

Melrose and its Builder

By KATHLEEN LEWIS

"MELROSE," the house which Nicholas Adamson Peay built over a century ago in the Longtown section, was the fairest to ever grace Fairfield County; and though it was never quite completed, was one of few of such magnitude in the South. It overlooked a view of thirty or more miles from its hill crest, an elevation of 700 feet; and from its summit on clear evenings, flickering lights from neighboring communities could be seen across the darkness.

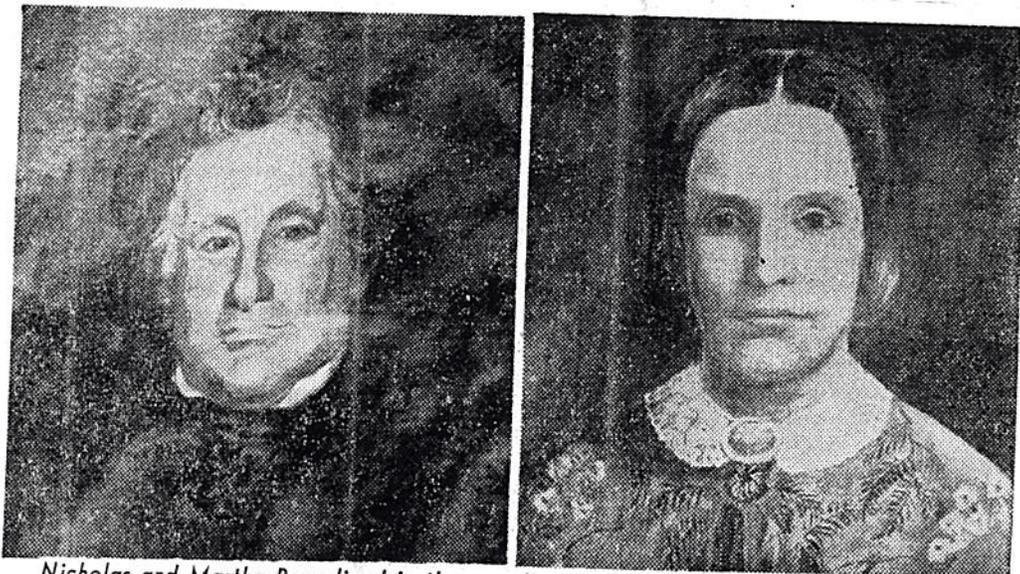
"Nick" Peay built his house when plantation life was at the zenith, in the early 1800's. Like his associates, he was a member of the wealthy, powerful, planter aristocracy which dominated the life of South Carolina politically, economically and socially. However, the lavish life enjoyed on the Peay plantation, Flint Hill, was on a grander and more elevated scale than on the majority of others.

His ownership of over 2,000 slaves and 9,000 acres—stretching from Fairfield County to Camden—placed him in the position of being the wealthiest man in the upcountry. (He was one of 72 men in the South owning over 500 slaves and one of eight in South Carolina).

At his birth, February 8, 1811, he was already rich, inheriting from his father as the only son in the family. His father, Austin Peay, grandson of the first Peay in the South Carolina line who had settled at Camden, accumulated large holdings of lands, Negroes and horses after "he had crossed the Wateree in Fairfield."

With his inheritance from his father, by thrift and business ability, Nicholas added to his wealth, acquiring several plantations, each of which was identified by a particular name. All had comfortable homes for the overseers, and individual slave quarters which were laid out with their own streets and gardens. Barns, numerous out-buildings, ginneries, shops for artisans and stables were clustered nearby.

Cotton was responsible for a great deal of his added wealth, because after the advent of the cotton gin—and in the 1850's the



Nicholas and Martha Peay lived in the grand manner at their home, "Melrose," one of the most impressive private residences in South Carolina in the ante-bellum era.

railroad to transport the commodity to market—it became the planters' largest money crop.

Nicholas Peay was more than a wealthy planter; he was also a soldier. Just a few years before his marriage to Martha Cary Lamar of Edgefield in January, 1840, he had served in the Seminole War (1835), acquiring the title of Colonel.

