

Elliott Best Known For Improving S.C. Education



Stephen Elliott

.. Born in 1771 in Beaufort County

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Post-Courier Reporter

In a ceremony 51 years ago at St. Paul's Church on Coming Street, a small group of Charlestonians commemorated the fascinating career of Stephen Elliott. Yet it was only a fleeting gesture to a forgotten man whose contributions may be unmatched in the city's history.

Stephen Elliott was, as stated on the monument erected at his grave in 1933, a botanist, banker, planter, legislator and teacher. But above all, he was a man of inspiration whose progressive ideas improved the quality of life in Charleston and South Carolina.

Elliott — whose great-grandfather Thomas Elliott came to Charleston in the 17th century from Cornwall, England — was born in Beaufort County in 1771. His mother, Mary Barnwell, was a granddaughter of Gen. "Tuscarora Jack" Barnwell, famed conqueror of the Indian tribe of that name.

Do You Know Your Charleston?

Matriculating at Yale at age 16, Elliott graduated from that institution with high honors in 1791. Elliott was opposed to the idea of South Carolinians having to travel to other states for quality education, however, and his desire to reform the state's academic standards attracted him to a political career.

Elliott was elected in 1794 as a representative from St. Helena Parish, serving 14 years in the state house before being elected to the state senate in 1808. He labored diligently to overcome traditional opposition to public or free education, which was labeled "foolishness" by the great Francis Marion as late as 1795.

In 1811, the Legislature passed the Free School Act, establishing free elementary education in each of the

state's districts and parishes. Elliott, who introduced the bill, has since been referred to as the father of the public school system in South Carolina.

Elliott divided his time among a number of other pursuits in which he was an authority. During his years as a legislator, he was a successful planter and an accomplished botanist on his estate in Beaufort, collecting over 2,000 plant specimens that are recorded in his two-volume work "A Sketch of the Botany of Georgia and South Carolina."

Elliott's knowledge of business affairs was instrumental in his authorship of the bill for establishment of the Bank of the State of South Carolina in 1812. In this piece of legislation, Elliott sought to stabilize an inflated state economy by restricting the amount of available currency.

The Bank of the State of South Carolina opened offices at 19 Broad

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...Elliott Inspired Scientists In 19th Century Charleston

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St. in 1812, compelling Elliott, who was elected its first president by the state legislature, to reside in Charleston, where he lived until his death in 1830.

Elliott was dedicated to the improvement of scholarship in the city, founding in 1813 the Literary and Philosophical Society of South Caro-

liniana. Elliott, who served without salary as the museum's curator until 1819, painstakingly catalogued and arranged the museum's displays, including his own herbarium and ichthyological specimens.

His prominence as a scientist and scholar helped bring donations of rare specimens such as a collection of South American birds and mammals from the noted naturalist Felix I.

came known as the Museum of South Carolina. The current Charleston Museum, which grew out of the Chalmers Street institution, dates its origin to the formation of the Library Society's museum in 1773.

Elliott's prolonged efforts to upgrade education in South Carolina came to fruition in the establishment of the Medical College of the State of South Carolina by the Legislature

and North over regional economic interests, and in 1820 authored an eloquent argument against the proposed protectionist tariff, which was forwarded by the city of Charleston to Congress.

Shortly before his death, Elliott recatalogued the entire 12,000 volumes of the Library Society alphabetically and categorically. He was

Street, and paid tribute by organizing the Elliott Society in 1853. The society, which existed until 1898, was internationally respected for its members' publications in natural science.

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