

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.

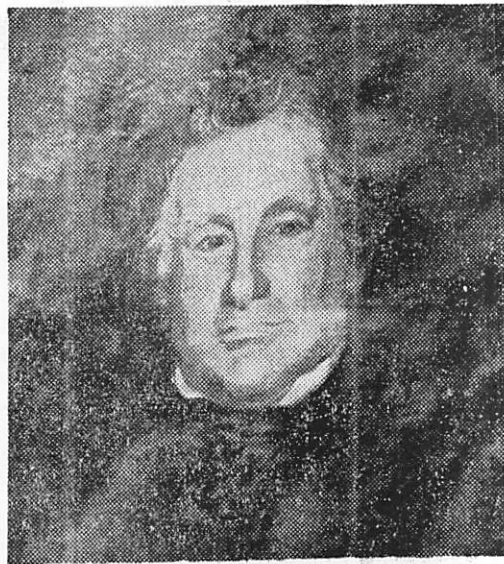
"Nick" Peay built his house when plantation life was at the zenith, in the early 1800's. Like his associates, he was a member of the wealthy, powerful, planter aristocracy which dominated the life of South Carolina politically, economically and socially. However, the lavish life enjoyed on the Peay plantation, 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, gineries, 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 robes 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.

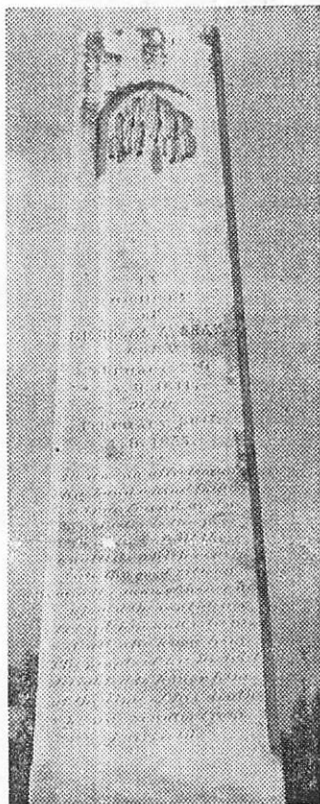


Mrs. James McIntosh of 2510 Stratford Road, Columbia stands beside a table on which cards were played at her great-grandfather's mansion "Melrose," at Longtown in Fairfield county. The table was one of a few pieces of furniture given to servant-caretakers before the home was burned by Sherman's soldiers, 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 Tuttle)

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.