PETERSBURG, Lisbon, Vienna, Edinburgh, Alexandria! These names of great cities in the Old World were adopted in the New by ambitious villages sprouting up in the upper Savannah River country. All but one were in Georgia; Vienna was in South Carolina. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries they grew up, aspired to greatness, and disappeared before any one had become a half-century old.

They were born of economic and social forces and out of the imagination of pioneer settlers and land speculators. They lived, breathed, thrived for a time, and then utterly disappeared, leaving not even the legacy of their names. Only three approached any prominence: Petersburg, Lisbon, and Vienna; and Petersburg alone gave early signs of developing into a great metropolis, for at one time it was the third largest city in the state—only Savannah and Augusta were ahead. But by the mid-twentieth century even its site was no longer visible, for it was covered by the waters of a great lake made by the Clark Hill dam on the Savannah River some miles below.

Before 1763 Georgia was cramped into a small area along the coast from the Savannah River as far south as the Altamaha River and inland and up these rivers as far as the tide went. Her limits as set by England were much greater (the land between these rivers and lines drawn from their headwaters to the “South Seas”), but a treaty with the Indians in 1733 had freed for settlement only the coastal area. Nevertheless, James Edward Oglethorpe, the founder of Georgia, set up an outpost at Augusta, far up the Savannah River beyond where the tide ended. However, not until the end of the French and Indian War in 1763 did Georgia secure this additional territory by treaty with the
Indians, which now gave the white people the right to settle up the Savannah River as far as Little River, about twenty miles above Augusta, and down the coast to the St. Marys River.

South Carolina as far up the Savannah River as a dozen miles above Augusta had long been freed from Indian ownership, and in 1755 the Creeks ceded the upper part of the Colony as far as a point about twenty-five miles beyond the mouth of Broad River, where Petersburg was later to grow up. By 1779 the Indians had given up all of South Carolina except a small slice in the extreme northwestern corner. So, before the end of the American Revolution practically all of upper South Carolina had been opened up for settlement by land-hungry frontiersmen, who were set into motion by the coming of peace.

Georgia was not as fortunate as South Carolina in freeing her lands from the Indians; however, in 1773 the Colony, taking advantage of some big debts owed to Indian traders by the Creeks and Cherokees, made a treaty with the Indians in Augusta, signed on June 1, wherein the Indians gave up more than 2,000,000 acres in payment of these debts. This cession extended northward about sixty miles beyond Little River, almost to the point where the Seneca River emptied into the Savannah from the South Carolina side.1

Georgia was now ready to welcome land-hungry people from as far north as Maryland to these lands, generally called the "New Purchase" or the "Ceded Lands." Sir James Wright, the third and last of Georgia's Colonial governors, made the settling of this region one of his principal ambitions. He had made a trip to England in 1772 with the definite purpose of interesting the British government in promoting this cession. Because of the support he had received from the Earl of Dartmouth he renamed the Broad River (in the midst of the New Purchase) the Dart River. He also made plans for a town and a fort on the point of land between the Dart (Broad) and Savannah rivers, to be called respectively Dartmouth and Fort James—the fort in honor of himself.

Wright had argued in London that a new Indian cession would attract immediately 600 families from outside the Colony and that a modest price for the land would bring 125,000 pounds. This would be a second founding of Georgia and an enduring monument to Wright by bringing in more people than had ever lived in that small cession gained in 1733. (Wright's namesake, a town called Wrightsboro, had already begun in a settlement
made by Quakers in the upper part of the cession which had been
gained by the Treaty of 1763. In the course of the next century
the town was to disappear as completely as Petersburg, though,
unlike Petersburg, it was never covered with water.)

Sir James (now a proper title for Governor Wright, since he
had been granted this honor while in England) lost no time in
appointing surveyors to run the boundary line of the New Pur-
chase and to issue a proclamation in the form of a handbill to
be circulated and posted on bulletin boards to the northward,
inviting settlers to come. The land could be had in tracts of 100
to 1,000 acres—100 acres to the head of a family, 50 acres addi-
tional for the wife, each child, slave, and white servant, and 40
acres for every woman servant. Quit rents were not to be levied
for ten years. The land was well watered and especially suited
for “wheat, indico, Indian corn, tobacco, hemp, flax, &c. &c. &c.”
To reassure prospective settlers of their safety in these new lands,
Sir James added: “That, to the end the said settlers may be safe
and secure with respect to their persons and properties and in
order to prevent any interruption to them by disorderly hunters,
vagrants and wanderers, or by straggling Indians, a fort will be
forthwith built, and garrisoned by a competent number of Officers
and Men to be employed as Rangers for the security and pro-
tection of the settlers.”

