

Joseph Lawton
October 18, 1753 – March 1815

Paper by Thomas Oregon Lawton, Jr.
Allendale, SC
for delivery to Lawton Family Convention circa 1975

*The original paper is housed in the Lawton Genealogy File
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INTRODUCTION

Joseph Lawton was an exemplary man, contributing to his society in religious, patriotic, civic and social activities.

He was born on October 18, 1753, on Edisto Island at his father's plantation on what is now called Steamboat Creek. He was the fourth son, the youngest child and the only child born to Captain William Lawton by his third wife, Mary Sams, the widow of Paul Grimball.¹

By the time of Joseph's birth, seventy-three years after the first permanent English settlement in South Carolina, Edisto Island had settled into the relatively comfortable security of freedom from the Spaniards and of the prosperity brought about by second and third generation wealth. His inheritances on Edisto from his father and three half brothers were considerable for the day, and it is not known what prompted him to come to the wilderness of the Black Swamp area.² However, he was on Black Swamp before the Revolution, along with his Grimball half brothers and sisters. By 1774, he had sold his Edisto plantation and was acquiring the first of the properties at Black Swamp, that were to become his Mulberry Grove Plantation.³

Joseph, not quite twenty, married on March 18, 1773 eighteen year old Sarah Robert. As tradition has it, the ceremony was performed at Indianland, or Stoney Creek, that indomitable stronghold of Calvinism, where Sarah's father, Jacques Robert, is said to be buried. Her mother, the former Sarah Jaudon, came on to Robertville subsequently.⁴

Joseph and Sarah reared seven children to maturity, beginning with William Henry, the eldest, born on February 23, 1775, and ending with The Reverend Winborn Asa, born on June 23, 1793.⁵ Each of the seven children deserves special mention, but time prevents telling the interesting points of their lives.

Sarah's surviving letters and commentaries on her, reflect her education, cultured French background and her concern with her family, the neighborhood and the church.⁶ Sarah's great grandson, Joseph Thomas Robert, in 1878, wrote of her... "She was very intelligent, fond of reading, hospitable, and eminently pious and exemplary." Mr. Robert said of her father, Jacques Robert... "Her father was a man of culture, well educated and fond of scientific researches, as we learn from records of philosophical apparatus belonging to the family. His children were brought up to be intelligent and influential members of society."⁷

Joseph and Sarah reared their children at Mulberry Grove in a two-story home that was sufficiently imposing, we learn from Sarah's will, to have a parlour and other accoutrements.⁸ The summer house, at Transpine, where the family spent its summers hoping to avoid malaria and miasma, could easily be reconstructed from the detailed specifications in Colonel Alexander J. Lawton's diary.⁹

In her later years, Sarah was seen through the eyes of a Yankee schoolteacher as the matriach of the large Lawton clan, and as the grand dame of Black Swamp, riding about the countryside in her chair, or chaise. Charlotte Verstelle, daughter of the famous miniaturist, William Verstelle, had been preceptress of Phillips Andover Academy in Massachusetts before coming to teach the Robertville gentry at the newly formed Black Swamp Academy, and it is from her descriptive letters to relatives in the North that we draw this picture of Sarah.¹⁰

To Sarah we owe the precedent of the first Lawton family reunion. It was held in 1831, almost a century and a half ago, when according to Mr. Robert, "Grandmother determined to invite all of her children and grandchildren then living to meet together at her residence at 'Mulberry Grove' and spend a day once more as a family in social enjoyment." (Now we might know where that "determination gene" originated in Joseph and Sarah's descendants!)

At that first Lawton reunion, Eighty-five persons were present to partake of Sarah's hospitality for an entire day. She was then Seventy-six, and our recorder reports further that "The afternoon was spent, as was the morning, in pleasant intercourse. Towards its close, the venerated parent, calling her children around her, gave them affectionate counsel and bestowed upon them her parting blessing."¹¹

Eight years after the reunion, on October 6, 1839, Sarah died at the age of Eighty-four. She may not have determined what was to be inscribed on her tombstone at the old Black Swamp Baptist Cemetery at Robertville, but the person who wrote her legend knew his subject sufficiently to know that she would be pleased to have recorded upon that stone the fact that she left One Hundred Fifteen (115) descendants.

