Chapter II

DOCTOR WILLIAM HOUSTOUN, BOTANIST

Doctor William Houstoun, a kinsman of the Patrick Houstoun who went to Georgia, played an important part in the latter's venture to the new land because he presented to the Georgia Trustees Patrick's application for a grant in the youngest English colony. He was then negotiating with the Trustees for a position on his own account, and the results were to make him prominent among the savants of his time. It is a matter of conjecture whether or not Dr. Houstoun ever touched the shore of Georgia before Oglethorpe founded the first settlement, but the evidence seems likely. He was appointed botanist for the colony in the summer of 1732 and gave great assistance in the development of the Trustees' Garden in Savannah by sending specimens of tropical plants from the West Indies to be cultivated in the experimental garden laid out on the bank of the river. His connection with the Colony of Georgia reveals the standing of his branch of the family in Scotland and, also, the position he held as a scientist of his day.

One of the children of Sir Patrick Houstoun, first baronet, and his wife, Anna Hamilton, was William, who, if the date of his birth, 1695, is correct, was born one year before the first baronet died. He would thus have been the uncle of Patrick Houstoun of Georgia, with only three years' difference in their ages. While the conjecture could be true, the more likely surmise is that Dr. William Houstoun and the younger Patrick were cousins and therefore of the same generation.

The scientist, a native of Scotland, had already become well known in London before he brought his kinsman's name to the attention of the Georgia Trustees. Dr. Houstoun died in 1733, at the age of thirty-eight, but he had an interesting career, and

1. This chapter was printed first in The Georgia Historical Quarterly, XXV, No. 4 (December, 1941), 325-339. The first paragraph was re-written to conform to this narrative.
the results he attained have lived after him. No facts of his early life have been obtained. If the evidence previously mentioned can support the theory that he was the first baronet’s son, he was born in the old Castle; if not, at least he grew up in its atmosphere as another branch of the family lived in the county of Renfrewshire at Johnstone Castle, approximately ten miles from Glasgow. In preparation for the profession of surgeon and botanist, Dr. Houstoun matriculated at some of the foremost universities in Europe. He was enrolled as a student of St. Salvators College of the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, on February 19, 1719. In the eighteenth century the qualifications for entering a European university required a high standard of scholarship. Dr. Houstoun must have acquired that at the University of St. Andrews. Eight years later, October 6, 1727, he entered the University of Leyden, where he studied medicine under the great Herman Boerhaave (1668-1738), who had been connected with that university since the year 1705, when he became professor of botany and medicine. Princes and noblemen were sent to Leyden to be instructed by “the illustrious Boerhaave, physician of Europe,” who was so styled by a Chinese mandarin. When Peter the Great (1672-1725), attended the university he elected that his studies should include a course under the tutelage of Professor Boerhaave, who was to his students “not only an indefatigable teacher, but an affectionate guardian.” While Dr. Houstoun was a student at the University of Leyden, “he performed in conjunction with Van Sweeten, the experiments in animal respiration in the ‘Philosophical Transactions’ under the title ‘Experimenta de Perfontaine Thoracis ejusque in Respiratione Effectibus’.” In 1728 he was elected to the French Academy of Science. Dr. Houstoun was graduated a doctor of medicine, Leyden University, in 1722, and shortly afterward he arrived in England, where he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. Then it was that he seems to have turned his attention almost exclusively to botany. In 1732 he obtained the degree of doctor

3. Obtained from the Secretary of The University, St. Andrews, January 24, 1938.
of medicine from the University of St. Andrews.\(^6\) In the year 1730 he entered the service of the South Sea Company\(^7\) and was given the position of surgeon on one of its ships that plied between the British Isles and South America. At the same time he was also in the employ of Sir Hans Sloane, to whom he wrote on the flora of the tropics and on the specimens he had collected while on shore. To be a protege of Sir Hans Sloane in the 1730's was a marked distinction. Sir Hans was a physician to the nobility and a botanist of eminence. He was born in Ireland in 1660, of Scottish ancestry, and in his youth he showed a decided taste for gathering objects of natural history. In time he became a collector and while studying medicine included botany in his studies. Sloane travelled extensively on the continent of Europe and was given his degree of doctor of medicine by the University of Orange. On his return to England, after some of his journeys, he was elected to membership in the Royal Society. When he became a member of the College of Surgeons he went to Jamaica in the suite of the Duke of Albermarle, and spent over a year collecting hundreds of specimens, the descriptions of which he embodied in a Latin catalogue. When he was again in London he was elected secretary of the Royal Society, and was appointed physician general to the army. In 1716, he was created a baronet and "was the first medical practitioner to receive an hereditary title."\(^8\) When Dr. Houstoun came under his notice, Sir Hans was president of the Royal Society, having succeeded Sir Isaac Newton in 1727.

