

## **John Rae and the Georgia Land Swindle**

Drumbo, County Down, Ireland, and The Tower, home of the Rea Families

While James Edward Oglethorpe was planting settlers in the Colony of Georgia, advertisements of "so fair a land" in the Georgia colony were being distributed throughout England encouraging settlement. Meanwhile, Joe Rae of Maghrenock near Ballinahigh in County Down, Nova Scotia, emigrated to South Carolina ca 1729 or 1730 and applied for extensive land grants in Georgia because of his connections in North Ireland. Initially, he was granted 50,000 acres for his countrymen and friends along the Ogeechee River in Queensborough (now Burke County, Georgia), 40 miles from Augusta. After this acquisition, he commenced publishing letters in Belfast to acquire purchasers.

John Rae was a resident of Georgia as early as August of 1741, where he was appointed Conservator of the Peace ten years later. In 1752, he petitioned the Georgia Trustees for 300 acres on Argyle Island on the Savannah River and 100 acres on Pipemakers Creek. In 1755, he was elected Representative to sit in the Assembly for Georgia at Augusta, and a lot was granted to him at Hardwick in Chatham County. On behalf of his settlement efforts, he petitioned for relief for building a Church at Augusta in 1756 and received it. John Rea was very active in the affairs of His Majesty. He was appointed Commissioner, Collector, and Assessor in Augusta in charge of erecting forts, printed the laws, built churches, and was charged with building barracks for the soldiers. He selected as his homeplace 200 acres of land on Stony Creek which had its own grist mill. The site was three miles above Augusta adjoining the lands of George Galphin. During April of 1765, he petitioned for land originally surveyed for Isaac

Barksdale to his widow, but title to those lands was passed in the name of John Rae, Jr.

In February of 1768, he petitioned for lands on the Ogeechee River to be reserved for three years, in hopes of getting Irish settlers there. He printed copies of the law and sent this to friends in Ireland, but the encouragement to settle in Georgia was much less than what was promised to South Carolinians. In South Carolina, the free passage was provided as well as other advantages. His friends wrote that they would come to Georgia only if their passage were paid and they had use of lands free of expense in addition to being exempted from taxes for the first ten years. The Georgia Trustees granted this wish in the form of "An Act for Encouraging Settlers to Come into the Province.

"Two of his letters asking for settlers appeared in the Belfast News in 1765. While inviting his countrymen to share in a great fortune, guaranteeing the free use of cattle and horses for five years, he sent 100 pounds back home to educate the children of his dead brother. Indeed, it was another brother (Matthew Rea) who had financed the arrangements for the voyage on the Prince of Wales which sailed with passengers during February of 1765 from Belfast, first to Charleston, thence to Savannah. Matthew Rea was a land promotor for America, lived in the village of Drumbo in County Down, and was either a small landowner or farmer. He had the means to undertake two tours of the surrounding countryside in furtherance of his emigration plans, acting as a middleman in the emigration trade, and as an agent, working with his brother in Georgia to obtain emigrants to the Colony.

As far as the land business was concerned, John Rea was described as a scoundrel in a letter published

in 1770 wherein the Georgia colony was described as "a woeful place, a poor hole, accursed place, inhabited by a few Irish and some run-aways from all parts of America, that John Rea was more concerned with erecting a hedge between himself and the Indians than with promoting the happiness of his settlers."

As the ship Waddell sailed in November of 1773, the activities of Matthew on behalf of his brother in Georgia came to an abrupt end. There was a scandal. Rea had a negro slave, Nero, who was convicted of a felony, for breaking open a store of rice and taking several barrels. Ten other slaves were also discovered in the records, however, there were probably a good deal more slaves who cultivated his lands than these few. John Rae was convicted for the manslaughter of Mrs. Ann Simpson in Savannah but was later pardoned. All his friends petitioned on his behalf, stating that he had been in the province for nearly forty years and had an unblemished character, having filled many offices of public trust. He was also a Member of the Georgia Assembly, which was a very highly respected position in the province. John Rae died in Augusta in 1784.