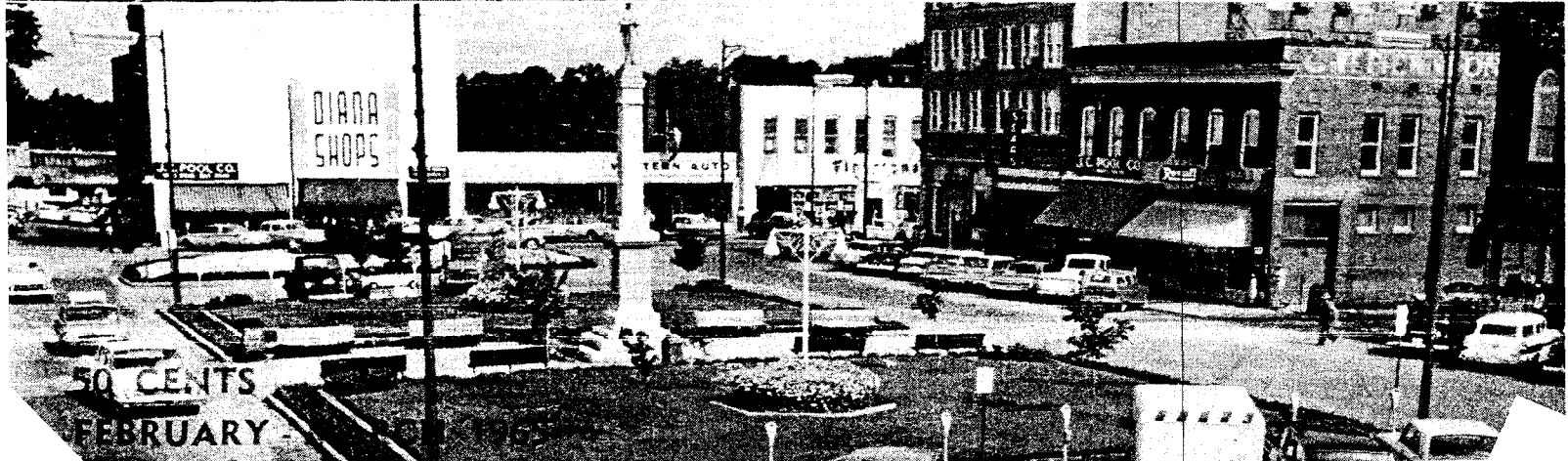
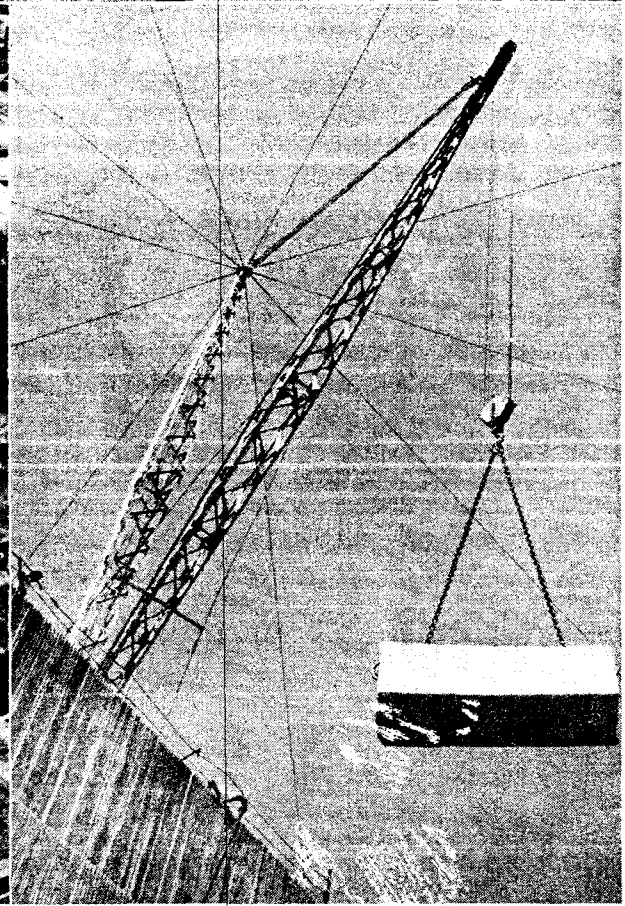
