

## Berkeley's Early Science Pioneer ~

On the banks of the Santee, not more than two or three hundred yards west of the granite post which marks the boundary line between the parishes of St. John's and St. Stephen's, and a few hundred yards yet further from the embouchure of the Santee Canal into the river, far away from the sound of busy life, and sheltered by the over-arching trees which consecrate the spot, there stands a solitary grave, which holds the remains of one who has left his name and his fame among the annals of American science.

A plain marble slab, which time and the corroding work of numerous Protophyta plants (those growing in a well-lit area; a major category of lower plants; a group comprising the algae, fungi, and lichens) have nearly erased, still marks the spot. It is sacred to the memory of Thomas Walter, one of the early pioneers of science in this country, and author of the "*Flora Caroliniana*."

(It was in March of 2023 that I gave you a bit of history on this noted Carolina botanist and his private life. Walter's published volume, *Flora Caroliniana*, was the first flora of a region of North America to utilize the Linnaean system of classification. This volume, 263 pages, was written in Latin, the botanical legacy of an unheralded scholar who graced the scene during one of the most opulent periods that history has witnessed in North America. *Flora Caroliniana* was published in London in 1789, the last summer of his life.)

It was on a bright morning in June when we made our pilgrimage to this classic spot. Crossing the (old) Santee Canal at the White Oak lock (#2), we left it on our right as we wound our way by a bridle path through an old field now grown up in young pines.

The old "engine house" built a half-century ago, by Col. Senf, the head engineer of the canal, to force up water from the river below, with its dilapidated machinery, lay directly in our path. Passing on, we soon came abruptly upon the riverbank, where the Santee makes a bold sweep upon the highland barrier, and turning again, is soon lost to sight in the deep recesses of the swamp. The river was within its banks, and as it flowed on calmly, and with scarcely a ripple on its surface, it gave but little idea of its power, when swollen by the floods of rain from above, it spreads its angry waters from shore to shore, a moving mass of four to five miles wide.



Our Southern rivers, if they lose in boldness and variety, have a quiet beauty of their own, as they meander through the low grounds which border them, their banks fringed with willows and rushes.

We are now in “Walter’s old field.” It has long been tenantless and deserted, and the very site of the dwelling house is lost. A few hundred yards further up the river, we come to a shaded grove of trees, known as his “garden,” some fifty yards wide, at the very margin of the swamp, and passing down into it, apparently to enclose a portion of its slimy soil.

In the cen’re of this grove and protected by the trees which his own hand had planted, rest his earthly remains. The large marble slab, which had been supported on a brick foundation, has now sunk to the level of the ground, it bears this simple record of filial love:

In memory of  
Thomas Walter,  
A native of Hampshire, in England, and many years  
A resident of this State. He died in the  
Beginning of the year 1788\*.  
Aetatis cir. 48. ann.

*\*This date was inscribed incorrectly; it should have read 1789.*

“To a mind liberally endowed by nature and refined by a liberal education, he added a taste for the study of Natural History – and in the department of Botany, Science is much indebted to his labors. At his desire, he was buried on this spot, once the garden in which were cultivated most of the plants of his ‘Flora Caroliniana.’

“From motives of filial affection, his only surviving children, Ann and Mary, have placed this memorial.”

Here was the spot chosen by himself for his long resting place – in the midst of the garden which his own hands had planted and beautified. Here it was that he collected together his pets from the surrounding country; here they grew under his nursing care – watched, no doubt, with parental fondness, for there were many – very many, which owed to him their first introduction to this scientific world, of which Linnaeus\* was then the guiding spirit.

*\*Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778) was a Swedish naturalist and explorer who was the first to establish the modern system of naming organisms using generic and*



*specific designations, also known as binomial nomenclature. He is regarded as the “Father of taxonomy.”*

Pure and unalloyed are the pleasures which science yields from her fountains of exhaustless store; sweet waters are they from the well of living truth.

