

Thomas Elfe (1719 - 1775)
by Dr. Robert E.H. Peeples

the culture of any society, whether it be primitive or highly civilized, is clearly revealed by the material things which the society needs and the degree of skill which it displays in producing or acquiring them. From its beginning in 1670 the society of the Province of South Carolina, centered in Charles Town on the Ashley River, was strikingly cosmopolitan. The lords Proprietors, to whom Carolina had been granted in 1663 by King Charles II, visualized their province as a reproduction in America of all that was finest in the landed aristocracy of England. They actually provided in the Fundamental Constitutions, drawn up by the philosopher, John Locke, for an hereditary nobility supported by ownership of land, in order "to avoid erecting a numerous democracy". They knew well the history of the other American Colonies and were determined to incorporate into Carolina Society only the finer characteristics of English Society amid which they would personally enjoy living.

First to come were the wealthy planters of Barbados, buying land in order to utilize their capital invested in slave labor. They were followed by the highly cultured, religiously motivated, French Huguenots, after the 1685 Revocation of the Edict of Nanted, many of them lords and ladies, members of France's lesser nobility. Substantial

numbers of Irish, German and Scots added their talents towards upward mobility so that John Lawson could write in his 1700 Journal of his travels in Carolina:" The gentlemen seated in the country are very courteous, live very nobly in their houses and give very genteel entrainment to all strangers and others who come to visit them."

Col. Peter Purry, in preparation for his venture at nearby Purrysburg, visited the newly re-organized royal colony (King GeorgeII had bought up the shares of the Lords Proprietors in 1729) and wrote in 1731: "there are between 5 & 6 hundred houses in Charles Town, most of which are very costly. The people of Carolina are all rich in slaves, furniture, cloth, plate, jewels or other merchandise".

One final background fact. In the decade 1763-1773 South Carolina's exports averaged 389,000 lbs. sterling annually. Contrast this with 71,000 lbs. for New York, 34,000 lbs. for Pennsylvania, 132,000 lbs. for all New England combined. Exports mean they got cash or commodities in payment for what they shipped abroad. In per capita wealth Lowcountry Carolina led all Americans by far.

Against this background let's look at a broad outline of what we know about Carolina's most famous cabinet maker, Thomas Elfe. He was born in London in 1719, there he learned the craft of furniture making, arrived in Charles Town in 1746 at the age of 27 with enough capital to set himself up in business. In 1747 he advertised (the Charleston Library Society has newspaper

files from 1732!) that a pair of large gilt sconces, valued at 150 lbs. would be auctioned at his shop. (Twenty years later John Rutledge got 150 lbs. per annum as Royal Attorney General.) The auction was surely a success because that same year Elfe bought a negro woman, Rinah and her three children for 500 lbs. We don't know why but she ran away, was apprehended and in September 1748 was sold with the children for 550 lbs. Earlier that year Elfe had married the widow, Mary Hancock, who died along with their child on 19 November. The same year Elfe advertised a house for rent in Tradd Street. In 1749 he bought a mulatto boy, Jemmy for 300 lbs. Had he been less successful in business, possibly he might have advertised more. Obviously his clients demanded additional related services of him because in 1751 he advertised the he "now has a very good upholsterer from London" and has available "tapestry, damask, stuff, chintz or paper". Four years later in 1755 Elfe brought to C.T. the cabinet maker, Thomas Hutchinson and began their business association. On 29 December 1755 he married Rachel Prideaux of French Huguenot extraction. He designated his business associate, Thomas Hutchinson, godfather for his first child, Thomas Elfe, Jr., when he had him baptized in newly-built St. Michael's Church. The partnership jointly bought for 157 lbs. in 1756 a negro boy, Mingo. Two years later Elfe bought two lots on Legare Street, south of Broad, and built two tenements to rent. In 1760 Elfe bought a pew in St. Michael's Church and also

advertised for a runaway slave, Bob. By then he had completed the balusters for the steeple of St. Michael's and most of the magnificent mahogany interior woodwork which you may still see. On 7 March 1763 the Vestry of St. Michael's directed the Warden to employ Elfe and Hutchinson to "make a mahogany communion table of such dimension as will fit the velvet covering" and "to be ready against Easter Sunday". Elfe was prompt in obliging George Washington 1791. The same year he made new chairs for the Royal Council Chamber.