By 1730, Dr. Houstoun had reached Jamaica. From Kingston, in December of that year, he sent Sir Hans a report of his studies and of his collection of plants. Apologizing first for his not having written for sometime, giving as his reason he had "nothing worth troubling" him about, Houstoun continued, "I cannot flatter my-

\(^{6}\) "It appears that 'William Houstoun' sometime student in this University, obtained the degree of Doctor of Medicine of the University in 1732." Letter to the author from Andrew Bennett, Secretary, The University, St. Andrews, January 24, 1938.

\(^{7}\) Although the collapse of that company occurred in 1721, it continued to exist without great prosperity until the nineteenth century. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1929-32), Vol. 21, p. 94.

\(^{8}\) *Ibid.* (ninth edition, 1894), XXII, 160. Sir Hans Sloane died in 1753, and he left to the British Museum, to be purchased, his collection of books, drawings, prints, etc., valued at considerably more than £20,000.
self so far as to think anything I am to communicate to you now deserves your notice yet I chuse rather to run the risk of being troublesome than negligent.” With the letter, he wrote, he was sending a “Collection of Plants and other natural curiosities from Vera Cruz.” Then followed a description of his work:

... The Drawing of the Manufactory of Cochoneel I did from an Indian Painting in the possession of one Mr. Knightsbridge an English Gentleman who has been long in the Kingdom of Mexico, the description too I copied from him, but there are some things in it which seem very incoherent, particularly touching the generation of the animal. Tho’ all the Jallap is exported from Vera Cruz, yet I could learn nothing there concerning it; but when I go back, if I can have leave from my Superiors, I design to take a journey to that Province. The Contrayerva used in England is the root of the Dorstenia Pluvis N.G. There are two kinds of it, whose roots are used indifferently, and the Plants themselves are not very unlike to one another; tho’ plainly distinct species; as you may see by the dried specimens, and I can confirm who have seen them growing. The first kind has its leaves cut deep, and the calix (or rather Placenta) which sustains the flower, is oval and erect. This is the Dorstenia Sphondylu folio, Dentariae radice Pl. N.G. and probably the Juspatli of Herdnandez 147. It grows some few leagues from Vera Cruz where I purchased some plants of it in earth, and have brought the box to Jamaica, but in the Hurricane which we met with at Sea, I lost all that was above ground of it, and am afraid the roots are dead too. The second kind has its leaves sometimes shaped like those of violets, but more frequently angular, and sometimes divided, but never near so deep as in the other kind. Its calix is quadrangular oblong, and placed transversely upon the footstalk. The figure in Plumiers N.G. has been done from it, and it seems to be the Caapia of Piso. This I found growing plentifully about Campechy, on high stony ground, and always in the shade. I brought some plants of it in earth to Jamaica, but dare not send them home at this time of year. I met with a great many Plants on the Continent which I could not possibly reduce to any Genus yet described, and therefor have made bold to characterize some of them, giving them the names of Botanists, which is a practice now authorized by custom. But as I have but few books here to consult, it’s very possible that they may have been described already by some person or other; wherefor I desire to submit
my Nova Genera, in that as in all other points to your better judgement. . . .

The botanist concluded his letter to Sir Hans by assuring him that he was always ready to serve him to his utmost powers and begged his employer not to expect him “to do so much as if I lived ashore,” because “of the many hindrances that one must necessarily meet with in a sea faring life and especially in a small vessel.”

Before Dr. Houstoun again wrote to his benefactor, the ship on which he was employed had suffered disaster on the coast of Mexico, and he was much perturbed over the possibility of his not being retained as a surgeon of the South Sea Company. In another communication he asked the assistance of Sir Hans in recommending him for his reappointment. It will be seen from the letter that Dr. Houstoun had planned a trip to Carolina and was to depart for England in two weeks’ time. From that sentence in his letter the deduction is made that he carried out his intention of disembarking at Charles Town on his way home, and so may have touched on what was later to be Georgia soil, then part of the colony of South Carolina. If so, he became familiar with the climate, the tidewater and the flora of that region. The letter was written from “La Vera Cruz, March 5 O.S., 1731”:

The Honb. S.S. Company’s Snow Assiento whereof I was Surgeon, was unfortunately drove ashore here and lost the 6th of last month. I had indeed the good luck to save most of what belonged to me, but the loss of my business obliges me again to have recourse to you, begging that you’d use your interest a second time to put me in a way of living capable to serve you.

