

THEODOSIA BURR

ONCE FIRST LADY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Large oaks covered with moss draping almost to the ground and flat rice fields of the old South are but a few of the low-country scenes which surrounded the "Oaks", the plantation home of Theodosia Burr Alston near Georgetown, where she lived for twelve years as the wife of Joseph Alston and as a belle in prominent South Carolina social circles.

Her short, but happy, married life was spent in South Carolina where her husband was a wealthy planter and governor of the State during the war of 1812. Her stay at the Oaks was not static, for she was continually traveling, seeking a climate which would help her restore her delicate health.

Frequent visits were made to see her famous father, Aaron Burr, whom some historians prefer to call "Acoundral". But Theodosia did not consider him as such. To her he was superior to all other men. She was ever blind to his faults, fortunately for Burr, and gave him much happiness and cause to be a proud father.

After he had been shamed from the country into European exile, following the Hamilton duel, she wrote him, "You appear to me - - - so elevated above other men; I contemplate you with such strange mixture of humility, admiration, reverence, love and pride, that very little superstition would be necessary to make me worship you as a superior being - - - I had rather not live than not be the daughter of such a man."

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The prolific correspondence of Theodosia and Burr began when "Theo" was about 10 years old since Burr's political life often kept him from home. Theodosia's mother was Theodosia Prevost, the widow of a former British officer. She and Burr were married in 1782 and Theo was born the following year in New York.

Theodosia's educational training began early, under Burr's guidance, of course. She was privately tutored in French, music and dancing as all the young ladies of her day were, but her education did not stop there. Being a member of the intelligentsia, Burr was determined to make his offspring one as well. In this we must agree that Burr greatly succeeded, for Theodosia was one of the most learned women of her day. One historian has bestowed upon her the title, "the first gentlewoman of her time."

Theo at age nine was writing to her father in French. She was also tutored in Mathematics, Latin, Greek, German and English composition. Burr once wrote to his wife concerning Theodosia, "But I yet hope by her to convince the world that neither sex appears to believe - that women have souls."

Theo's letters to her father were corrected by him. He criticized them as to length and content, and scolded her for unanswered questions and late replies. She worked hard to please him. "I really think, my dear Theo," he wrote to her when she was age ten. "that you will be very soon beyond all verbal criticism, and that my whole attention will be presently directed to the improvement of your style."

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Her study hours were determined by Burr who was none too hesitant in increasing them as time progressed. Whether Theodosia, the child prodigy, ever played the usual children's games or ever got her little face dirty from playing with mud pies is questionable.

When Theo was 11 years old her mother died. The loss drew father and daughter even closer together. Burr now undertook Theodosia's social education, teaching her the niceties of society and how to be a lady. At this he also did well.

With her large, flashing black eyes, dark hair, high forehead, and round face, Theo won many suitors. None of the young men of prominent New York families who pursued her love won it though.

Instead, the Southern mannerisms and speech of a young gentleman persuaded Theo to marry him before her 17th birthday. On February 2, 1801, Theodosia was married to Joseph Alston who was prominent in South Carolina Politics. Some criticized the marriage as a political move, but both married for love and remained deeply devoted until Theodosia's early death separated them. The following March the Howlyweds saw Burr Inaugurated as the third vice-president of the United States.

Joseph was from a prominent low-country family of All Saints' parish, Waccamaw (near Georgetown). His father, a wealthy rice planter, founded the single "1" branch of the Alston family in South Carolina. Joseph was the cousin of Robert Francis Withers Alston, governor of South Carolina from 1856 - 1858

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Joseph became a member of the lower house of South Carolina in 1802. After an ardent but successful fight for the 1812 governorship, he went into office at the age of 33.

Had it not been for Edward Hooker, a New England gentleman, who came to Columbia in 1805 and kept a diary, a description of Joseph would not exist. There is no portrait of him known to exist.

With an observing eye Hooker watched the legislators and recorded his impressions, unknowingly, for posterity. He considered Joseph one of the "ablest" and the most "active". Joseph was a "short man and rather thick" Hooker noted. "Of dark complexion - with thick, black hair and a formidable pair of whiskers." It seems that Joseph liked horses and could often be found around the Columbia stables, wearing boots, a jockey-like frock," and smoking a "segur."