The surveyors graded the land into six classifications. In in-
structions to commissioners, who should hold sales successively
at Augusta, Wrightsborough, and Dartmouth (Fort James), Gov-
ernor Wright set the general price of from one to five shillings
per acre, but certain strategically located areas such as mill sites
should bring a higher price, and “All lands situated on Savannah
River four miles above and below the Town of Dartmouth be
rated at one Shilling Six Pence per acre over and above the
valued quality.” And the same specifications applied to the lands
on the Dart River, with some additional variations of prices of
land on both rivers farther up. In the forks of the two rivers the
town of Dartmouth was to be laid out on 800 acres reserved for
that purpose. Apparently Sir James had visited this site because
in his instructions he directed that a fort be erected in the forks
“at the place already marked out by his Excellency the Governor.”

Sir James did not name the fort, which came to be called Fort
James (undoubtedly in his honor), but he did give its dimensions.
It should be 120 feet square with bastions (abbreviated block-
houses) on the four corners of the enclosure. Two of these bastions
were to be roofed over, while the other two were to be left open to the sky, and all four were to be made of squared logs. To make the enclosure, these bastions were to be joined by walls (curtains) made of split logs and by the outer sides of the officers’ houses, the barracks, and the “goalhouse and magazine.”

With the building of this fort, there was now no need for another fort which South Carolina had erected in 1765-1766 across the Savannah about a half mile down the river. This was Fort Charlotte, which had been designed to keep the Indians quiet after that Colony had secured the cession of 1755.

According to a description of Fort James given by William Bartram, the famous naturalist, who visited the fort on a trip in the late spring of 1776, it covered “about an acre of ground.” If this was the area of the enclosure, the fort was about three times as large as Sir James had specified, but it is probable that the fort was built larger than originally planned. Bartram was purposely exaggerating or was unable to make valid estimates. He had already travelled sufficiently to make him an expert on judging distances. In a more minute description, Bartram said that swivel guns were mounted on the second story of the bastions and that there were loop holes breast high for small arms along the walls between the bastions. The commander’s house was a “good building,” flanked on each side by officers’ quarters and barracks for a garrison of about fifty rangers (including officers), “each having a good horse well equipt, a rifle, two dragoon pistols, and a hanger, besides a powder horn, shot pouch and tomahawk.”

The perilous times of 1776 required the fort to be manned, and certainly now the members of the garrison were Georgia revolutionary patriots, for Sir James Wright had already fled the Colony. Fort James was there, but the town of Dartmouth had not yet been able to rise from its paper description and would not do so until the Revolutionary War was over, when the town that was destined to grow up there would be called Petersburg. But when Bartram was there, he could merely write in his journal that the “point of peninsula between the two rivers, for the distance of two miles back from the fort, is laid out for a town, by the name of Dartmouth”; but he made no mention of any lots having been laid off or buildings constructed.

Sir James’ proclamation of June, 1773, inviting settlers to come to Georgia did not bring in as many as he had expected. There was little time left before the Revolutionary War, and there were
more important matters to engage the attention of prospective settlers. Yet within the next year or two there was a good sprinkling of North Carolinians and some South Carolinians applying for lands in the New Purchase; and, of course, most of them came to the land office operating at Fort James. They selected locations up the Broad River (Dart soon being dropped) and the Little River to the southward, and their tributaries, as well as up and down the Savannah. Broad River and its tributaries were the favorite regions, where warrants for more than 20,000 acres were granted. North and South Carolinians, in almost equal numbers, made up by far the bulk of these settlers. According to incomplete records, there were only fourteen warrants issued to Virginians, eleven to Pennsylvanians, three to Englishmen, two to New Jerseyites, and one each to Irish and Scots.

The Scotsman was James Gordon, who secured warrants for 5,000 acres in the Broad River Valley and on Chickasaw Creek, a tributary, on condition that he bring over a certain number of families to be settled on these lands. According to long-standing and persistent tradition, Gordon brought over a considerable number of settlers as indentured servants, and when the Revolution broke out he went back to Scotland; however, not before selling them for whatever he could get, after taking most of them over into South Carolina. George R. Gilmer (born in Wilkes County in 1790) said that while attending school in South Carolina he boarded with one of the Scottish families which Gordon had brought over—named Sutherland and originally from the Orkney Islands. Gilmer could have been correct in this assertion, but he was mistaken when he said that the Scotsman who brought the settlers to Georgia was George Gordon, the agitator who later led the anti-Catholic London riots in 1780. Gilmer’s mistake came to be accepted and repeated many times thereafter, and in making this statement in 1854 Gilmer was probably repeating what he had heard.