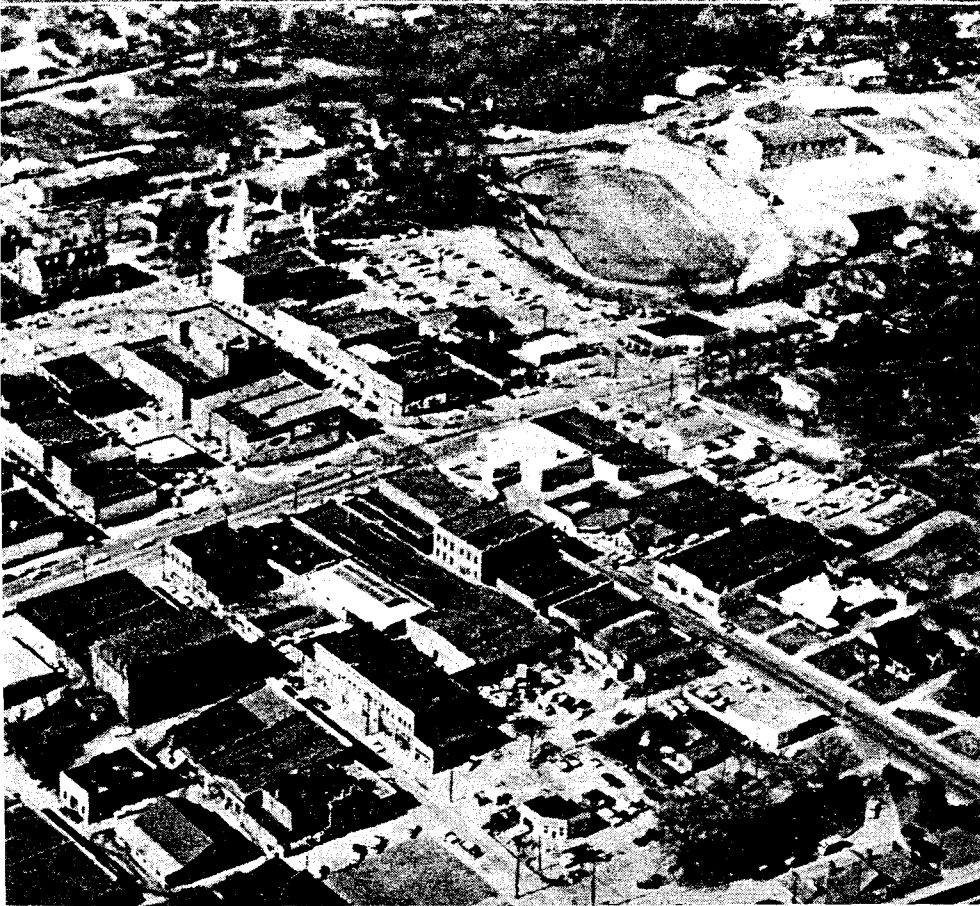
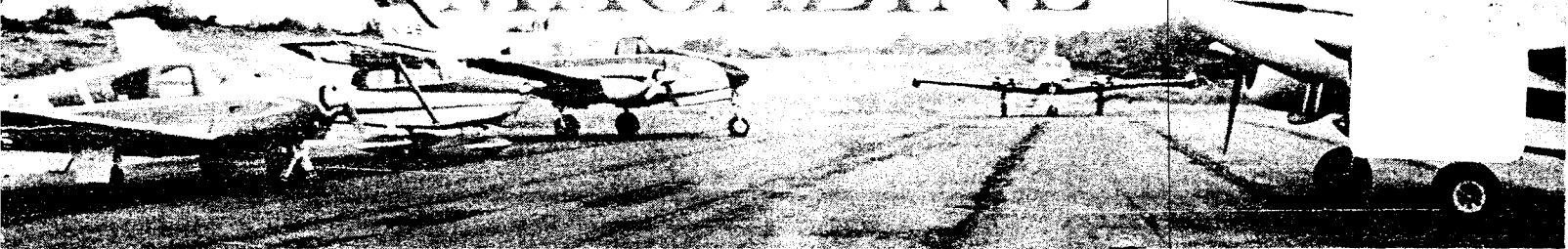


