

## Chapter 2. Silk

COLONIAL GEORGIANS  
by Jeannette Holland Austin

The following year, in April of 1733, 17 Italian silk reelers from the Piedmont arrived in Savannah. The major function of the new colony was to promote the silk business, ship the silk to England, as well as to His Majesty's colonies abroad. This expected to be a profitable venture which would ultimately repay investors. In May, 6 more persons were sent. To this point, that meant that a total of 152 persons were in Savannah; 141 were Britains, and 11 were Foreign Protestants, and 61 were men. The silk worm would feast upon mulberry leaves, grow fat, and spin cocoons of silk. Thus, experts in silk culture were employed from Italy and Switzerland and transported into the colonies.

Ten Swiss families from this group settled on a creek of the Savannah River, about 3 miles from its confluence, being about 15 miles above Savannah, at a place they called Abercorn. They spoke German and were silk reelers.<sup>1</sup>

The method of planting the mulberry trees was one which was practised in Lombardy, that is: "Plant every field in a plantation, two or three rows of Mulberry trees at a small distance from each other, and The vines planted so as they may run up the bodies of the trees and intermix themselves with their branches and the extremities drawn out from tree to tree to hang in festoons between them. Besides the festoons, the vine branches may be extended right to left, and fastened to a row of stakes on each side running parallel to the trees, which will form a sort of penthouse made by the vine branches, and make a constant arbour in the summer, and in the middle, the corn may be raised."

During the next year settlers continued their work on the palisade surrounding the town, while clearing pine trees and laying out the public garden. The Trustee's Garden was located west of town, at a convenient spot overlooking the bluff and the shores of the Savannah River. This nursery would supply settlers with plants of the white mulberry tree, vines, oranges, olives and other necessities.

The first gardener to arrive was a German, Joseph Fitzwalter, who embarked for the Colony of Georgia on 6 November 1732, arriving 1 February 1733. As soon as he arrived, he was granted Lot No. 8 in Savannah and was appointed a Constable (along with Samuel Parker) in Savannah. He was employed in the Public Garden at Savannah for the propagation of plants, etc. In October, Paul Amatis arrived from Switzerland, hired to oversee the production of silk. He sowed 1000 mulberry trees which came up well. Mr. Vanderplank, one of the gardeners, had not been able to get the people's cattle according to Oglethorpe's last instructions, so the cattle were running wild. The people had little hope in seeing the cattle any more, and Mr. Causton had to purchase beef from the Indians or Mrs. Musgrove.

Jacques Camuse, awinder of silk, left Germany to go to England where he obtained permission from the Trustees to come to America.<sup>2</sup> He embarked on 4 April 1733, arriving in

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<sup>1</sup> By 1737 these 10 families had left. The improvements which were left fell into ruin and decay. In December of 1739, William Stephens and Mr. Jones visited the town and Stephens commented on the fact of the town having 50-acre lots, but that loose, idle people had occupied these lots. He proposed that Mr. Jones send a few German families to cultivate the soil of the Trust Lands, and to make the area a more desirable settlement. There were a few settlers there in 1744. One settler, John Dobell, on 4 February complained to the Board stating that Mr. Avery, the Land Surveyor, had resurveyed the Village of Abercorn and altered the original lines on both sides and made a road run through the middle of it. Also, that Mr. Avery, without having authority, had taken away a portion of the lands of one person and then gave them to another. The Board conducted a hearing and it was established that Mr. Dobell was mistaken by Mr. Avery had indeed been given Orders to resurvey for the reason that two or three of the old occupiers had deserted their lots for years since.

<sup>2</sup> Also known as James Lewis Camuse

Georgia on 21 July 1733. He brought with him his wife, Mary Januarye and three sons, Francis, Jeffry and John Bapt. Camuse. Initially,

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Initially, Camuse and his family were indentured to Mr. Paul Amatis, who was in charge of silk winding and the culture of mulberry trees. Camuse was paid 20 pounds per year for his family to be employed to produce raw silk, also an allowance of 12 pounds for the maintenance and clothing of a servant.<sup>3</sup> He was to be provided with a cart and horse, and 4 servants for his wife. The instructions from the Trustees were that in the event the servants were young, they were to be bound as apprentices to Mrs. Camuse and be instructed in the production of raw silk.

She was very instructive to persons who were capable, so that in the event of her death, because of her expert training, the management and production of raw silk would continue. <sup>4</sup> The Camuse family became a very industrious family and a great advantage to the colony. In fact, the Camuse family were so trustworthy and diligent in their silk winding, that they were given the complete management of its production.