It’s highly probable that as soon as this news comes to England another Snow will be built in room of her that is lost; and as I have been already in the services, I think my pretensions to be Surgeon of her pretty well founded, but it being a place much sought after, I need to make all the interest I can to secure it; and my friend Dr. Houstoun [probably a distant relative] being absent, I have now but yourself to depend upon, wherefor I humbly beg that you’ll take it to heart.

I hope to have the honour of seeing you in a few months, being to sail in about a fortnight for Carolina; but I take the oppor-

10. Ibid.
tunity of sending this in the mean time by the way of Campechy because it may probably come to England sooner, and so prevent my being supplanted.

I wrote to you about three months from Jamaica and sent you a collection of Plants from this place and Campechy among which was the Contrayerva. After the Vessel was cast away, I designed to have gone up to the Province of Jalappa, to enquire about the Plant of that name, but could not obtain leave of the Governour, tho' I made use of the Doctors interest. However I have sent up an Indian who has brought me down 4 small roots of it which I hope will grow, and I believe we shall find it a Plant quite different from the Marvel of Peru.

About ten days ago there was a Spanish Vessel put ashore here, and 40 of her people drowned. And it is said here that there have not blown so many and so hard Norths a great many years past as this winter.11

Dr. Houstoun must have reached London the end of the year 1731, or early in 1732, because in his March letter he expressed the hope of seeing his patron “in a few months.”

Two years previously some distinguished men of London, in particular James Edward Oglethorpe, Member of Parliament, were planning the founding of another English colony in North America, which would form a barrier for the Carolinas against the Spaniards in Florida. Oglethorpe, the originator of the idea, saw his hope taking shape in June, 1732, when a company of twenty-one men organized under the title, Trustees for Establishing the Colony of Georgia in America, with a Common Council of eight members as a governing board, and received their charter from the Crown. Amid all of the arrangements required for the embarkation of the first settlers, the Common Council took under consideration, as one of the provisions of settlement, the employment of a botanist for an experiment in which they wished to engage. The Trustees' intention was to have a public garden “To aid in determining and effecting the economic destiny of Georgia . . . . While this institution would supplement the private gardens of the settlers in providing needed vegetables, its principal purpose was two-fold; to serve as an experiment station in testing out plants best adapted to the soil and climate of Georgia; and to constitute a nursery to furnish seeds, par-

11. Sloane MS., British Museum, 4052, fo. 82.
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ticularly young mulberry trees and vine cuttings, for planting in the farms and gardens of the colonists in order to carry out the predetermined culture of silk and wine." It was assuredly on the advice of Sir Hans Sloane that negotiations began with Dr. William Houstoun as early as August 23, 1732. Six weeks before the Georgia colonists sailed for America, the agreement between the council and Dr. Houstoun was signed. The Trustees received sufficient financial assistance for the creation of their venture—a garden in the colony for raising herbs and tropical plants, etc.—and were relieved entirely from raising funds for the purpose. Seven titled men pledged annual contributions for six years. The largest donor was Lord Petre, who promised to give fifty pounds per annum if he lived the three-year period of Dr. Houstoun's services with the Trustees. The next largest patron was the "Rt. Hon. the Earle of Digby," whose contribution was also fifty pounds a year. In succession the other guarantors were: His Grace the Duke of Richmond and Lennox, thirty pounds; Sir Hans Sloane, Baronet, twenty pounds; the "Company of Apothecarys," twenty pounds; Sir Charles Du Bois, Esq., ten pounds; George Heathcote, Esq., five pounds; and James Oglethorpe, five pounds.

Dr. Houstoun signed his agreement with the Trustees on October 4, 1732, in the presence of Thomas Richards and Andrew Balston. By its terms he was to receive an annual salary of £200 for a total of three years, unless shortened by the Trustees. He was to proceed at once to America and for a period of two years, unless otherwise ordered by the Trustees, he was to collect and deliver to Georgia such plants as the Trustees requested. At the termination of this period of preparation he was to take up his residence in the colony and supervise the preservation and propagation of his collection of plants.