Elbert County Issue

Feb-Mar 1965

# GEORGIA MAGAZINE



# Early Days of Elbert County

By JANNELLE JONES McREE

WHEN a man is thirsty he searches for a trickle of water. But when he finds an abundant spring it is time to call a halt and say, *This is a place for living*. Tradition says that William Woodley and a small number of settlers found such a place. Why go on when the spring flowed deep and clear?

So, far into the hills of Northeast Georgia a village was born. The story is told that William Woodley built the first home near the Old Town Springs. Two or three other families also stayed. This was about 1769. No records show from what place Woodley came or where he moved after he left the Old Town Springs. Tradition also says that a small group of settlers had come even before 1769. The Old Town Springs later became known as Elberton.

Elbert County was created by the Georgia State Legislature December 10, 1790 from part of Wilkes County which had included lands formerly ceded by the Cherokees and Creeks in 1773. It was named for Samuel Elbert, noted general in the Revolutionary War. After Elbert County was cut off from Wilkes County in 1790, three justices were appointed to select a site for the county court house. One of the justices was Stephen Heard, governor of Georgia in 1780. He came from Wilkes County on horseback.

The justices selected the present town of Elberton as a place for the court house. In its beginning Elberton was known as Elbertville. After the court house and jail were built the town was called Elbert County Court House. Elberton was incorporated in 1803 with a legislative act that began: 'Whereas the town of Elberton needs regulating.' So five commissioners were appointed to regulate and rule the town: Middle Woods, Reuben Lindsey, Dr. John T. Gilmer, Beckham Dye, and James Alston.

## FORGOTTEN TOWNS OF ELBERT COUNTY

PETERSBURG — once Georgia's third largest city — lies beneath the waters of Clark Hill Reservoir. Fort James and Dartmouth, like Petersburg, are forgotten towns of Georgia.

Fort James, situated on a point of land between the Broad and the Savannah Rivers, was built to defend the old Colonial settlement at Dartmouth. History tells us that Fort James, which protected the settlers from attacks by the Creeks and Cherokees, was a four-square stockade with "salient bastions at each angle, surmounted by a blockhouse and guarded by a number of swivel guns. The stockade was an acre in extent. Within it was a house for the commandant, quarters for the various officers and barracks for the garrison. The entire force consisted of fifty rangers, each of them well mounted and armed."

The first town to be established in Elbert County was Dartmouth. After 1789 a group of Virginians settled in the Broad River country and named their town, Dartmouth, for the town in Virginia. It had the distinction of being the third town to be established in Georgia. Dartmouth at one time had a population of about 300 but Dartmouth and Fort James vanished after several years. Dartmouth soon gave way to Petersburg. Dionysius Oliver, one of the pioneer settlers, is said to have named Petersburg for his native home in Virginia.

To the historian Petersburg is more than just an old forgotten tobacco market. At one time it became the great tobacco center of the district with a population of more than a thousand. Many wealthy Virginians settled on Broad River and acquired the valuable lands in the Savannah Valley. Petersburg became an active, wealthy center as well as a powerful political center. It had two newspapers. The tobacco, packed in large hogsheads, was shipped by flatboat to Augusta and Savannah where it was sent directly to England. Petersburg merchants were both exporters and importers, and Petersburg prospered because goods were sold much more cheaply there than in Augusta.

