting, and intended to be well filled with the best Kinds of all Things which this Country will produce."

But Causton's careless record keeping was fast catching up with him when citizens attempted to stop his unfair dealings. Mr. Bradley was one who frequently sought an audience with Stephens to complain against Causton, saying that he refused to pay his bills or give assistance.

Causton tried to sluff it off by saying that Bradley had avowed enmity against him. Bradley did not give up ... complaining that Causton had taken off one of the Germans, a carpenter who was building huts, to serve Mr. Williamson (Causton's nephew). Mr. Williamson, was, of course, the husband of his niece, Sophie, and a party to the slander which drove John Wesley from the colony. Taking advantage of his kinship, Williamson got what he wanted without having to pay for it. Not long afterwards, the German servant wanted to return to Bradley. When questioned why he wanted to return, he said that was allowed no sugar for his rice.

A meeting occurred between Stephens and Bradley. Bradley brought with him Mr. Sheftall, A Jew, who was appointed interpretor between himself and the Germans, to testify as to the truth of Causton's mistreatment. Bradley threatened to print his case against Causton in the newspaper, *The Carolina Gazette*. As a result, Stephens allowed Bradley to return the German servants who'd worked for Williamson to the public workhouse.. In the meantime, Williamson was anxious to know the outcome of the meeting and left his uncle's house to inquire as to what happened.

Then Causton presumed to give some leather to a shoemaker (German) to make shoes for the servants, and this deed enraged Bradley, who snatched up the shoes and threw them in the trash, without making an accounting of it.

Still, Stephens left Causton in his powerful position as Magistrate.

Then in March, Causton received a letter from Mr. McPherson, Captain of the Rangers that his people had been engaged for 6 months' service and that their time had expired. His Rangers were not willing to continue to work unless Causton agreed to certain demands. If he did not agree, McPherson would leave his post. Causton responded by saying that McPherson's demands were too exorbitant, and McPherson wrote that Causton could send someone to take charge of Ft. Argyle. Causton confided to Stephens that McPherson was an insolent bully.

As these exchanges continued, Causton received a letter from the Indian Nations that warlike preparations were underway by the French in using the Choctow Indians to war against the Chicasaws. Capt. McPherson pressed for the rebuilding of the fort at Ft. Argyle, saying that it was in ruinous condition. But Causton fell ill with a fever, which lasted for about a month. More threats came from Capt. McPherson, but Causton was still ill from fevers and too weak to argue. So Capt. McPherson took his complaints to William Stephens, demanding that matters be settled. Simultaneously, news of the threatening Spanish reached Stephens' ears from the lips of the servant of Bailiff Parker. Seeing the threat, Causton conceded to McPherson's demands to repair the fort.

A whispering campaign throughout Savannah since February convinced the people to believe that Oglethorpe (who was in England) could not get troops to serve in Georgia and to get volunteers, men were being beaten and bullied. These rumors were finally put to rest with the receipt by Stephens of a letter from Mr. Verelst who said that Col. Cockran would soon arrive in the colony with 4 transport ships under the convoy of a *Man of War*.

The Spanish threats were real, but incidences were isolated. One instance was when one of Mr. Parker's servants was alone on the plantation and suddenly 4 strange men, foreigners, came on him. He described them as being swarthy, having black braided hair, wearing hats, dark clothing, and being armed with swords, guns and pistols. At first one of them drew his sword with the intent to kill, but another interposed, and the servant's life was spared. The men decided to rest themselves inside a nearby hut on the plantation. After resting and drinking, they left quietly by a path leading into the woods. Then, Mr. Horton reported that the Spaniards has taken the post on St. George's Island, in violation of an agreement with Oglethorpe. He asked for a supply of ammunition from the stores in Frederica, which couldn't be furnished.

As the possibility of war loomed over the colony, life in Savannah was becoming desperate. Mr. Scott, a gunsmith and notorious dealer in rum, was charged with retailing liquor and was bound over to the court. Stephens wrote in his Journal: "Happy were it for the Town, if all Delinquents of the same Kind were discovered, and severely punished; which certainly would appear to be a greater number than can be easily imagined; and not only tends to destroy the Peoples Health, but debauches the labouring People and Servants, being Places of Nursery for all Vices; and it is observable, that Thieving begins to grow very fast, robbing of Gardens and such like of late being frequent." Servants continued to run away.

Normally, March would have been a good month for planting in this mild coastal climate, however, variable weather of unequalled heat to strong winds, threatened crops. At night a northwest wind blew into a hard gale, causing a sudden and severe frost to blanket the land. Stephens compared it to the worst winters in England. Water standing in pans or basons within doors was frozen into solid lumps of ice, and on 8 March a hard frost occurred. Settlers feared that the young orange trees and other tender plants would wilt and die.