After a long honeymoon Joseph took his bride to his native state. Theodosia was now married to a new life and living almost in another world - South Carolina. She sensed early the conservative and skeptical ways of these Southern people which put South Carolina in strong contrast with other states. In "South Carolina," she wrote her father, "there is less enterprise, less public spirit---" "This vagrant life fatigues me", is an expected statement to come from Theo who loved excitement and flurry. "My health is infinitely improved," she wrote Burr from the Oaks, "and I attribute it to nothing but the continual bustle I have been kept in for the three weeks past. What a charming thing a bustle is. Oh, dear de-

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lightful confusion. It gives a circulation to the blood, and activity to the mind, and a spring to the spirits."

It was hard for Theo to condition herself to her new environment after the bustle and glitter of New York society but South Carolina had its society and glitter as well and she was soon a member of it. She went often to Charleston, the races, and visited their summer home on Debordieu Island.

She continued to read, increase her knowledge, and engaged a Spanish tutor. Theo did not read the sentimental novels over which the ladies swooned. She expressed her beliefs to Burr in a letter, "Novel reading has, I find, not only the ill effect of rendering people romantic, which thanks to my father on earth, I am long past, but they really furnish no occupation to the mind. A series of events follow so rapidly, and are interwoven with remarks so common and spun out, that there is nothing to reflect upon."

Theo's intelligence made her no different from any other girl her age. She loved pretty things and wrote to her father, "But you must send me the shawl. I shall be down at the races and want to have the gratification of displaying it."

Theo's son, Aaron Burr Alston, was born in 1802. He later acquired the nickname "Gangy." After his birth her health continued to decline. She remained under a doctor's care and continued to travel, trying desperately to regain her health,

She wrote to Burr while on a visit to her husband's Greenville farm, "Thus, as far as health, and plenty, and comfort can go, Greenville pleases me greatly."

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The increasing bad relations between Burr and Hamilton came to a climax in 1804 when they fought the duel which took Hamilton's life and caused Burr to decline as a public figure. Just two years later Burr shared his idea of disuniting the Western states from the United States with the wealthy expatriated Irishman, Harmon Blennerhassett. Burr was arrested in the spring of 1807 for his alleged conspiracy. Theo was at his side during the Richmond trial, using her charm and graciousness as influence in his favor. After Burr's acquittal public pressure forced him into European exile. Theo went to New York to bid him farewell for the last time.

Theo's son died of a fever at the age of 10 on June 30, 1812. She was in ill health at the time and her condition was greatly aggravated by her loss. Burr returned to New York from exile the next month only to receive the sad news. The distressed and sick Theo wrote him "----but there is no more joy for me; the world is a blank. I have lost my boy. My child is gone for ever."

She was unable to meet Burr immediately because of her feeble condition. By December 30 she was well enough for the voyage to New York. Joseph's duties as governor prevented him from sailing with her. Theo sailed from Georgetown harbor December 30 on the PATRIOT, a pilot-built-schooner, taking with her a new portrait of herself to replace the travel-worn one which Burr had carried all over Europe. Theo, the crew, and the PATRIOT never reached New York harbor and were never

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heard of again. This strange disappearance remains a mystery.

Alston wrote to his wife in a frantic state of mind when no news of her was received after her embarkment. "Another Mail, and still no letter! - - - - -The state of my mind is dreadful- - - - -May God grant me one word from you tomorrow. Adieu. All that I have left of heart is yours. All my prayers are for your safety and well-being."

There are many theories of Theodosia's death. Some believe the PATRIOT capsized in a terrible storm which struck the Carolina coast a few days after Theo left Georgetown. Some said the ship was captured by pirates and all on board made to walk the plank. Then too, the ship may have wrecked on jagged Cape Hatteras coast.

Theodosia's death has taken many forms of stories and several fiction books of her life have been written. They tend to make her a heroine of romance and a fictitious character rather than the real vivacious, elusive and intelligent person she really was. In her short life she had won a name for herself, a name which would live with history. She had reached her father's intellectual goals and have lived up to her families standards and expectations. Theo was the great granddaughter of Jonathan Edwards, the ardent New England theologian.

When all hope was gone for Theo being alive, Joseph wrote his father-in-law, "My boy - my wife- gone, both! This, then, is the end of all the hopes we had formed."

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Joseph died less than three years after Theo, a very young and broken-hearted man. He was buried next to his son on the Oaks plantation which is in Brookgreen Gardens today.

Among Theo's few belongings, which were left behind, was a letter to Joseph which he never read, written during an illness which she thought she was dying. "If it does not appear contrary or silly," she requested, "I beg to be kept as long as possible before I am consigned to the earth---." unaware that she was to have a watery grave.

Last month marked 139 years since Theo sailed from Georgetown and said good-bye to Joseph, but there are few people in South Carolina who do not know of the sad death of the pretty 29 year old adopted South Carolinian who was once first lady of her husband's native state.