After their marriage, the Colonel brought Mrs. Peay to his Flint Hill plantation in the Longtown section while "Melrose" was being constructed. Already it had become known as "Peay's Folly," because observers felt it was foolish to build such a sizeable house and especially one so far from the railroad.

But the young bride was thrilled over the plantation home as she watched the bricks, Italian marble—imported for the purpose—and granite grow into an "American Palace." It was a job that she never saw finished for she died some years before the Army of Sherman devastated and laid waste all of "Melrose."



An artist's conception of how Melrose might have appeared. An exhaustive search was made for a drawing or print of the famous o'd mansion, both in libraries and in family papers, but none could be found. (Drawing by Jak Smyrl)

"Melrose," of course, had been the point from which Colonel Peay had dispensed his famous hospitality to the countryside. Mrs. Peay was termed an excellent hostess who welcomed guests for "indefinite stays."

She, no doubt, worked hard, as she supervised the one hundred fifty house and yard servants and looked after their well-being. Because there were so many, no one slave worked unduly. For instance, one servant held only one job, that of opening and closing the windows; another as the fly brush boy.

The butler was an ancient, white-haired man who had served the generation before, called "Daddy George." Next to the master and mistress, he was in charge. His manners were founded upon those of the aristocracy and best society, and were best discernible upon his greeting of guests at the door, a privilege he always reserved for himself. He also trained the younger Negroes as they grew

up to take their places; and taught table etiquette to the Peay children.

"Maum Nannie," his wife, was the chief nurse and beloved by all who came to her with their problems and rested them in her confidence. Under "Daddy George" and "Maum Nannie" were the individual body servants and maids for the young members of the family.

Each of the boys was allowed his own dog and horse; and was taught riding by the coachman whose main duty was to drive the ladies. Under the Coachman

were the hostlers who saddled the horses and hitched up the carriages; and the footman who rode up front with him. The footman saw that the ladies' feet were well wrapped in lap-ropes to prevent their catching cold, and helped them alight from the carriage by placing a foot-stool for their convenience. On long journeys, out-riders paced along to repair broken har-

nesses, spokes, tires or the like.

Nearby the stables—said to have been as fine and comfortable as modern brick homes—was the laundry house where clothes were washed and ironed. This building stood until only a few years ago as the single remnant of "Melrose."

Spinners and weavers worked the year 'round to keep the plantation clothed, as did the shoemaker who provided shoes from "splint lengths."

A task which Mrs. Peay loved to perform was her morning visit to the nursery which was in charge of slaves too old to work. Here were squalling, laughing and sleeping children, and newborn babes, of servants at work in the house or fields.

At the Sick House, also on her daily agenda, she dispensed medicines and called in a physician if the malady were beyond her knowledge.

Wednesday night was a special time for all the field hands and house servants as they gathered in their quarters for their weekly prayer meeting, led by one of the elderly men. Here they recited bits of Scripture their mistress had taught them, and sang "her" hymns, ending with their own special music, much of which was haunting African refrains.

Much of her home Mrs. Peay perhaps saw rather infrequently, because Melrose contained thirty rooms and sprawled over three-fourths of an acre. But what a joy it must have been to have had running water in the 19th century which the Colonel had so thoughtfully provided! Water for the mansion was pumped by hydraulic ram over the hills from a cool spring in a deep ravine, according to one of his descendants, a granddaughter who died in 1928.

Embracing the front of "Melrose" was a two-story portico which was supported by large white columns. The colonial entrance was flanked by large, double doors which opened onto an extremely wide hall, ending in a circular stairway to the upper bed chambers. The back hall was divisible from the front by folding doors; and the two, state drawing rooms were also divided by folding doors which when thrown back became full length mirrors reflecting beautiful candelabra and polished mahogany.

There were two large dining rooms, one a state dining room, and the other used by the family which consisted of the Peays and their six children, three boys and three girls.

Wings projecting from the house contained kitchens, pantries and servants rooms. The entire top floor was given over to the ball room which afforded a magnificent view of the beautifully landscaped gardens of exotic flowers and shrubbery.