By the middle of the month, the weather was very cold, with high winds and frosty nights. Colonists took a mechancholy attitude, wondering what would be the end result ... would they lose all the tender plants, and the silk worms silk worms coming abroad despite all endeavors to retard them. Mulberries leaves had already been nipt with frost, and the next buds were not opening. Another week passed with galling winds pounding the shores and the season preparing itself for a dry spell.

But Stephens was hopeful, writing on 29 March. "A fine rain last night and good part of the day, gave new life to planting."

As unseasonably cold weather prevailed, people suffered for lack of food and supplies. Causton had already reported a scarcity of potatoes in the stores. And to aggravate conditions, William McKay came up river in a sloop from Providence with a cargo of brazilletta wood, mahogany, two thousand weight of turtle (and probably rum), some oranges and other fruit, but did not intend to trade in Georgia. Conditions were so undesirable that his brother, Capt. Patrick McKay, told him to look for a market at Charles Town or elsewhere.

On the first of April, a fine rain sprinkled over the heavily laden mossy branches of ancient live-oak trees. Spring promised renewal as it awakened fresh-water springs and rivers to snapping bass and brim, and the landscape bloomed overnight with yellow jasmine, dogwoods and wild fruits. Deeply soaked pits of the lowlands and wet grassy mashes dried from their winter storms. All of the land seemed to welcome the sultry sun, as wild turkeys, deer and boar roamed forests unhindered. The islands pumped white sand in from the tumultuous sea and harbored oyster beds and crabs.

More than a month late in planting, settlers hurried to plant corn, fodder and vegetables of all sorts. Food supplies were in short supply, the storehouses having no molasses, or sugar for months. Luckily some relief occurred when James Williams, a brother to Robert, who had been off on a trading voyage since October of 1737, arrived on Tybee Island in the *Snow*, bringing supplies of thirty hogsheads of molasses and sugar.

The holidays for the Festival of St. George commenced, and the German servants who were employed to do public work, refused to move. They were slothful and mutinous, complaining of too much work, too little victuals, and grew troublesome daily.

As the festival began, the flag was displayed in Savannah. Magistrates and officers and other townsfolk met at the guardhouse where biscuits and bottles of wine were dispatched from the stores. His Majesty's Holland House was drunk under the discharge of eleven pieces of cannon; next a salute was given to the Prince and all the Royal Family; then to the honorable Trustees; the prosperity to the colony; and lastly a toast drank to the safe arrival of the Captain General.

On 27 April a pettiagua of goods arrived from Charles Town, but the beef was damaged. It was feared that if they burned it, the fumes from the smoke might infect people with a malignancy, so they decided to dig a deep hole and bury it.

After the unseasonably cold spring weather, came a very hot summer, and worse, drought. By June, crops had failed, and people had small hopes of reaping the fruit of their labor. The hot summer sun was so excessive that few people stirred, and the populace fell into a deep melancholy mood. They simply sat still, scarcely breathing, fanning themselves. A planter of Carolina, who was staying at one of the public houses, where he dined, looked well in appearance. However, after dinner he complained that the heat overcame him, and went to sit down in a chair. Then died.

The cold spell was followed by high temperatures. Stephens' son was taken ill with sharp pains, occasioned by a great cold, which seized him in the midst of the violent heat. By August, his pains grew worse, and his nerves contracted in all parts of his body. Stephens wrote in his diary: "It may not be unworthy Remark here, to observe what strange Effect Colds frequently have in this Country; this showing itself at first only in an ordinary Tooth-Ach, but by Degrees insinuated into all the tender Nerves, and even deprived him of his Senses, Feeling only excepted."

By the end of summer, all of Stephens' servants were sick. Agues and fevers were commonplace. The heat was so sultry, that almost everyone was ill, some fainting with fevers. Letters from Charles Town told of small pox in Carolina carrying off a great number of people, white and black. They thought it was due to a boat which had docked bringing people having distemper. The malady quickly spread among them, causing their head to swell, then to drop dead.

