

Dr. Robert Grant - Elizafield and Oatlands Plantations

ELIZAFIELD PLANTATION, just below Hopeton, was on a tract of land whose romantic history reaches far back into the mists of the past. Some students of Indian lore say that it was the site of the ancient Creek village of Talaxe; and some historians believe that it was the location of the mission-presidio of Santo Domingo established in 1604. A large octagon-shaped tabby ruin still standing has been an object of interest for years. Pieces of nineteenth century machinery found among the ruins are proof that the building was used as a mill for threshing rice or grinding cane when the plantation of Elizafield was situated here two centuries after the founding of Santo Domingo. But although examination by several experts produced no evidence that it was of Spanish origin there are those who still believe that the mill was built upon the ruins of the mission of long ago.

Cleared in the early 1800's by Dr. Robert Grant, wealthy planter-physician from South Carolina, the land called Elizafield was destined, during more than half a century, to see his children, his grandchildren, and his great-grandchildren. A native of Leigh, Scotland, young Robert Grant, when scarcely out of his teens, had come to Carolina, where he became a prominent surgeon as well as a prosperous rice planter. He and his wife, the former Sarah Foxworth, lived at Waterfield Plantation near Sand Pitt, South Carolina, before they came to the Georgia coastline to make their home. Their extensive property along the Altamaha was divided into three parts-Grantly, Evelyn (Eve-lyn), and Elizafield. Grantly and Evelyn were merely vast acres of rice fields with their ditches, banks, and canals; and of cotton and cane fields, with their settlements for the hands. Elizafield, named for Dr. Grant's mother in Scotland, was the home plantation of the family. And upon the island of St. Simons the Grants had a summer place called Oatlands, where they spent the hot months when the "fever" lurked in the rice fields.

In 1811 **Oatlands** was the birthplace of the son who was to become master of Elizafield. Named for his father's closest friend, Dr. Hugh Fraser of South Carolina, Hugh Fraser Grant grew up to love the river plantations, so that when his three brothers chose careers that took them away from Georgia he decided upon the life of a coastal planter. And what satisfaction it must have brought to Dr. Grant and his old friend when young Hugh won the hand of Dr. Fraser's daughter Mary. After their son's marriage Dr. and Mrs. Grant retired to their St. Simons place, and for a quarter-century Elizafield Plantation was the home of Hugh and Mary Grant and their family.

The first house that Dr. Grant had built was destroyed by fire, but the family rebuilt at once upon the same foundations. Set back at some distance from the river on the bank of a deep canal, the Elizafield house was designed in the typical Southern Colonial manner with a double flight of buttressed steps leading to an open portico with great square columns two stories high. In the spacious rooms there were Brussels carpets and crystal chandeliers, imported silver and china, and hangings of brocade and damask.

Approached by the traditional tree-bordered avenue, the house was surrounded by fenced lawns and gardens. There was a grape arbor and an orange grove, and an orchard famous for the flavor of its nectarines and peaches. To one side stood the children's schoolhouse, a replica of the big house, with miniature columns and portico. At the rear

were the quarters for the house servants. Here lived Maum' Rebecca, Mrs. Grant's personal maid and head seamstress for the family. Here, too, lived the coachman, Frederick Proudfoot, and his wife, Maum' Ann, the children's nurse; and Sukey, cook superlative, and her assistant, Martha, whose preserves and jellies reached an enviable point of perfection. And here lived Caesar, that important member of the household, butler and majordomo of Elizafield-Caesar, whose manner achieved that perfect balance between deference and dictatorship, that unshakable poise and dignity which characterized the well-trained plantation butler.

The Grants and their six children, five daughters and one son, spent the summer months at their place, The Parsonage, on the "salts" near Brunswick, and at their Sand Hills cottage near Tebeauville, with frequent visits to Grandma and Grandpa Grant on St. Simons Island. Dr. Robert Grant died at the age of eighty-one "revered and beloved by his family, respected and esteemed by all who knew him;" and Grandma Grant came to Elizafield where she spent the remaining five years of her life. In a quiet wing of the house she had her own rooms where the children loved to visit; and the younger ones liked to ride with her in the phaeton as the gentle old horse jogged along the shady winding roads of the plantation. She was indeed a favorite with the children for sometimes she allowed them to hold the reins, and besides Grandma always carried peppermints in her reticule.