Even though Sarah was proud of her progeny, she was practical in considering their worldly successes. When her will distributed to various daughters-in-law and grandchildren, in minute detail, her china, pictures, mahogany furniture, silver (over two dozen silver tea spoons), etc., she perhaps placated the children of her deceased son, William Henry, in a tactful manner by declaring... "I desire it to be remembered that it is not for want of parental affection that I do not place the family of my son William on the same footing in the distribution of my small Estate, with my surviving sons. They are abundantly blessed with the goods of this world, and do not need it. They have been affectionate and attentive children to me." Whether or not Sarah's tact did indeed placate the Maner-Lawton grandchildren is not known.¹²

WORLDLY GOODS.

The measure of a man is not necessarily reflected in the size, value, or amount of his worldly possessions, but contemplation of such possessions in retrospect may shed light on the nature of his style of life and on the contributions he made, according to his wealth, to the world in which he lived.

Joseph inherited wealth from at least six different sources. From his father, he inherited a plantation on Edisto Island which he sold to John Hanahan on December 16, 1774. He also inherited wealth from his three unmarried half brothers: Josiah, William, Jr., and Jeremiah Lawton; from his maternal grandmother, Susannah Winborn, and from his mother, Mary Sams Grimball Lawton Fickling.²⁰

When he moved from Edisto Island to Black Swamp, he obviously intended to produce silk on his new plantation in the backcountry when he selected the name "Mulberry Grove." Perhaps he hoped to receive technical assistance in producing silk from the settlers at nearby Puryburgh since the Puryburghers had come to South Carolina some forty years earlier for the express purpose of producing silk and wine. Ultimately, Joseph was to produce rice, indigo, cotton, and other crops on his plantation.

Joseph owned twenty slaves in 1790, twenty-eight in 1800, and thirty-eight in 1810.²¹ He had purchased a number of large tracts of land before 1785,²² the date the 1785-1865 void begins in the Beaufort District records. For this reason, we cannot say with certainty what the acreage of Mulberry Grove was in 1815 at Joseph's death, but an ancient plat depicting Mulberry Grove in 1854, when owned by Joseph's son, Colonel Alexander J. Lawton, shows the acreage to be 5363 acres.²³

When Joseph died, his will confirmed gifts of plantations or made devises of plantations to each of his five sons, including the home tract to Colonel Alexander J., subject to the life estate of Sarah Lawton. The will also spoke of lands Joseph was buying in Mississippi and admonished that slave families were not to be separated.²⁴

Mention has been made of the principal house, apparently an imposing one for its day and of the summer house at Transpine, or Pineland. Neither exists today, but the Morels, present owners of a portion of the plantation, have built a charming pre-Revolutionary style home on the site, between Furman and Pineland.

Mulberry Grove was originally in Granville County, then for a time in St. Peter's Parish, Beaufort District, and for a short while in Lincoln County, before being returned to Beaufort District. Colonel Alexander J. Lawton's son, General Alexander Lawton, sold it to Mrs. Mary Mulligan just after the area became Hampton County.²⁵ In 1956, major portions of it were owned by the John Morel family of Savannah, who called their portion Pineland Plantation. Mr. R.B. Kirby of Charleston, owned another large portion of the plantation in 1956, and he called his "Mimosa."

CIVIC RECORD

Between the Revolution and the Civil War, Black Swamp became one of the wealthiest areas in the state. Pierre Robert, writing for the Hampton County Guardian on August 24, 1879, stated:

“Previous to the War, the people around this place, with very few exceptions, were in easy circumstances, many owning plantations, with from fifty to two hundred slaves, and several as many as five hundred. Some planters numbered as many as twenty thousand acres of land in their domain. Their sons and daughters were educated at the best Southern and Northern colleges and seminaries.”

