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Famous South Carolina Mansion Destroyed By Sherman In 1865

HOME OF COLONEL N.A. PEAY, PALACE OF GREATEST BEAUTY DESTROYED BY ENEMY TROOPS

Scattered Bricks and an Old Laundry House Mark Site of Renowned Homestead Near Winnsboro, S.C. Was Noted for Its Luxury and Hospitality---Boasted an Observatory on Roof---There Were 150 Servants and 500 Slaves---Isolated Now, But Natural Beauty Inspires.

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By Ellen Evans Hough

A barren summit with scattered bricks, large holes revealing evidence of fallen walls, 13 inches thick, and a lone hut, formally the laundry house, mark the place of South Carolina's once most beautiful and extravagant mansion of the nineteenth century. This palace, as it has been called by many, stood on the hill's crest, giving a vista of the surrounding country for a distance of about 30 miles, and was monarch of that territory until the war between the states by Sherman's army on its "march to the sea."

MANSION DESTROYED.

The destruction of the lovely historic residence of Col. Nicholas Adamson Peay, better known as the "Old Peay Mansion" and "Peay's Folly" has been classed with the ruining of "Millwood" former elegant home of Gen. Wade Hampton, five miles from Columbia, which was destroyed during the same campaign in Feb., 1865, when Sherman's army devastated South Carolina's homes of splendor and barns of plenty. Gothic columns still stand as a memorial to the home of the former governor of South Carolina, the posts being all that was left of the home after Sherman's visit to the state.

The "Old Peay mansion" still renowned for its former splendor, was a massive structure covering three-quarters of an acre, and said to have been the largest dwelling in the state at that time. It was built of brick, granite and Italian marble, imported for the purpose, and fragments of the materials are still scattered over the hill to prove the tale. It was never finally completed, due to the death of Colonel Peay and the war between the states, but the interior was of unusual beauty. "Peay's Folly" was the name by which it was most commonly known; this name being given by the citizens, who considered it foolish for a man to build a home of such lavishness so far from the railroads.

HAD THIRTY ROOMS.

It contained 30 rooms, and though waterworks were hardly known at that time, the house was completely equipped with such a system, the water being pumped by hydraulic ram over the hills from the cool spring of a deep ravine. A most unusual and interesting feature was an observatory on the top of the house. Many thought that there was a fish pond on the roof, the idea coming from the negroes, who saw the reflection of the sun on the glittering tin and thought they saw rippling



water.

One hundred and fifty servants were kept by Colonel Peay to serve the home, hospitality was paramount. The famous stable, said to have been prettier than the average brick homes of today, was always well filled with at least a dozen aristocratic horses, with a separate attendant for each horse. In a nearby ravine was a privately-owned tanyard. Besides his personal servants, there were 500 slaves, all the sole property of the colonel. These were, of course, set free when the place was burned.

#### GRANITE POSTS.

Two handsome granite posts, which have stood the test of war and time, formed an imposing entrance to the grounds until but recently, when they were dismantled and sold. They have since been presented to the Presbyterian church, directly across the road from the site of the former Peay home, and have been erected at the gate leading into the cemetery. There they will probably remain always, reminders of the lovely home which was destroyed by enemy troops.

It is well known that the house was the result of competition between former Governor Manning and Colonel Peay, who were trying to outdo each other in the building of elegant homes.

The only living child of the Peay family is Mrs. Annie Peay Bray, who is now living with her daughter, Mrs. J. R. Carson, in Chester, S. C. Mrs. Bray is 78 years old and remembers many things never told about the event. She was one of six children. Both she and Mrs. Carson have many relics, family pictures and antiques which were saved from the house by the slaves, who were allowed to ransack the house after the federal soldiers had secured all they wanted, before burning it. Some of the things saved at that time came back into the family after the war by securing them from the negroes. Nothing, however, was saved by the family at the time of its destruction.

#### ON A HIGH HILL

The gradual rise of the hill upon which the mansion stood prevents one realizing its elevation of 700 feet, but once upon its summit there can immediately be detected a change in the atmosphere, and there is an unusual wild beauty in its far-reaching view. North can be seen a succession of hills, but none are so high as the site of "Peay's Folly." Like a tan ribbon encircling a distant hill, the Wateree river winds its way parallel to the land of the "Old Peay Mansion."

On a higher hill above and across the river, more than 12 miles away, may be seen the home town of the governor of South Carolina, Gov. John G. Richards. Tenants, who live nearby, say that on clear nights that the flare of lights from surrounding towns may be seen.

Col. Nicholas A. Peay, affectionately called Col. "Nick" Peay, who owned the famous "American palace," possessed approximately 9,000 acres of land in Fairfield county as shown by records now in the Winnsboro courthouse. This land was centered



about the home place, which is 20 miles southeast of Winnsboro, and 10 miles from the present site of Lugoff dam, on the Wateree river, in the Longtown section. He was one of the wealthiest men of his day, and though he died before the war between the states, the house was still in the family at the time it was so ruthlessly destroyed.