Mrs. Camuse was greatly respected for her skills, having servants to train in the art, but she was a headstrong woman who quarrelled with the magistrates and officials in Savannah, more particularly with William Stephens. From time to time, she threatened to return to England, and Mr. Stephens feared that she might do so, and thus the colony would lose a good winder. To avoid the setback, he suggested that she be subsidized to become a manufacturer silk manufacturer. This maneuver worked so well that, she was rewarded with two pounds Sterling for each person whom she perfectly instructed, and later on was given a pension.

Later, Camuse would write the Trustees: "I most humbly presume the freedom to acquaint your honors of the non-payment of the wages due me from the year 1732 to the year 1736 in order to the obtaining of which have applied by petitions to His Excellency, James Oglethorpe, who promised me account should be balanced and then sent to your honors to be adjusted ....proves a very great hardship and disappointment, having abandoned and left my native country for your honors' service, hope humbly my industry and care in the Colony have been and is accepted in that branch of propagation which I profess as a proof of my diligence, have sent your honors 14 " silk Avoirdupoise weight...the silk manufacture would abundantly increase if it was by the government financed and supported....James Lewis Camuse". <sup>5</sup>

Thomas Causton wrote a letter to the Trustees dated 25 July 1735: "The Caper plants are safe arrived, and are delivered to Mr. Fitzwalter to be planted and managed according to the directions of which he has a copy. The madder roots are dead; but as your honours could procure another parcel, I would take care of some myself, having property great deal cleared for that part ...Mr. Johnson Dalmas being dead, I placed those servants under the care of Mr. Fitzwalter to be employed in the garden....T. Causton".

On 8 September 1734 Mr. Amatis wrote a disparaging letter to James Oglethorpe: "...all the silk that I have drawn off for the past year in three different quantities ....and I pray you also to cause people skilled and expert in the manufacture to come to see the said silk, and I have no doubt that they will find it in all its perfection, quality by quality...however I hope that this year silk will be more lustrous and not so smoky by reason of the precautions which I shall take...also how generous I have been in this enterprise since I have spent clothing...except those expenses I have been obliged to pay out of my subsistence along without having first wished to give you the

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<sup>3</sup> The Earl of Egmont, Journal dated August 13, 1739

<sup>4</sup> In a letter from Harmon Verelst to James Lewis (Jacques) Camuse dated June 11, 1740, Westminster, sent onboard the ship, *Minerva*

<sup>5</sup> Letter of James Lewis Camuse to the Trustees dated March 10, 1739, received at Westminster 6 May 1740

Marks of my skill; I hope that those persons you will completely satisfied in seeing results of my labours...." COLONIAL GEORGIANS

Paul Amatis on Mulberry Trees complained about the various gardeners who neglected their duties. He tried to resolve the problem by traveling to Switzerland to recruit more servants, and then to London, taking with him samples of silk. This caused him to be away for prolonged periods of time, and left the garden in the care of inefficient German Trust Servants. Finally, disillusioned, Amatis quit the colony altogether. With the departure of Paul Amatis, this left the Trustees the burden of locating another expert. So they found, Mr. Samuel Auspourger, a gentleman from the Canton of Bern, Switzerland. A contract was drawn that Auspourger would leave his home and come to Georgia to grow mulberry trees and wind the silk. The Trustees had made a good choice in the new gardener, because only a short while after Paul Amatis quit the colony, Auspourger sent 20 pounds of raw silk to England, declaring it was as fine as any Italian silk. His enthusiasm was not short-lived because several years later, (July of 1739) he left America to go to England and obtain a land grant of 500 acres and to get some of his countrymen to return as servants to cultivate the trees. <sup>6</sup>

Even though a fine quality of silk was spun off at times, nevertheless, a hefty production of it in the colony was not to be found. Settlers were required to go to the nursery, obtain their Mulberry cuttings, and nurture the growing trees. However, as times were tough and survival became paramount, they raised cattle instead. The citizenry had its own problems, failing crops, fevers, a labor problems. While the general populace did not nurture trees, the Italians, worked industriously to reel off the silk.

Joseph Fitzwalter's gave an account of silk production when he wrote a letter to the Trustees in England, about 1735, as follows: "...The garden I have made great improvements in, most the tree stumps I have roote up, planked the front walk with trees of orange six foot high which will bear fruit some this year...some orange trees this last season shott in the nursery four foot...I have a thousand of them; of mulberry plants, I have 8000...the olive trees like the soile...I have some of them shott six foot this season, I have met with some cotton seeds from Guinea which from it I have raised 1000 plants...I thank God our Town is in very good health and increases mightily, for that place which was nothing but pine trees when we came is becoming almost as many houses and as Williamsburg, which is the metropoliss of Virginia, we exceed them in number of houses though they have been settled near a hundred years, though not our buildings quite so magnificent, in a word I take it to be the promised land, it's land is rich and fertile, its trees large and good for building both land and sea, various sorts of Gum and then as good as ones from East Indies, various sorts of drugs following shrubs and plants of various kinds, fruits, while of different species and very good, when cultivated, will be much finer...fine rivers...multitudes of fish and the best in the world salmon, trouts, sturgeons, of which I caught one weighed upwards of 300 pounds weight...our woods affords us good plenty of deer and bear whose meat is extremely good, turkeys in great plenty, I have shot six of a day and them very large, some weighting 25 pounds each....Sir, I hope that the things that I sent...arrived safe in the Trustee's hands, I shall always make it my business so to send something of the produce of Georgia to their Honours ....Joseph Fitzwalter".