The roof of the house had an observatory; and it may have been from this vantage point that the servant, care-takers saw the approach of Sherman's soldiers February 20, 1865. The Colonel had been dead for eight years—since February 26, 1857; his sons were away, fighting in the Confederate war; and the girls were either in school or with relatives.

The burning of Columbia two days before may or may not have reached the community by this time, but from the reputation already established, the servants knew not to expect mercy. (In his Memoirs, Sherman states that the 15th Corps under Gen. Oliver Otis Howard—the body of soldiers who called at "Melrose"—was noted for doing its work pretty well). One soldier lost his life in the holocaust; he had ridden his horse up the front steps and into the wide hallway, then making his way to the well stocked wine cellar, he imbibed so freely that he never found his way out. Before the torch was applied to "the type of luxury we love to destroy"—and after the place had been ransacked of valuables—the servants were allowed to bring out a few personal items and pieces of furniture. These eventually were returned to the family connection and are treasured by members of the Peay family today.

EDUCATION, POLITICS

Colonel Peay was educated at the University of Virginia and Columbia University, and owned a large library at "Melrose." Following his success as a planter, he became interested in politics, and was serving as state senator from Fairfield at the time of his death. He had taken the oath of office in a special session November 4, 1856, and was succeeded by his very good friend, Edward Gendron Palmer of Ridgeway, who qualified for the 1857 session.

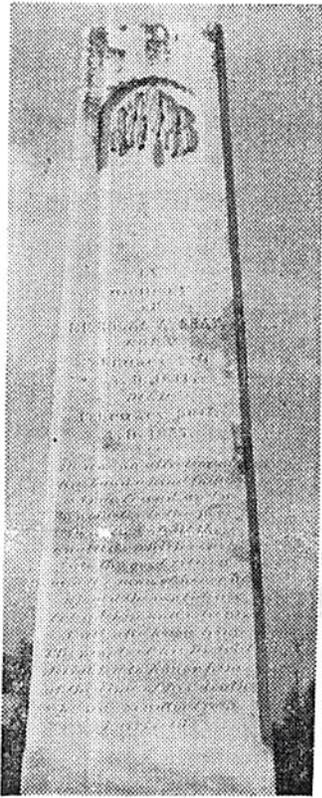


Mrs. James McIntosh of 2510 Stratford Road, Columbia stands beside a table on which cards were played at her great-grandfather's mansion "Melrose," at Longtown in Fairfield county. The table was one of a few pieces of furniture given to servant-caretakers before the home was burned by Sherman's soldiers, and later returned to a member of the family. Mrs. McIntosh's father was Nicholas Adamson Peay, namesake of Nicholas Peay, the owner of "Melrose," at Longtown in Fairfield county. She grew up in Camden and Chester and has lived in Columbia for some years. (Staff photo by Vic Tutte)

During the days of their friendship, Colonel Palmer was trying to get a Ridgeway church established. Colonel Peay contributed \$100 on the condition that it not be mentioned to his wife who was of a different denomination, and that it be situated close enough for his sister in the vicinity to attend.

"Melrose," in a way, was a reflection of the master who presided there; and his lovely wife, Martha. Their pyramidal monument, in the Baptist cemetery, on the highway from Ridgeway to Longtown, is cut with blending hearts, two sides of which are dedicated to the husband, and two to his wife. It is inscribed with mentions of charity, faithfulness to duty and good works.

Nearer to Ridgeway, on the opposite side of the road, is the Longtown Presbyterian Church where many other Peays are buried. Guardians of the entrance to this cemetery are two



Memorial shaft to Nicholas and Martha Peay in the burial ground near Longtown.

granite posts. They stand sentinels to the dead as they once did to the living at "Melrose," where their white gates swung open and shut from the side garden. These are among the last reminders of "Melrose," which like the era it represented, are now yellowed pages in history.

All that remains at the actual site are some scattered bricks and stones and a few cedars which nod sadly in the wind for a lost and beautiful home, for a past of elegance and hospitality. There is no echo across the hills of the once joyful music of the slaves, or the laughter of a happy family. The waters of the nearby river and the sighing of the trees are in tune only with the birds that nest in the trees of "Melrose." Time has swallowed up the blueprint of the magnificent homestead.