#### WAS GREAT SCHOLAR

He was a great scholar, having received his education at Columbia university and at the University of Virginia. He died at the age of 47 on the 26th day of Feb. 1857. He was a member of the house of representatives in South Carolina also.

The original home site is now owned by a Floridan, Mr. Sam McCormick, but the majority of the estate belongs to the Southern Power company, the arable land being farmed by the Great Falls Farm company.

A monument of unique design covers the graves of Colonel Peay and his wife, Martha Cary Lamar Peay, and it may be found on the family lot in the cemetery of the Longtown Baptist church. It is composed of many layers of granite slabs of uniform width, which diminish in length with each layer, like steps, until at the top it is but wide enough for a slender monument. Two sides of the monument bear inscriptions of Colonel Peay, while the other two bear inscriptions regarding his wife. Designs of weeping willows and blending hearts are cut alternately on the four sides of the tomb. There is no way of entering the high granite obstruction which surrounds the lot, and the only view obtainable is over the four foot wall.

#### UNDER GENERAL HOWARD

As to the destruction of the palace, February 20, 1865, it has been ascertained that the Fifteenth Corps of the right wing of Sherman's army, under the command of Gen. Oliver Otis Howard, was responsible. On the day after Columbia was burned the right wing was sent northward. We have Sherman's own words for this advance from the capital recorded in his "Memoirs," (Vol. II, page 288). He says: "Having utterly ruined Columbia, the right wing began its <sup>march</sup> northward, to Winnsboro, on the 20th (February, 1865)." And Winnsboro was likewise burned. The Fifteenth Corps, according to Sherman's "Memoirs" were noted "for doing their work pretty well."

Every American citizen is familiar with General Sherman's famous march to the sea--all agreeing that its success broke the backbone of secession--and that there was special spite against South Carolina as the originator of the whole trouble. Again we have Sherman's own words for the feeling against the state. In his "Memoirs" (page 226) there is a dispatch from him to Gen. W.H. Halleck, dated headquarters in the field, Savannah, Ga., December 24, 1864. It reads: "The truth is the whole army is burning with insatiable desire to wreak vengeance upon South Carolina. I almost tremble at her fate; but feel that she deserves all that seems in store for her."

Thus, it does not seem strange that the magnificent Peay mansion was not left unmolested by the wreckers, as it possessed the very type of luxury desired for



destruction.

#### ARMY DEVIDED

The whole federal army was devided into two wings, with Gen. Oliver Otis Howard, then a one-armed man, having lost an arm in the battle of Fair Oak in 1862, in charge of the right wing, and Gen. Henry W. Slocum, the first general to enter Atlanta with his troops, in charge of the left wing. They covered the entire state and, including the state capital and the already mentioned Winnsboro, there were 14 towns partially or wholly burned by the army. These towns were Robertsville, McPhersonville, Grahamville, Barnwell, Blackville, Orangeburg, Lexington, Chesterfield, Camden, Winnsboro, Lancaster, Cheraw, Darlington and Columbia.

One accident at the time of the burning of the house and known to be true, was the death of one of the federal officers, who rode his horse up the low built steps leading into the house and down into the well-stocked wine cellar. After drinking many of the various brands with the air of a connoisseur, he was not sober enough to find his way out of the cellar, and so when the house was ignited he burned with it.

#### GRANDSON COMES SOUTH

In September of 1925 a grandson of General Howard, the general previously mentioned as being responsible for the burning of the Peay mansion, spent his months of vacation with a university friend in northern South Carolina. Both were graduates of a leading southern university.

Before returning north, the southern host, not knowing the relation of his friend Howard to the famous general of the war between the states, spent several days with his friend in exploiting the wonders of the capital city, and historical places of the city by the sea.

He motored to the spot where Sherman is said to have set fire to Columbia, pointed out, with true southern pride, the shell marks on the beautiful capitol, and with equal loyalty to the lost cause, drove to the ruins of "Millwood," Gen. Wade Hampton's burned home.

Proceeding the next day to Charleston the southerner showed the northerner where the first shot was fired at Fort Sumpter, the fortress on James Island the harbor where numerous naval conflicts were staged. All during the tour of the war scenes the northerner was continually impressed by his companion with the burning of the southern mansions, the pillaging by the Yankee soldiers and the devastating wreckage instigated by Sherman and his chief of staff, Gen. Oliver Otis Howard. During those days young Howard was noticeably quiet and subdued, very different from his accustomed jovial disposition.

#### VISITOR EMBARRASSED

A few days after their return to Baltimore the students <sup>started</sup> reminiscences of the war between the states. Prominent generals on both sides were mentioned, and one spoke of General Howard's being Sherman's chief of staff during his march to the sea.



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More as a joke, the Carolinian asked his friend Howard if by any chance he was related to this notorious northern leader.

"Why, Rob, he was my grandfather," was the embarrassed reply. Not until then was the reticence of the southerner's late visitor understood while the two had viewed the remains of the states' conflict in 1865.

When again alone he confessed to his roommate that he had suffered the tortures of the damned as he viewed the havoc wrought under the direction of his illustrious grandfather.

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