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<sup>6</sup> Silk production continued throughout the life of the colony. On 11 May 1741 Mr. Bolzius recorded in his journal that twenty girls had spun seventeen pounds of cocoons the previous several months, which were sold at Savannah. By 1764 the Germans who resided in Ebenezer had delivered half of the fifteen thousand two hundred and twelve pounds of cocoons were delivered to the filature in Savannah. Sir James Wright notified the Commons House of Assembly on 19 January 1774 that activities in the filature buildings in Savannah had been discontinued,

but silk production had not ceased at Ebenezer. In 1772 the Germans had raised four hundred and eighty-five pounds of raw silk which was exported to England. Silk Culture in Georgia by Stevens.

Despite all the troubles in cultivation, the silk was regarded as being of a good quality, and reasonable amounts were exported.<sup>7</sup>

Yet even though the large number of servants allotted for raising silk contributed to its ultimate dissolution, the colonists were simply trying to survive in a sultry hot climate, under conditions they were not accustomed to. Even though wild mulberrys grew along the Georgia coast, and particularly on St. Simon's Island, the land was not perfectly suitable for the cultivation of the silk worm and colonists did not particularly try to venture privately in this undertaking. The cultivation was under the strict delegation of those sent by the Trustees, like Mr. Amatis and Mr. Auspourger, who directed a small number of Trust servants in its operation, particularly Italians and persons from the Piedmont region of Europe. There was always difficulty obtaining enough mulberry leaves for the worm beds, so leaves had to be imported by Purysburg, however, they dried out while enroute to Savannah. The nursery used a long table for the worms nest, and success depended on a good leaf bed. There was a poor survival rate for servants, many dying once they put their feet on the soil, while others were sickly, only living short periods of time.

In the meantime, Dr. Herbert baptized the first white child born in the colony. He also founded the first parish, called Christ Church. However, he was only in the colony for a few months when he became too sick to continue. He decided to sail for home. However, the crossing proved fatal, and he died at sea on 15 June 1733. Fortunately, the Trustees had approved the appointment of Rev. Samuel Quincy as a Missionary to Georgia, and he was already enroute to the colony.

Rev. Samuel Quincy was a native of Boston and a graduate of Harvard. He was ordained in 1730 by the Bishop of London and worked as an assistant to the Rev. Thomas Page of Beccles for one year; then applied to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts for a missionary post. When no vacancy occurred, he personally appeared before the Trustees to ask for an official appointment, and at that time was named as a Missionary to Savannah.<sup>8</sup>

Rev. Quincy discovered that the church built for him by the first settlers was a crude wooden hut made of split boards, 30 feet long and 12 feet wide. Quincy sought support in erecting a suitable parish house in Savannah, and was encouraged by the Trustees who forwarded donations.<sup>9</sup>

The Trustees' expectations were that the unfortunate poor of London would not only be industrious colonists, but would be devout Christians as well. However, all of Rev. Quincy's efforts to erect a building for worship were stunted by a powerful local magistrate, Thomas Causton who refused to grant the vicar money or materials. A few years later worship service was held in the local courthouse, and sometimes other public buildings were used. Yet the ministers themselves encountered setbacks and personal derogation. As Rev. Mr. Quincy struggled for a proper parish house and a flock, his own character fell under condemnation. In October of 1735, he was criticized for performing a marriage ceremony between an Englishman and an unbaptized Indian squaw. The Trustees expunged him from office for doing it.

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<sup>7</sup> By 1741, 300 caccoons of silk balls were exported in six weeks, Mrs. Camuse' balls weighting 140 pds. Additional help came in 1742, when the trustees acknowledged a chest of silk sent by Mrs. Camuse, and sent a family of Germans on board the ship, Europa. "This family is Christopher Burgemeister, who has a wife and three sons." (Letter of Harmon Verelst to William Stephens, 16 February 1741/1742.)

<sup>8</sup> 21 December 1732

<sup>9</sup> Although donations were made, such as a large church clock and dial plate, clock weights, books for a parochial library, bibles, testaments and prayer books, Christ Church was not erected until 1750