One descendant of an old Petersburg family recalled stories told him of the exciting day when the "river was up"

and there was much fear for the safety of those who made trips on the flatboats. During extremely high tide the trip to Augusta was made in less than a day, but the trip back often took more than a week. One incident was recalled when Broad River was so swollen that the flatboats reached Augusta in much less than a day, a distance of about sixty miles, and Augusta itself was so flooded that these same flatboats floated up Broad Street.

One person who lived in the community recalls stories handed down to him. He said, "When the flatboats got back safely after high waters, Petersburg was jubilant. There would be long tables of food in the big houses and much rejoicing."

According to stories told, bonfires seemed to be a favorite pastime for the young and old, and, about dusk, crowds would gather. Rich mingled with poor, and many tales of old Virginia were exchanged. The graceful Virginia reel was put to test but according to the old timers, the old-fashioned square dance was even more popular.

According to Dr. E. Merton Coulter, historian, Petersburg was a wealthy place. In the old deed files of Elbert County he found recorded the sale of city lots for as much as \$1,200 each.

Petersburg's fame was short lived, however. One historian succinctly records its end: "Tobacco gave way in the first decade of the new century, and Petersburg began to decline. With the coming of the steamboats and the abandonment of tobacco planting and the growth of Augusta, its decay was rapid, and now not one house remains."

Petersburg can be remembered, however, for many reasons. It was the fourth town to be established in Georgia. It bears the distinction of having two United States senators serving in Congress at the same time. They were Judge Charles Tait and Dr. William Wyatt Bibb, for whom Bibb County is named. Later Bibb moved to Alabama and he became the first territorial governor of Alabama. Tait moved to Alabama also and he became the first federal judge of the Alabama territory.

The first cotton factory and the first tobacco warehouse in the south were in Petersburg. The first four wheel vehicle ever brought into the state is said to have been brought to Petersburg by John M. White.

According to McIntosh's *Elbert County History*, most of the people in Petersburg were Virginians and they organized a "society for the betterment of social, educational and industrial advancement." They realized the urgent need for a school so the Petersburg Academy was established. This society in Petersburg gave to John Smithson the idea of his gift to the government, which later became the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D. C.

## RUCKERSVILLE AND GEORGIA'S FIRST MILLIONAIRE

ON VAN'S CREEK near an old Indian trail is Ruckersville, settled in 1773 by Virginia aristocrats who moved in to take up land grants—the first being taken by John Rucker and John White.

In 1822 the village of Ruckersville was incorporated, taking its name from Ruckersville, Virginia. In 1827 *Sherwood's Gazetteer* described it as having 10 houses, 6 stores and shops, an academy and a house of worship for the Baptists. Later it became a thriving town of 600 or 700 people, fifty stores, a newspaper, two banks, two schools, and a Princeton graduate was the principal of its academy, and it is credited with producing Georgia's first millionaire, Joseph Rucker.

Joseph was the son of John and Elizabeth Tinsley Rucker and in 1812 he married Margaret Houston Speer, daughter of William Speer who lived at Cherokee Falls on the Savannah River and they established their home in Ruckersville.

The land was young, the roads were bad, from Ruckersville to Augusta was a four-day trip, and yet in that secluded locality, remote from mart and market, Joseph Rucker created a fortune great for his day and generation.

Joseph Rucker must have been an organizer for there was

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## CLAUDE RAY FORD SALES

Elberton

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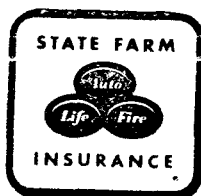
## HERNDON DRUG COMPANY, INC.