The only connection with Hilton Head Island I've found, is in 1776 when Elfe bought 1/2 of C.T. Lot 243 for 1000 lbs. from Benjamin Guerard who later bought H.H. Is. property from Landgrave Bayley's heirs, was sued for non-payment and promptly became governor of South Carolina. Elfe also bought 172 acre Daniel's Island for 500 lbs. Also in 1765 Elfe was elected Warden of C.T.'s prestigious St. George's Society. He gave 50 lbs. to the poor at Christmas. I seldom address any group without reminding them that if one wants earthly immortality, one must write something. Fortunately for Thomas Elfe and for us, he kept a journal, a daily account book, and the volume covering the years 1768-1775, the last 8 years of his life, has survived. It shows how he sought to please his customers in smallest details, such as sending apprentices to repair a birdcage, to build a squirrel house or to take down, move and re-erect

a heavy four-poster bed. Elfe had many apprentices, both slave and free. In 1775 he owned 3 negro cabinet-makers named in his will, as well as 4 lawyers valued at 1400 lbs and 5 joiners appraised at 2250 lbs., a total of 36 slaves. Elfe began his 1768 account book with an inventory which included 40,000 brass chair nails and 10,000 princess metal chair nails. Such chair nails were important. For example, in 1774 Elfe made a set of 12 Chairs "covered with hair and brass nails" for Gen. William Moultrie for 170 lbs. Believe it or not, the same year Thomas Chippendale sold 12 similar chairs to an English duke for 170 lbs. Elfe's side chairs were of 3 types: Scroll backs @ 90 lbs. per dozen, Splat backs @ 160 lbs. per dozen and Carved backs @ 230 per dozen. Elfe produced 643 side chairs 1776-1775, in 8 of the 30 years he worked in Charles Town. And there were 34 other cabinet makers working there.

Elfe only made 9 easy chairs @ 30lbs and 9 French Chairs (Arm Chairs) @ 60 lbs. They weren't popular-- Too warm. Don't expect to find Windsor chairs in Charleston; they were simply considered porch or garden furniture, exposed to the weather and expendable. Although many were made locally, most could be imported more cheaply from Philadelphia, few survived.

Elfe made 68 mahogany bedsteads and 55 poplar bedsteads; the former, with carved knees and claw feet, typically sold for 50 lbs. But prices varied. In 1771 John McKenzie sold a

bedstead complete with bedding and purely gold-embroidered curtains @ 600 lbs.

He made 28 double chest ("chest on chest") @ 100 lbs. and 51 "half drawers and dressing tables". Remember the term "low-boy" was not used at all during the colonial era. but dressing tables were very popular.

Also popular were Sideboards, then thought of primarily as tables. As early as 1725 they were called "side board cedar tables", then designated in 1750 as "side board tables with drawers", selling for 25-30 lbs. From 1768-1775 Elfe made 41 described as "slab & side board tables". They were of 6 legged design, not generally slender and with very little inlay. Plentiful white holly wood was used for inlaying mahogany but in South Carolina inlay was thought to be "gaudy" and was little used. The mahogany side board with marble slab top sold for 15-20 lbs. Knife cases and Urns adorned most sideboards because there was much silver in Charles Town. Some were covered with sharkskin and known as "Shagreen Cases". After 1750 many houses had 6 or more such silver storage cases. There were also fancy mahogany, brass-bound wine coolers, commonly called "butlers", because fine Bordeaux and Madeira wines were served regularly. Elfe turned out many such @ 12 lbs. He made 132 dining tables in 8 years, usually 42" square @ 32 lbs for a pair. In 1773 he made for the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the Southern Colonies a "large square table with two (drop) leaves and sideboards rounded"@ 58

lbs. This was the usual banquet table with separate rounded end tables. He also made 36 Breakfast tables, usually Pembroke style, @ 16-30 lbs.