Will of Austin F. Peay

The State of South Carolina

I Austin F. Peay of the Distric of Fairfield and State aforesaid, calling to mind the uncertainty of life, do make, publish and declare this my last will and testament, in manner and from following, viz.

Item First. I give and devise to my Executors hereinafter named, all the land which purchased from the estate of Taylor and from the Hopkinses, situate on the Wateree River in the District of Richland and Kershaw, joining land of the Englishes and Nixons, and others, (including a tract of pine land in Kershaw District the legal^{title} to which is in my son Nicholas Peay, and which he is to release to my Executors or hold for the use of this my will) in Trust for the use of my daughter Martha Black during the term of her natural life, and at her death in Trust for the heirs of her body, equally to be devided among them according to the Statue of Distributions - I also give and bequeath to my executors, the following negro slaves, viz. Ben, Jenny, Peggy, George, Jack, Zadock, Lovey, Sophia, Zyck, Harriet, George (Boatman) Phoebe, Singleton, Eliza, Betty and her child, Edmond, Harriet, Fanny, Ely, Sammey, Jerry Cook, Nancy, and her five children, Roderick and Jerome (thirty in all) together with their nine work mules, wagon and gear, farming utensils and stock of hogs belonging to, and used on the above mentioned plantations, in Trust for the use of my said daughter Martha Black during the term of her natural life, and at her death in Trust for the children of said daughter equally to be devided between them; in case however, any of the children of my said daughter shall have died leaving ifsue living at the decease of my said daughter, such ifsue shall take same share of the aforesaid property which the parent would be entitled to if then living, according to the provisions of the Statue of Distributions- I also give and bequeath to my executors all the debts of every kind and description due to me from my son in law Joseph A. Black Esqr. with power to collect the same in such manner as to my executors shall seam meet and proper, in Trust for the use of my daughter Martha Black during her natural life, and at her death in Trust for her children, share and share alike, the ifsue of a deceased child, (in case of the death of any in the lifetime of my said daughter leaving ifsue living at the time of her death) to take the share which the parent would have been entitled to if living.

Item Second. I give, devise, bequeath and confirm to my daughter Sarah Myers all the negro slaves, which I have heretofore delivered into the possession of her and her husband, together with all the plantation, body, or parcel of land, on which she and her husband Dr. John J. Myers now reside, and for which I have heretofore made a Deed of gift to my said daughter.

Item Third. I give and devise to my son Nicholas Peay, in fee simple, all the land planted or cultivated by him the present year, being the Bacot land, Arledge land and Nicholas Peay land, situate on both sides of Dutchman's Creek in the District

of Fairfield and State aforesaid; I also give and bequeath to my said son, all the negro slaves, now worked, used, employed or kept on the plantation or land mentioned in this item of my will; (except such of them as have been disposed of in the preceding items). My said son is to pay for said slaves above the number of thirty, (which number thirty is hereby given to him freely and without payment.) at the rate of \$300.00 each, to be paid in one, two or three years, and applied toward the discharge of the debts due by estate; I also give and bequeath to my said son, all the stock of mules, cattle, hogs and farming utensils used, employed or kept on the plantations or land mentioned in this item of my will.

Item Four. I give and devise to my daughter Mary Poelnittz, for and during the term of her natural life, (not to be subject or liable to the debts, contracts or incumbrances of her present or future husband) all my land lying on the N-E-side of the Wateree River, in the Districts of Lancaster and Kershaw, including the land purchased from Thomas T. Williamson; and at the death of my said daughter I give and devise said land to the heirs of her body then living, equally to be divided among them, according to the Statute of Distributions-I also give and bequeath to my said daughter Mary Poelnittz, for and during the term of her natural life, (not to be subject or liable to the debts, contracts or incumbrances of her present or any future husband) the following negro slaves, viz- Patty, Jae, William, Fanny, Washington Hilliards, Chainey, Isaac, William, Sam, Nancy, Sophia, Suckey, Patty, Francis, Polly, Venus, Lizasa Gulla-Robbin Jr., Ellen, Delia, Cudjo, Amey, Nancy, Albert, Obed, Jeff, Jim-Gulla, and Sylvia; and from and immediately after the death of my said daughter I give and bequeath said negro slaves, together with their future issue, to and among the children of my said daughter, share and share alike; in case of any of the children of my said daughter shall have died before that time, leaving issue then living, such issue is to have the share which the parent would have been entitled to if living- Also I give to my said daughter seven cows and calves.