13. A. D. Candler, ed., The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia (Atlanta, 1904), I, 23. (Hereafter cited Colonial Records of Georgia.)
14. A. D. Candler, ed., Colonial Records of Georgia. Transcripts (16 unpublished volumes in the State Archives, Atlanta, Georgia. Typed copies in the Georgia Historical Library, Savannah), XXXII, 225-228. (Hereafter cited Unpublished Colonial Records of Georgia). In the above list the last two contributors were Trustees.
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The day before he signed his contract with the Georgia Trustees, Dr. Houstoun drew up a letter of attorney, appointing Philip Miller his representative in London during his absence. That he had received his reappointment with the South Sea Company is attested by the opening sentence of the letter of attorney. Following the introduction were directions for the transaction of any legal or business contingencies that might occur regarding his personal affairs, “saving only so far as relates to my claim and Interest in and to Ten Baggs of Havana Snuff in the custody of the South Sea Company for transacting which I have executed a peculiar power to Mr. Silvanus Bevan.”

Dr. Houstoun receipted for his one-half year’s salary of seventy-five pounds on October 4, 1732. A week later his orders were ready. Ordered to Madeira and to Jamaica aboard the Amelia, lying in the Thames River, the botanist was instructed upon arrival at the former place to study that island’s wine industry and to carry with him to Jamaica, or to send directly to Mr. St. Julian at Charles Town in South Carolina “Vines, & Seeds, Roots or Cuttings of any other useful plants . . . which are wanting in the British Colonies, but particularly the Cinnamon tree.” From Jamaica Houstoun was to go to several Spanish settlements at Carthagena, Puerto Bello, Campechy, and Vera Cruz, and if he could he was to cross to Panama. At all those places he was to use his “utmost diligence to procure Seeds & Roots of all useful plants, such as Ipecacuana, Jallap, Contrayerva, Sarsaparilla, & Jesuites Bark; the Trees which yield the Peruvian, & Capivi Balsons, the Gum Elemi, etc., the Cochineel Plant with the Animals upon it; and all other things that you shall judge may be of use to the Colony of Georgia.”

Upon his return to Jamaica he was directed to leave all of his collection with the person he found most capable and willing to care for them, while he went to other Spanish ports in search of more material. If, however, he found a ship going to Charles Town he was still to send “some of each kind” to Mr. St. Julian.

15. Philip Miller was a horticulturist, and was placed in charge of the Chelsea Garden, when in 1722 Sir Hans Sloane made the final grant of his gift to the “Company of Apothecaries.”
17. Ibid., XXXIII, 3-5.
18. Ibid.
After he had visited all of the places and collected all that he could, further orders would be sent to him at Jamaica directing him how to "proceed in transporting yourself to Georgia where you are to spend the remaining part of three years, in taking care of the Culture of what you carry with you." 19

In conclusion, Dr. Houstoun was particularly urged to study the nature and culture of the white mulberry tree "which is the most proper for the Nourishment of silkworms," and all "Sorts of Dogwood, & other Woods and Barks of use in Dyeing in order to the propagating of them in Georgia."

After the signing of the aforesaid papers, two objects in the Georgia Trustees' plans were realized in the next few weeks: the departure of the botanist for his horticultural undertaking, and the embarkation of the first colonists. Dr. Houstoun probably left toward the end of October, while the Trustees' ship Anne sailed from Gravesend, November 17, 1732, having on board one hundred and thirty-five persons, "all able-bodied and of good reputation." 20 As the galley cast off her moorings and slowly sailed toward the sea, some of the Trustees on shore waved good-bye to the men, women, and children who had responded to their call for settlers in an alien land.

When the Common Council was meeting on January 10, 1732/33, a letter directed to Mr. Oglethorpe from Dr. Houstoun dated Madeira, November 9, 1732, was opened and read, as the former was on his way to Georgia. Dr. Houstoun acquainted Mr. Oglethorpe that he had sent "two Tubs of the Cuttings of Malmsey and Other Vines on board a Ship, to be forwarded to Mr. S. Julian at Charles Town for the Use of the Colony of Georgia"; and that he was to embark the next day for Jamaica. 21 On March 31, Benjamin Martyn, the Trustees' secretary, wrote from London to Oglethorpe in Savannah that he had opened and read a letter addressed to Oglethorpe from "Mr. Houston," dated Kingston, Jamaica, December 21, 1732, advising him that he had "obtained of Mr. Prather, the South Sea Company's Agent, a Conveyance to Panama." Another entry in the minutes of June 27, 1733,

19. Ibid.
20. C. C. Jones, Jr., The History of Georgia (Boston, 1883), I, 117.
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states: “Read a Letter from Mr. William Houston dated Carthagena, Jan’r the 25th 1732/33 directed to Mr. Oglethorpe.”