No moth nor rust doth corrupt her treasures. “Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.”

It was here on the secluded banks of the majestic Santee, turbid with its waters from a thousand hills, where the river, after winding its serpentine course through the deep swampy forest that girds its borders, sweeps round upon the high land, and finding there a barrier to its further progress, turns back to work its way in the more yielding soil of its own alluvion – as the dolphin when it sports for an instant on the surface, and then plunges downward into the deep abyss. It was here that the man of science, who had brought over with him from Europe, the classic culture and training for his favorite study, found a congenial home for the gratification of his taste.

And what more fitting spot could he have selected? Wonderful even now to the eye of the native familiar with the majestic features of American scenery, is that vast wilderness of stately forest and angled thicket – an exuberance of vegetation which knocks, by contrast, the puny efforts of the surrounding country, and which marks the course of the Santee, for more than a hundred miles from its mouth, with a width of four or five miles.

A soil of unsurpassed fertility, the annual deposit of the muddy waters brought down from the rich clay hills of the upper country during the freshets, supports a vegetation which vies with the almost fabulous reports of Californian growth, and the impenetrable forests of the Amazon. Here, the limbless trunks of the magnificent cypress, stretching upwards like columns in a vast temple, throw out their great parachutes of feathery, graceful foliage, in an impervious over-arching canopy above. These patriarchs of the swamp are gradually falling one by one before the axe, but they are yet numerous enough to give a character to the scenery, and by their conspicuous height, to mark the winding course of the swamp for miles distant.

Oaks of numerous species and of gigantic size, hickories, elms, and the iron wood tree, and numberless others, occupy the dryer part of the swamp – whilst in the lower parts, there are thickets of the tall cane (*Arundinaria*) growing to the height of twenty-five to thirty feet, and with a diameter of one or two inches, impenetrable almost to man or beast.



It was here, on the very verge of this swamp, teeming with its rich burden of vegetable life, that Walter planted his garden, and cultivated at one and the same time, the objects of his care and the pure pleasures of *amabilis scientia*. The “garden” has long missed the nursing hand of its founder, and the wild denizens of the forest have usurped the place of the more tender plants – but there still stands a clump of trees which proclaim the master’s hand – an exotic from China, which has struggled on and disputed its claim to possession with the hardy natives for a period of seventy years. This is the *Stillingia sebifera*,\* or Tallow tree. There are two clusters standing some thirty yards apart. They bear the marks of age, for the present trees, one of which has attained a height of thirty feet, are offshoots from a half-decayed stump of at least one foot in diameter. These trees, with a cluster of Iris growing at their base, (but not then in flower) – and the venerable oaks which overhung his grave, were the only things to tell the story of their parentage. All else had passed away – even at his grave stone, time had been also busy in the work of destruction – and this too may go, but his name and his works are already inscribed in the temple sacred to American science, and there they will remain “*monumentum perennius aere.*”

LENEVAR.

*\*A few years since, the Patent office, among other importations of new products, distributed seed of this plant, with a view of testing its adaptation to our climate. Walter’s specimens answer the question of hardihood very satisfactorily – and on the outskirts of Charleston, along the roadside and old banks, may be seen hundreds of the trees, which have been there, to our knowledge, at least thirty years – planted perhaps about the time, or even before Walter planted his.*

Edited by Keith Gourdin

*Resources and references: Charleston Courier, written in 1856. As to the writer, LENEVAR (Ravenel spelled backwards), if you know any more, please share (another of history’s puzzles); Collections of Keith Gourdin.*

Important Note: Fortunate for history’s sake, this private property is now under a land conservation easement, permanently protecting it from decimation due to development. The Protophyta plants spoken of above have been removed and the area securely identified after one of my earliest visits over (almost) fifty years ago, thanks to a previous landowner.





Thomas Walter's gravesite, photo by Keith Gourdin, February 2006





Thomas Walter's grave, photo by Keith Gourdin, 2007