

Chaplin name pervades the Carolina Lowcountry

You don't have to look far in Beaufort County before you come across a Chaplin.

That name seems etched beyond memory across the face of the South Carolina Lowcountry, and those who bear that name today are indelibly linked to that family.

Here on Hilton Head, one of our major communities that existed far before modern development is still fondly known as "Chaplin."

The large number of today's Chaplins are all descended from an indentured servant from Barbados, John Chaplin, or from those whose ancestors were slaves to the Chaplin family.

John Chaplin came to the Carolinas as a servant of Lord Colleton, one of the lords proprietors who founded the colony barely two years after the settlement was established. It is surmised that Chaplin was a free man on Barbados who agreed to the indenture as a way of getting to the mainland of North America.

Six years was the agreed term of indenture, and six years later, his period of service done, Chaplin and his wife Ann were granted 140 acres on the northern shore of the Stono River, which would have been on James Island.

The law then stated that a man who had completed his term of indenture would be given 70 acres and that a "free" woman would be given the same amount. Since the two were granted 140 acres, it can be assumed that they were married before he left Barbados.

John Chaplin did not fare well with his landholding and wound up losing it because of debt. He then moved south, across the Combahee River into what was then known as St. Helena Parish, and today as Beaufort County. His son, John Jr., sired eight children in his marriage to Phoebe Ladson, whose name is also a memorable one to Lowcountry historians. It was from this family that the other Chaplins received their surname.

Of the eight children, William Chaplin went on to become a major landholder in the parish, marrying Sarah Saxby. Their five children included a son, Thomas Benjamin Chaplin, who was the grandfather of another Thomas B. Chaplin, whose name lives on as the owner of Tombee Plantation on St. Helena Island.

It was, by the way, the custom throughout South Carolina to blend families by more than a single tie.

Cousins wedded cousins, almost at will, and the Chaplins were not far behind in that race. One of Sarah Saxby's daughters by her first marriage to Caleb Toomer married Benjamin Chaplin, brother of her second husband. Phoebe, sister of the two senior Chaplins, married John Jenkins, whose bride was Mary Fripp. Inter-marriage of the three clans continued on down to the late 1800s.

One of Sarah and Thomas' children was Saxby Chaplin, who married Isabella Field, whose grandparents were the original John and Mary Chaplin of our story. Saxby died young, and their son Thomas B. Chaplin, born in 1822, became the owner of the family plantation on St. Helena known as "Tombee." Actually, Saxby's will gave half the family land to Thomas and the other half to his wife, Isabella, with the understanding that the second son, Saxby, would inherit that portion at her death.

Thomas attended "The Richland School for Classical, Scientific and Practical Education," which was located between the present city of Columbia and the town of Camden. As his mother, Isabella, had married her third husband, an Episcopal minister named John S. Fields, the family had moved to the Greenville area where he owned property.

There is some evidence that young Thomas might have been a bit of a disciplinary problem to his new stepfather. Indeed, this appears to be borne out by his marriage, a few days shy of his 17th birthday, to a young Charleston miss, Mary McDowell, who at the time was only 15.

The young family moved back to the Lowcountry where Thomas began working on his landholdings — he would not receive them officially until his 21st birthday — and his family. By the time he reached his majority, the couple had four children.

The plantation house was large for its day, boasting six rooms, each of which had windows on three sides, by virtue of the house's cruciform design. While not the storied mansion of the movies, the house did boast a columned front with a veranda on the bottom and a sizable porch on the second floor.

Thomas B. Chaplin is remembered today for his journal that he kept of life on Tombee Plantation from his youth until his death after the Civil War, and which gives much detail about plantation life during the days of slavery.

(This article is based on the scholarship of Theodore Rosengarten's book, "Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Plantation," together with Chaplin's journals.)



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The View from
Hilton Head