Dr. Houstoun fulfilled only in part the mission for which he was sent, and he was not able to see the fruit of his labors or to visit his kinsman, Patrick Houstoun. After his visit to Carthagena he traveled only as far as Jamaica, and became ill in Kingston. He had received from the Trustees a further remittance on his salary, but foreseeing that he would be unable to render future service, he wrote to his attorney, Philip Miller, and “Directed him to Reive [sic] no more of his Said Salary on Acc’t of his ill State of health, whereby only Nine Months Salary of the said three years have been paid . . . .”

Dr. Houstoun died of heat in Jamaica on August 14, 1733, and was buried in Kingston the next day. The Georgia Trustees were apprised of his death at their meeting of February 20, 1733/34, and entered in their minutes the brief mention of the decease of “Mr. William Houston.” On the recommendation of Sir Hans Sloane, the Trustees appointed Robert Miller as Dr. Houstoun’s successor. Miller left England on May 19, 1734, and on his arrival in Jamaica, July 25, he went “nixt [sic] morning to Dr. Cochran’s and Demanded the Observations Made in Botany by Dr. William Houstoun together with the Collection of Dyed Plants which was left in his hands he told me he had Sent them all home already by one Mr. Houston, Surgeon a Relation of the Deceased Doctor William Houston and ther was now nothing in his Possession but a Parcel of Books w’c he would only be accountable for to the heirs & Executors of his Deceased friend.”

The names of Karl von Linne, well-known as the Swedish botanist, Linnaeus (1707-1778), and Johann Friederich Gronovius (1690-1760), the eminent Dutch botanist of his day, are linked in some way with that of Dr. Houstoun’s, but it has not been found that the two great botanists actually met the Scotsman. There was a

22. Ibid., 128.
difference of twelve or more years between Linnaeus and Houstoun, and the two attended different universities. Gronovius lived in Leyden where he may have made the acquaintance of Dr. Houstoun. The two men were interested in the same science, and there was less disparity in their ages. Linnaeus visited Gronovius in 1735, subsequent to the death of Dr. Houstoun. It is probable that Linnaeus then met Houstoun's former professor, Boerhaave, because the latter recommended Linnaeus to a botanist in Amsterdam. It was Gronovius who dedicated the genus *Cinchonaceae Houstonia* (Order of Rubiaceae), to the memory of Dr. Houstoun, and Linnaeus, in publishing his botanical works, retained the name “which later merged into the genus *Hedyotis*.”

In 1828, a Scottish poet published a book to which he gave the title, *The Columbian Lyre or Specimens of Transatlantic Poetry . . .*, and in the quite small volume is a poem with the title, “To the Houstonia Cerulea.”


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sent to Philip Miller, and which Miller grew from the seeds he sent, in the Chelsea Garden. His letters to Banks and other mss. are in the old Building." Dr. Houstoun also "left a manuscript catalogue of the plants he had collected, with engravings on copper by himself. The manuscripts, as well as his specimens, now in the botanical department of the British Museum, after Philip Miller’s death, came into the hands of Sir Joseph Banks by whom the catalogue was published in 1781 as ‘Reliquiae Houstonianae’ with the copper plates." Philip Miller’s numerous correspondents in “Siberia, at the Cape in North America, and especially Dr. Houstoun’s collections led him to plan a series of all known genera.”

From the connections which he made with noted men of science, it is more than a matter of surmise that if Dr. Houstoun’s life had not been terminated so abruptly by the effects of a tropical climate, he would have contributed even more than he did to the science of botany. It is to be regretted that efforts to find the burial place in Kingston, Jamaica, have been futile.

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28. Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820) was an English patron of science, and at one time was president of the Royal Society.
29. Through a letter to the American Consul, Kingston, October 7, 1936, from the late Frank Cundall, Secretary of the Institute of Jamaica, a copy of the letter was sent to the author.
31. Ibid., XIII, 421.
32. Dr. Houstoun has received recognition in Savannah where Mr. and Mrs. Marmaduke H. Floyd in 1940 established a museum of the Trustees’ Garden history and a small herb garden on a portion of the site of the Trustees’ Garden. In commemoration of Dr. Houstoun they laid out a parterre flower bed in the pattern of a conventionalization of the Houstonia cerulea. In June, 1948, the property on which is the garden was purchased by the Trustees’ Garden Village, Inc. (Savannah Morning News, June 26, 1948).