As the older daughters grew up there were trips to New York and to Europe; there were house parties at Elizafield and visiting back and forth with the young people at Hopeton and Altama on the one side and at Broadfield and Hofwyl on the other, with friends in Darien and Savannah and on the island plantations. On fine afternoons the young ladies and their visitors were content to play a quiet game of lawn croquet or, in dainty hoopskirts and ruffles and carrying diminutive parasols, to promenade along the wide banks of the canal. But in the evenings there were gatherings for music and dancing; and among visiting boats at the Elizafield landing there was usually one from Retreat Plantation on St. Simons-the boat of young Mallery King who had his own pet name, "Jenty," for pretty Engenia (jenny) Grant.

As the sixties drew near and life on the plantations began to lose its lighthearted gayety, parties and dances gave way to serious and troubled gatherings. Although Hugh Fraser Grant's health had begun to fail he was enrolled in the Glynn County Reserve, and when war did come and young Hugh Fraser, Jr., left to join the army, much of the responsibility for the safety of the household fell into the hands of Caesar, the butler. When the approach of gunboats down the coast made it no longer wise for the family to remain at Elizafield, Caesar was a "tower of strength." Under his supervision boxes and barrels of china, glass, and silverware were carefully packed in rice straw and Spanish moss and buried in the garden. Clothes and a few personal belongings and household necessities were packed. Trunks and boxes, coops of poultry, and provisions from the smokehouse were loaded on wagons. Then Caesar shepherded family and house-servants into carriages and carry-alls, and the cavalcade set out on the long journey to Tebeauville where they and many of their friends found sanctuary during the war years.

News of the men in the army came from time to time. Young Captain Mallery King had Jinny's promise to wait until his return, and he wrote hopefully of an expected leave. When word came that he was at Kennesaw Mountain near Atlanta and that he would be able to come to Tebeauville long enough for a wedding, there were hurried

preparations. Firm in the traditions of the Grants, Caesar hitched up a wagon and set out on the long drive to Elizafield to dig up the china that was always used at family festivities. The clouds of war were pushed back for awhile as old friends gathered to celebrate the wedding and to drink the young couple's health and happiness with the toast that is still remembered in the family-"A Grant to a King." And refreshments were served on the dainty flower-wreathed English china which has been used at the wedding receptions of daughters of the family from that day to this-the china that Caesar dug up from the garden at Elizafield in 1862.

Finally the war was over, but the Grants never returned to Elizafield. The family went to Savannah to live, and management of the plantations was put in charge of an overseer. For a few years Mallery and Jinny stayed at the old home place, and their children were the fourth generation to live on the Grant plantation; but when the young Kings moved to St. Simons Island, the Elizafield house was left unoccupied. The plantations were proving unprofitable and soon the fields of Elizafield, Evelyn, and Grantly were no longer cultivated. The sluice-gates fell into disrepair; the tides overflowed the ditches and canals; the marshes reclaimed the rice fields. Marsh grass covered the lowlands and dense undergrowth covered the lawns and crowded out the gardens and orchards. The plantation buildings fell into ruins. The big empty house went up in flames, and finally as the years passed, nothing remained of Elizafield but a few tabby foundations and ruins and myriad beautiful memories.

But the romantic saga of the land was not yet at an end. Another turn of the kaleidoscope of fate, and a new pattern emerged for the acres that had been known as Talaxe, as Santo Domingo, and as Elizafield. Included with Hopeton and Altama in the immense plantation holdings first of the duPont and later of the Woolford interests, three hundred and fifty wooded acres of the old Elizafield home plantation were presented by Cator Woolford to Georgia in 1935 as the Santo Dominiao State Park. A decade later the historic old place was made available by the legislature for the establishment of Boys Estate, Georgia's town just for boys.

A dream-come-true for a group of Glynn County business and civic leaders, Boys Estate was founded in 1945, with a Board of Trustees composed of prominent Georgia citizens. Under the guidance of J. Ardell Nation, the boys set up their city government and have done a superb job of running their community. Like famous Boys Town, the Estate elects its own city officials and has its own Chamber of Commerce. Each boy does his share of the work, and they live together in congenial groups with house-mothers in charge of the cottages. With a deep understanding of boys, the men responsible for Boys Estate know that many a youngster would prefer insecurity for himself rather than be parted from his dog. So an integral part of the town is Dogs Estate where Rags can share the life of his young master. Other animal companions enjoy the hospitality of this youthful town; friendly donkeys help with the chores, and a sorrel horse draws the surrey-witli-the-fringe-on-top that is provided to show visitors over the Estate.

Driving along the shady winding roads it is easy for the visitor to picture the gracious days of old Elizafield; but the privileged boys who live here can probably more easily imagine the days when Indian braves tracked deer in the forests or plotted the massacre of conquistador and priest who had dared to invade their ancient domain.