Prices were higher for the "Scallop Tea Tables (tilt-top) with eagle claws" @ 25 lbs. Elfe made 70 such miscellaneous tables and 39 card tables, often "lined with green cloth" (felt) @ 30 - 40 lbs.

Then, there were 26 large pieces, custom-designed library bookcases, a desk and bookcase @ 130 lbs., a double chest of drawers with desk @ 100 lbs., a "Scrutore" (desk only) or Secretary with arched pediment 130-150 lbs., corner cupboards and bookcases with glass @ 100-140 lbs., sofas @ 90 lbs. (castors extra). A clock case (grandfather clock) brought 40 lbs. There were 7 clothes presses in which Elfe uses cypress, the "wood eternal" as a secondary wood for sides and bottoms of drawers.

And finally there were some 200 small pieces 1768-1775, such necessary items as basin stands, bottle boards, fire screens, mahogany tea trays, picture frames, candle stands. A total of more than 1500 pieces in 8 years.

What woods did he use??? West Indian mahogany from Santo Domingo or Jammaica. Or Honduran Mahogany which could be had @ 4 pence per foot delivered in Charles Town, definitely cheaper than cutting and hauling Carolina trees to town. Even clerks and bricklayers in C.T. owned many pieces of

mahogany. Of course, cedar has always been "esteemed for its sweet smell" as John Lawson wrote. And walnut carved a niche for itself. Oak and pine were secondary woods; maple and sweet gum were not used; hickory occasionally for chairs. In general, think mahogany.

Elfe, like many other famous artists and artisans, used no label, no signature. His work does have 3 characteristics by which one can recognize it, 2 exterior and one interior, all of which you will have to see for yourself: a carved fret, a distinctive foot style and a cross member from front to rear in the center interior construction of most pieces. I want each of you to plan to visit the Heyward Washington House on Church Street; a house museum of the Charleston Museum, America's oldest museum. You'll come away with a deep appreciation of the magnificent work of Thomas Elfe. He made his will 7 July 1775, died 28 November 1775, only 56, leaving his daughter, Hannah and sons, Thomas Jr., George and Benjamin each a C.T. town house and 1000 lbs in cash. His son, Williams Elfe received a plantation in Amelia Township, 8 slaves and 1000 lbs in cash. Thomas Jr., the residual heir, chose the Tory side during the revolution, was amerced 12% by the S.C. Legislature and moved to Savannah in 1784. But he found Savannah was not Charleston and returned by 1801 to Charleston where he lived another quarter century until 1825 when he was buried in St. Paul's Churchyard, now the Cathedral of the Diocese of South Carolina.

Dr. Peeples Describes Life of Cabinet Maker

HILTON HEAD NEWS 23 May 1985
Members of the Dr. Henry Woodward Chapter of the Colonial Dames of the Seventeenth Century heard Dr. Robert E. H. Peeples, president of the Hilton Head Island Historical Society and vice president of the Society of First Families of South Carolina, present an account of South Carolina's premier colonial cabinetmaker, Thomas Elfe, at their quarterly meeting May 18 at Ellie's Restaurant in Plantation Center.

Mrs. Marion L. Jones, hostess for the meeting, introduced Dr. Peeples, who described the career of London-born Elfe in early Charles Town, where the quality of his workmanship commanded prices identical with those of the English cabinetmaker Thomas Chippendale. Outstanding examples of his work may be seen in Heyward-Washington House Museum on Church Street, their history traced from Elfe's own extant journal (1768-1775).

Elfe's handsome balusters on the steeple of St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Broad and Meeting streets, where he had his children baptized and where he purchased a pew for his family's use in 1760, remain in excellent condition despite enemy shelling of the landmark during two major wars. His magnificent mahogany woodwork in the interior of St. Michael's Church is among the most spectacular in America. Elfe's career also was financially rewarding. His 1775 will left 36 well-trained slaves, four Charleston town houses, a substantial plantation in Orangeburg District and thousands of pounds sterling to his daughter and

his four sons.
The Colonial Dames Chapter plans to visit the restored workshop of Thomas Elfe in Charleston, where reproductions of his colonial furniture are available.