The nonpartisan primary evidence fully supports Mr. Robert's description of Black Swamp. Charlotte Verstille concluded shortly after her arrival in 1821 that Robertville people were “very worldly minded, and... appear to think more of the-rise and fall of cotton²⁶ than the rise and progress of religion...” A later-day writer, Chlotilde Martin disagreed with Charlotte by concluding that Robertville people possessed the unusual traits of accumulating material wealth while at the same time displaying great missionary zeal.²⁷ Records do show that Black Swampers were interested in religion, accumulating wealth, and education.²⁸

An Ohio soldier wrote from Robertville in February, 1865, that this place had splendid plantations and palatial mansions.²⁹ What a pity that photographs and detailed descriptions do not exist, although I once saw an architectural rendering of the home of William John Lawton, whose steps at Robertville remain as mute testimony to the wrath of these invading Yankees. It was indeed a palatial mansion, two and one-half stories tall, on a raised English basement, with piazzas adorned with ellipses and slender columns.

Education came to Black Swamp early. The Black Swamp Academy was incorporated in 1818 by three Lawtons, two Roberts, and two Maners.³⁰ Planters' sons attended Brown, Princeton, Madison (Colgate), The University of Virginia, Randolph-Macon, Hampton-Sydney and the South Carolina College. Daughters attended Emma Willard in Troy, New York; Salem Academy in North Carolina; Miss Bonney's in Philadelphia, and other fine schools closer to home.³¹ And by 1865, three Lawton, several Bostick, Robert, Maner, and other families could measure at least a part of their wealth in owning more than one hundred slaves.³²

Black Swamp had been the county seat of short-lived Lincoln County, named for the Revolutionary General, with its own courthouse and jail, and the village boasted a small Episcopal Church, a large and splendid Baptist Church with every attention to elegant architectural detail (specifications of this are in existence), stores, and professional offices. The Federal Post Office at Black Swamp, founded in 1800, with Joseph's son, William Henry, as first postmaster, became Robertville in 1812.³³

Just prior to the emergence of the greatest prosperity of Black Swamp and Robertville, Joseph Lawton died in early middle age in his 62nd year. His role in the Baptist denomination and in the Revolution has been recounted. After the war, his sense of nobless oblige was further displayed, in civic duties. In 1792 and again in 1795, he served as a commissioner upon appointment by the State Legislature to lay out public roads from various centers to and through Black Swamp, a vital and sometimes onerous task.³⁴ He served as a Justice of the Quorum and as a Justice of the Peace in the 1790's, the latter office at that time approximating the office of our present-day Circuit Judge,³⁵ and he was elected to the South Carolina House of Representatives, as a member from St. Peter's Parish, Beaufort District, from 1784 until 1786.³⁶

His tombstone, the earliest marked grave in the Black Swamp Cemetery at Robertville, and his obituary, in the City Gazette of Charleston for Saturday, March 18, 1815, are remarkable in their simplicity.

Traditionally, the motto of the South Carolina family of Lawton is the word “Honor.” Truly, Joseph Lawton exemplified this precept with his devotion to family, church and country. Let us hope that we, his descendants, will follow his example.

Footnotes

1. S. C. Historical Magazine, Vol LX, p.90.
2. supra, pp. 86-93.
3. Deed Book U-6, p. 450, Charleston Co. R.M.C. office, also various gravesites.
4. Our Family Circle, P. 323.
5. "The Lawton Family of Roberville, S.C.", by E. L. Inabinett, with annotations by Robert E. H. Peeples, pp. III-IV.
6. copies, possession of Thomas O. Lawton, Jr., Allendale, S.C.
7. Newspaper Clipping (unidentified as to paper), possession of author.
8. Will of Sarah Lawton, Lawton Family Papers, Carolinana Library, Columbia, S. C.
9. Diary of Col. Alexander J. Lawton, U.N.C. Library, Chapel Hill, N. C.
10. Letters of Charlotte Verstelle, Carolinana Library.
11. Newspaper Clipping, supra.
12. Sarah Lawton Will, supra.
13. S. C. Historical Magazine, supra.
14. see Two Hundred Years of Lawtonville Baptists, also Leah Townsend, History of the Baptist Denomination in S.C. (1670-1800)
15. See Gibbes Documentary History of the Revolution in S.C., also Ramsey, History of the Rev. in S. C.
16. S.C. Treasury Journal 1778-1787, p. 115.
Auditor General's Account Book (April 1778 through Feb.178 p. 91). Also, Cash Book 1777-1779, p. 123, 1778-1779, p. 123, 1779-1780, p. 17, All in S. C. Archives Dept., Columbia, South Carolina