

Melrose and its Builder

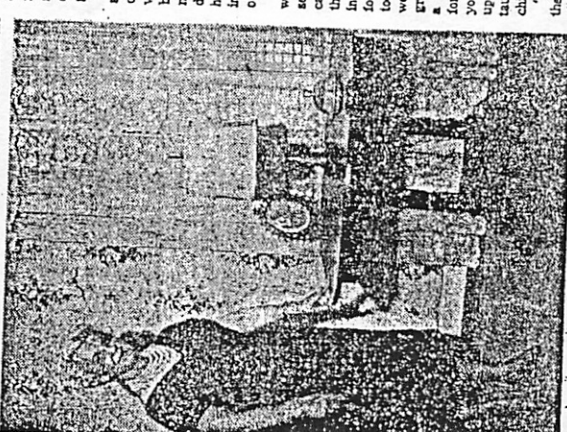
By KATHLEEN LEWIS

"MELROSE" the house which the upcountry. (He was one of 12 men in the South owning over 200 acres, and one of eight in the 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, Augustus Peay, grandchild of the first more miles from his hill crest, 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 in the majority of others.

His ownership of over 2,000 slaves and 8,000 acres—stretching from Fairfield County to Camden—placed him in the position of being the wealthiest man in the South in the 1850's.



Mrs. James Melrose 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 sergent-caregivers before the home was burned by Sherman's soldiers, and later returned to a member of the family. Mr. Melrose'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 Tette)

were the bastions who saddled the horses and blipped the reins. They were the ones who were the most impressive private residences in South Carolina in the ante-bellum era.

Nicholas Peay was more than a wealthy planter; he was also a soldier. Just a few years before his marriage to Martha Cary Lanier of Edgefield in January, 1840, he had served in the Seminoles 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 sizable house and especially one so far from the railroad.

But the young bride was thrilled over the plantation home as she watched the brides, 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."

"Melrose," of course, had been the point from which Colonel Peay had dispensed his famous hospitality to the country-side. Mrs. Peay was termed an excellent hostess who welcomed guests for "indulgent 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 uncle, 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 child nurse and beloved by all who came to her with their problems and rested with 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 catchman whose main duty was to drive the ladies. Under the Catchman 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 refrain.

Much of her home, Mrs. Peay perhaps saw rather infrequently. It was because Melrose contained 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 grand-daughter 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, year—since February 26, 1862,

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-lakers saw the approach of Sherman's soldiers. After the place had been ransacked of valuables—one estimate was 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.

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, site are some scattered bricks on the highway from Ridgeway to Longtown, is cut with blood 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

his sons were away fighting in the Confederate war; and the girls were either in school, or with relatives.

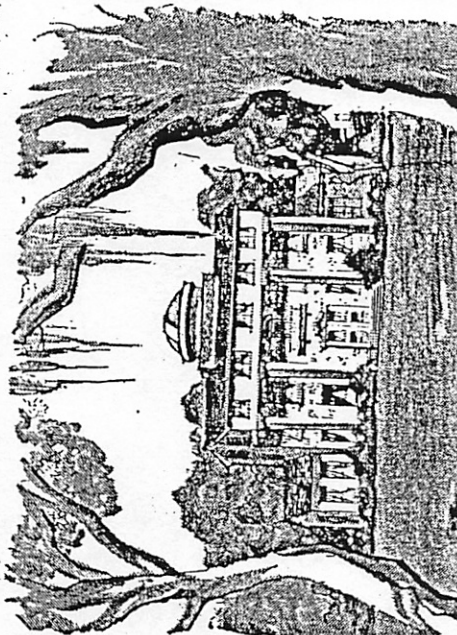
The burning of Columbia two days before may or may not have reached the community by this time, but from the reputation already established, the servants knew not to expect mercy. In his Memoirs, Sherman states that the 15th Corps under Gen. Oliver Otis Howard—the body of soldiers who called at "Melrose"—was noted for doing its work pretty well. One soldier lost his life in the holocaust; he had ridden his horse up the front

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 one of the elderly men. Here a magnificent view of the beautifully landscaped gardens of

state drawing rooms were also divided by folding doors which when thrown back became full length mirrors reflecting beautiful candelabra and polished mahogany.

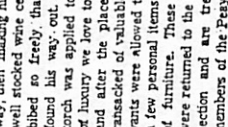
An artist's conception of how Melrose might have appeared. An exhaustive search was made for a drawing or print of the famous old mansion, both in libraries and in family papers, but none could be found. (Drawing by Jack Smyrl)



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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.



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

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