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## DIXON FURNITURE COMPANY

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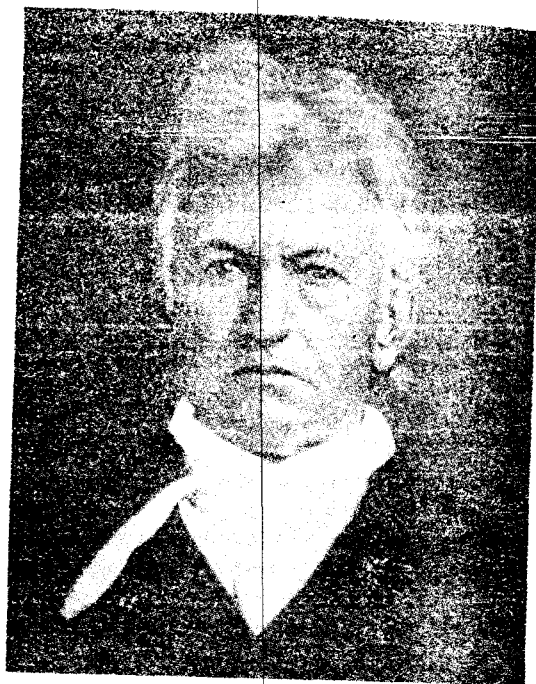
A Good Furniture Store in a Good Town

Ernest R. Dixon, Owner

## J. C. Pool Department Store

A progressive store, on the square,  
in a progressive city.

Elberton, Georgia



JOSEPH RUCKER — from "Georgia and Georgians" by Lucian Lamar Knight.

much to be done. He had saw mills, his own tanyard and tanners, harness makers and shoe makers, and mills to convert grain into flour and meal. There were the necessary blacksmiths, wheelwrights, and carpenters. Not only was there cotton to be ginned but there was cloth to be woven. Cotton was shipped in Petersburg boats down the Savannah River to Augusta.

According to the *Cyclopedia of Georgia*, Joseph Rucker showed kindness and justice in his treatment of his slaves. "There were slaves who were trained and taught and how humanely and well this was done is shown by the conduct of those same slaves when, during the war, discipline was necessarily relaxed and control partially suspended."

The late James S. Lamar, of Augusta, son-in-law of Joseph Rucker, once wrote of his father-in-law's visits to Elberton: "It was his custom to go to Elberton on the first Tuesday in every month, when the principal men of the county would assemble in a sort of general meeting together, to attend the sheriff sales, to transact business with each other, to laugh and talk and crack jokes, and especially to save the country by discussing politics. During court week he would often meet with Alexander Stephens and Robert Toombs."

Georgia's first millionaire was organizer, president, cashier, and stockholder of the Bank of Ruckersville. In fact he was the bank. It must have been a strange sight to see a bank surrounded by a forest. It was a small, nondescript frame building. "Its doors and shutters were studded with nails at close and regular intervals to guard against the burglars' axe. It had a safe without a time lock, opened with a key carried by the president." The Bank of Ruckersville became nationally known and any business transaction involving it was honored throughout the United States. Corra Harris once wrote that her grandfather, John M. White, transported \$150,000 in currency in the foot of his buggy from Milledgeville, the capital, to Ruckersville, and deposited it there for the state.

James Rucker, cousin of Joseph Rucker, also had a bank in Ruckersville. He had his bank in his house and the safe in which the money was placed was sold a number of years ago as junk. It served its last bit of usefulness at the old Rucker home as a hen's nest.

Rucker was not a doctor but he must have attended the sick as this old bill indicates:

2 visits attendance on your family	\$1.56
Stomach Liquid	.20
Elixir and 1 visit	.89
Liquid Lavenders	.12
Laxative	.20
Visits and 6 doses of medicine	1.16

The home of Joseph Rucker still stands today. Once the scene of hospitality and quiet elegance it now waits and longs for restorative hands. Joseph and Margaret Rucker lie sleeping in the old graveyard at Van's Creek.