A sickness caused by fevers in the colony during the spring of 1738 caused Thomas Hawkins to write the Trustees that all the people belonging to Capt. Thomson's vessel were under his care; that a servant was scalded to death of atrophy; two died at St. Andrew's and Amelia, both of the dropsy.³

The popular minister, Rev. Mr. Whitfield was not to be deterred by illness as he travelled the countryside captivating people with his moving discourses. An unfortunate accident occurred on August 9th when Mr. Whitfield went to Frederica, riding as far as Vernon River. He took with him Mr. Habersham, the schoolmaster's brother, with the intent that he would bring the horses back. The plan was that Whitefield would proceed by water, but young Habersham got lost as he followed his horse into a swamp. The next morning, Whitefield left his own horse tied to a tree with the intention of returning to fetch the animal. For hours Whitefield wandered through the swamp, but finally found his way home the following morning. He was fatigued. Some of the townspeople went back into the swamp to search for Whitefield's horse, but did not find him. And worse, Mr. Habersham never returned.

It was probably the drought of 1738 that caused the most despair and fear to the colonists. Nothing would grow except yellow skinned corn, and before the drought had ended, more than half a year's crop was destroyed by the dry, cracking soil.

The colonists went to the stores for their entitlements of basic foodstuffs, but were turned away by Causton and Jones. Mr. Thomas Jones, the contentious Savannah storekeeper, dealt unfairly with settlers during the crisis years. He employed Negroes into service, while ridiculing church doctrine. When orders were sent to issue cash, he denied sustenance to some, while

³ Letter of Thomas Hawkins to the Trustees, 6 May 1738, General Oglethorpe's Georgia: Colonial Letters, 1738-1743, Vol. II, edited by Mills Lane

feeding some of the less-deserving. Mr. Parker was denied the food allowance designated for his servants. An Italian family employed in the Public Garden were told to “go to hell!” Everyone hated Jones’ insouciant and nasty temper and complained bitterly to public officials, who could do very little. Unfortunately, a cargo from London was long overdue.

Officials heard an earful of grievances and grew weary of listening. They did not bother to report the complaints to the Trustees, but as conditions worsened, the colonists wrote letters to the Trustees themselves. The letters were noted, but nothing was done. It didn’t help matters when Oglethorpe, while onboard the *Blanford*, wrote the Trustees advising that his officers and soldiers were all doing very well. This was due to the enterprising Major Horton, who supplied Frederica from his own store on Jekyll Island. Horton wrote the Trustees and told them that although the corn crops were badly parched, the gardens flourished and people in Frederica were healthy and peaceful. This confirmed Oglethorpe’s report.

With Thomas Causton at his plantation *Ocstead* and Major Horton on Jekyll Island supplying beer to the regiment, William Stephens felt that situations were not as desperate as portrayed.

There were two distinct factions in Savannah – one of local authorities trying to enforce strict laws and religious disciplines, and the other of the poor people who’d been transported for the purpose of colonizing, and now refused to improve themselves. The social experiment failed as settlers looked to the stores for sustenance, and then organized themselves to ask for more charity.

People began searching for other means of earning a living. Although rum was forbidden, it was a commodity which settlers smuggled from the Carolinas. Two town persons, Patrick Tailfer, a surgeon, and Robert Williams, a merchant, quit cultivating their lands in order to sell rum. They established a store in Savannah. This business flourished throughout the drought and depression. Almost all of the townspeople owed them money; so much so that they feared nonpayment would cause them to lose their lands to Tailfer & Williams. Oglethorpe was aware of this, and asked the Trustees to ship over a cargo of 50 or 60 tons of strong beer. But settlers were already consuming as much as 6 barrels of rum per day, which was considered an evil. On the other hand, English beer was thought to be a healthy diversion. In making the request, Oglethorpe did not mince words, telling the Trustees that Savannah people were lewd and lazy, and that most of them had not improved their lands.

As townspeople were idle during the drought and given to public drunkenness, others fell into lockstep by ignoring local ordinances. Even the Savannah Chaplain, Rev. Mr. Dyson, was known to be a town drunk who performed marriages without a license, doing so in kitchens and cellars. Some of the persons he’d married already had living wives or husbands, while others were servants to different masters.

The magistrates did not sit still for such improprieties...colonists were tried for offenses against the Rum Act, but juries were sympathetic and issued acquittals. During the summer months, Patrick Grant, a relation of Sir James Grant, Naval Officer and Searcher at Frederica, was tried for running rum, but was never convicted.

In the meantime, trade disputes occurred between South Carolina and Georgia. The close promiscuity of the Indians to villages and towns caused concern. The Indians who lived on the northeast side of the Mississippi River near its mouth had sizeable towns of more than 16,000 persons, including over 1500 warriors, while the Choctows boasted having over 5000 warriors, and the Chickasaws had 500. Peace needed to be secured.

William Bull, President of the South Carolina Council, wrote to the Commissioners of Trade and Plantations, to send presents to give to the Choctow savages while Oglethorpe directed his attention to Indian threats and the Spanish who bribed them to desert the English.