Some of the names which were to appear in the galaxy of Georgia Revolutionary heroes (and heroines) first appear in this migration into the New Purchase. There was Elijah Clarke, who fought throughout the war and thereafter continued against the Indians; the redoubtable Aunt Nancy Hart, cross-eyed, freckle-faced, a terror to Tories, who stood her ground on Broad River and never left the state until years after the war was over; John Dooly, foully murdered by the Tories, whose son John M. Dooly became a judge and a wit unequalled in the annals of the Georgia
bar; the Lamars, a family most prolific in men of prominence in American history; and other families who fought for independence and whose names became ornaments in the history of the state thereafter.

The war left a destruction probably unequalled in any other state and a legacy of hatred and social turmoil relieved only somewhat by the confiscation of Tory property and the banishment of some of the best and worst citizens. But in Georgia and out there was released a great urge to move on and upward in a bold new world, now set going by release from the control of Great Britain. This moving might be to secure a better life in areas already somewhat populated, or it most likely meant setting out to a land of even better promise.

In Georgia the New Purchase, interrupted by the war, was now open again for settlers. In the state's first formal constitution, made in 1777, this region had been erected into a county, named for the famous English statesman John Wilkes. The course of empire in Georgia was now into Wilkes County, which would later contribute in whole or parts to six counties and which by 1790 would include almost half the people of the state. The heart of Wilkes County was the Broad River valley with its tributaries; but there were other streams, many of them, for Sir James Wright had not been guilty of mere rhetoric when in his Proclamation of 1773 he had said that the New Purchase was well-watered. As an indication of their number and a tribute to the imagination of the early settlers, there were these creeks: Powderbag, Pistol, Troublesome, Buckhead, Hound, Wildcat, Panther, Beaverdam, Buzzard, Doves, Lightwood Log, Cedar, Bluestone, Millstone, Coldwater, Dry Fork, Deep, Big Shoal, Fishing, Rocky Comfort, Hardship, Long, War, Red Lick, Drunken Camp, Mud Lick, Flat Rock, Camp, and Town. It was a land of pines, but more so of hardwoods and deciduous trees—walnut, poplar, white oak, ash, pine, hickory, chestnut, birch, and beech—with carpets of wild grasses, pea vines, shrubs, and reed canes along the streams.

All of this was west of the Savannah River. Nature had made the regions east of the Savannah much the same, but man had come along and named the country South Carolina and given it another government. Thus it was that upper South Carolina was by nature about the same as upper Georgia; however, the Savannah River separated two authorities over the lives of the people in this great kingdom of the upper Savannah, and there was not always co-operation and friendly relations. This rivalry tended
to develop two economic units, and the New Purchase was not to be greatly helped by the divisions east of the Savannah, sometimes called districts and sometimes counties. Those lying directly across this upper part of Georgia were Pendleton and Abbeville, with Edgefield immediately below, fronting all the way down to Augusta and farther. South Carolina had at least one advantage over Georgia; for the great stream of people passing southward from as far north as Pennsylvania and New Jersey must first pass through the upper part of that state, and if any of these settlers were attracted by what they saw they might stop there and Georgia would be the loser. But this was not a great hindrance to the growth of Georgia, for upper South Carolina was not large, and many passing into Georgia had first settled in South Carolina.

When peace came after the Revolution the New Purchase, now Wilkes County, had few settlers. Of those who had come in before the war, some had remained faithful to England and being Tories had been killed or driven out; some had been killed in the war as soldiers or had died natural deaths; and some who had left the state for safety during the fighting had not returned.

The state both during and soon after the war had been passing land laws designed to attract settlers. A law passed in February, 1783, was much more liberal than Sir James Wright’s terms had been. Any head of a family might have 200 acres by merely paying the “office and surveyor fees,” and could obtain additional amounts up to 1,000 acres by paying ascending prices beginning at one shilling an acre. With the opening up of new lands lying northward and westward of Wilkes County, obtained through Indian treaties in 1783, a new scale of prices not so liberal as the former scale was set in a law of February, 1784. The price was now raised to three shillings per acre with a limit of 1,000 acres; however, in the multiplicity of laws, rules, and regulations it was still possible to get land in Georgia for nothing if a person belonged to five different classes relating to service in the war or if he merely had remained in the state without “plundering or distressing the country.” In February of the next year the legislature amended the state’s land policy by removing all charges for land except office and surveyor fees, but the maximum amount allowed to one person was still 1,000 acres. This was the law until 1803, when the Land Lottery System was set up, under which the remainder of Georgia’s public domain passed into private ownership.