Item Five. I give and confirm to my daughter Eliza Lyles and her husband "Thomas Lyles the thirty negroes which I have already put in their possession- Having already given to my said daughter Eliza a Pianna worth \$300.00, and also to her husband Thomas Lyles the sum of \$600.00 in cash; I further give to my said daughter the further sum of \$1700.00 annually until the same shall amount to \$8000.00; but in case my said daughter shall die before the whole of said amount of money shall have been paid, the further payment of said annuity shall cease, unless she should die before the payment of the first annuity, which first annuity I desire shall be paid to said Thomas Lyles in case of the death of my said daughter before the payment thereof - I also give to my said daughter seven cows and calves.

Item Six. I further will and direct that all the residue of my slaves, horses, mules, cattle, farming utensils, and stock of every kind necessary for the support of the plantation, be kept and employed by my executors on the Brown plantation, Rofs plantation and Flint Hill plantation, until the crops to be raised and made on said plantations shall be sufficient, (together with other funds properly

From COLUMBIA TELEGRAPH, 23 APRIL, 1851, copy in files of the South Carolina Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

OBITUARY

DIED -On the 9th inst., at the residence of Major Starke, near Columbia, Mrs. Martha L. Peay, wife of Col. N. A. Peay, of Fairfield District.

It is difficult to do justice to a character like Mrs. Peay, without being charged with exaggeration; yet the voice of the community in which she dwelt, and of which she was so bright an ornament, cannot withhold its mournful, though brief tribute to her excellence. Nurtured in the most refined circles of society, and married at an age when splendor has its highest attractions, she ever maintained a beautiful simplicity in the exercise of an elegant and widely extended hospitality, in the gentle ministry of an unostentatious charity to the poor, but especially in the quiet duties of life. In untiring devotion to the happiness of husband and children, her generous nature found ample exercise for mind and heart. During the eleven years of her married life, never once did an unkind word pass between her and her husband; and when we add to this the remark of one who was long an inmate of the family, that she was never known to speak a harsh or unkind word to a servant it may well be said hers was a truly lovely spirit, nor was she wanting in firmness and energy of character, these were manifest in the systematic regularity of her domestic arrangements, and in the judicious discipline of her children. In the character of a tender but faithful mother, earnest and prayerful in the religious training of her children, the writer knew her best, and in this, few could claim higher praise. She trusted not alone to the instincts of a mother's love, but sought anxiously by reading and by counsel with those who might instruct, to know a mother's duties and the surest modes of discharging them.

Such in a brief outline of one who, with all that love and friendship could throw around home and an extensive social circle, has passed away, and we feel assured, to a holier home and companionship. Her life exhibited much of the Christian spirit, and her last days gave assurance of that faith that triumphs over death.

Mrs. Peay died in the 31st year of her age, leaving six children.

applicable thereto) to pay off and discharge all of my just debts and pecuniary legacies; and after all my just debts and pecuniary legacies shall have been paid, I give and devise the said Brown plantation, Rofs plantation and Flint Hill plantation together with all my land on the S-W-Side of the Wateree river which laye joining each other or in any wise united, together with all the stock of horses, mules, hogs, cattle, and farming utensils of every kind which shall be on said plantation, to my son Nicholas Peay absolutely and forever.

Item Seven. I authorize my executors to sell in such manner as to them shall appear most for the benefit of my estate, all the residue of my lands, lying in Fairfield District, being in several detached tracts or parcels, and to make and deliver to the purchaser, or purchasers, good and legal titles for the same.

Item Eight. In case Jacky Perry shall pay to my executors the debt of \$1890.75, with the interest from the fourteenth March 1833, which I advanced for him to John Carter, Also the balance due on my books, and my notes in the Camden Bank, all of which were given for his use and benefit, and all other debts which he owes me, and shall also discharge my estate from all liabilities as his Surety, I authorize and empower my executors to relenquish the title which I hold for the land on which he lives and the negroes now in his possession, and for which he now pays me a small rent and hire.

Item Nine. After all my just debts and the foregoing pecuniary and specific legacies shall have been paid; I will and direct that all the residue of my negroes not hereinbefore disposed of be divided by my executors into five equal shares, keeping families together as far as possible, and when necessary equalizing the divisions by money to be paid by certain divisions or lots which may be of greater value, to such as may be of less value; and that my children, Martha Black, Sarah Myers, Nicholas Peay, Mary Poelnittz, and Eliza Lyles, each draw for one of said lots; and the lot, or share, which shall be drawn by each of my said daughters severally I do hereby give and bequeath to her, for and during the term of her natural life, and at her death to be equally divided among her issue then living, according to the Statute of Distributions; said slaves in this item of my will not to be subject or liable to the debts, contracts or incumbrances of the husband of my said daughters, or either of them; And the lot which shall be drawn by my son Nicholas Peay, I do hereby give and bequeath to him-

Item Ten. All the residue of my estate, if there should be any thing embraced in the foregoing provisions of my will, I give and bequeath to my aforesaid children equally to be divided between them-Subject to the following particulars omitted above-

Item Eleventh. When Henry Belton, son of my nephew William A.A. Belton shall attain the age of twenty-one years, I then give and devise to him for and during the term of his natural life, and at his death to the heirs of his body then living the following parcels of land, viz. the tract of land containing 750 acres situate in the District of Fairfield, purchased by me at Sheriff's Sale as the property of

William Robertson and for which titles were made by the Sheriff to Roland Cornelius; and the tract of land containing 250 acres joining said tract, and conveyed by John McMaster as agent for Cornelius Mandeville to Roland Cornelius; which said tracts of land said Roland Cornelius holds as trustee and subject to my order and appointment- But in case the said Henry Belton should die without issue living at the time of his death, then said land in this item of my will mentioned shall revert to my estate and be equally divided among all my children, or be sold by my executors and the proceeds thereof divided among my children, or applied toward the payment of my debts, should any of them at that time remain unpaid. And until the said Henry Belton shall attain the age of twenty-one years, the rents of said lands are to be received by my executors and applied toward the payment of my debts, or divided equally among my children.

Item Twelve. I give and bequeath eight of my slaves, viz. Amey, Nelly, Louisa and her children. Elizabeth, John/Robin, George and Sarah, to my son Nicholas Peay in Trust that he will as soon as practicable after my decease, procure the emancipation of said slaves: but in case they cannot be emancipated, or in case they would prefer remaining in their present condition, then it is my will that they be allowed to enjoy as much liberty as they do at present.

Item Thirteen. My wife having left my bed and board, I conceive that she has no just right to any share or portion of my estate- And it is my will that she shall not be allowed any part of my estate whatsoever, either real or personal-

Item Fourteen. Lastly, I do hereby nominate, constitute and appoint my son Nicholas Peay, and my sons-in-law Charles Poelnittz and Thomas Lyles, and my friend Roland Cornelius Executors of this my last will and testament, hereby revoking all former wills by me heretofore made, and establishing this my last will and testament-

In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and seal this 10th day of October in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty four and in the fifty ninth year of the Independence of the United States of America.

Signed, Sealed, published and declared by Austin F. Peay, when signed this sheet of paper and the two sheets hereunto annexed, as his last will and testament in the presence of us, who in his presence and by the testator A. F. Peay (seal) and at request and in the presence of each other, subscribed our names as witnesses to the due execution thereof

David McDowell

James Rochelle

John Bell

William Nelson

In the Twelfth Item, the word "six" erased and "eight" interlined, also in the second line of the Twelfth Item, "Robin, George," interlined before the execution of this will,

Proved-----unknown

unknown

Recorded in Book 19

Page 41

Recording date unknown

Apt. 74 File 51