Old Petersburg and the Broad River Valley of Georgia
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The Founding of Petersburg

BEFORE THE REVOLUTION, when the New Purchase had been secured from the Indians, the most strategic region in upper Georgia was the lower Broad River Valley. Governor Wright thought so when he ordered a fort to be built at the juncture of the Broad and Savannah rivers. South Carolina Governor William Bull thought likewise when earlier he had had Fort Charlotte constructed nearby. Now with the great influx of settlers after the Revolution, this location took on even more significance. Fort James had been an outpost to protect the settlers, but now a fort was little needed. Commerce, not protection against Indians, called for a city instead of a fort.

Not only had the Colonial governors of Georgia and South Carolina sensed the strategic importance of this region around the mouth of Broad River, but there were others who saw great possibilities there. Among them was Dionysius Oliver, a Virginian who came to Georgia about the time of the outbreak of the Revolution. He is reputed to have been captain of a privateer (so stated on his tombstone, which, however, is of twentieth century origin), to have been with General Benjamin Lincoln’s army at the siege of Savannah in 1778, and subsequently to have fought at Kettle Creek and Kings Mountain. It seems highly unlikely that he was at Kings Mountain, for the year before (1779) he was appointed a magistrate of Wilkes County and shortly thereafter was serving on a jury. This service would not have precluded his having fought at Kings Mountain, but it seems that his war career was already over. Certainly he soon began to capitalize on his war services and take advantage of the loose administration of the Georgia land laws. In July of 1784 he received these grants, 650 acres, 200, 300, 500, 400, 600, 650, 1,000, and in September
another grant of 950. All of this land lay in Wilkes County and amounted to 5,250 acres.⁢

A part of this land included the old Fort James and the town of Dartmouth site between the Broad and Savannah rivers, an area which came into the possession of the state on account of its previous ownership as public domain by the Colonial government or by confiscation from the Loyalists. At the same time Oliver was wisely locating his lands, another Virginian, Zachariah Lamar, who had come down before Oliver and had received from Sir James Wright in 1773 a grant of 400 acres on Broad River, was becoming a leader of importance.⁴ This grant could not, of course, have included the Fort James area, but it is possible that it was located just across Broad River southward at its mouth. If not so, another grant of 700 acres which Lamar received in 1784 undoubtedly did lie in this area,⁵ for in February, 1786 the legislature authorized him “to lay out a town on his own land, situate on the south side of the mouth of Broad river,” to divide it into half-acre lots, and to offer them for sale. The town should be named Lincoln. Also he was authorized “to erect a public warehouse for the reception and inspection of tobacco.”⁶

The legislature thought all of this was called for, because it was necessary and would “be greatly conducive to the general convenience of the citizens in the upper part of this State, that a town should be laid out, and a tobacco inspection established at the mouth of Broad river in the county of Wilkes.” In the same law there was the germ of the town of Petersburg, for the legislature recited that Dionysius Oliver had petitioned the body for authority to erect a warehouse “on his own land, in the aforesaid county of Wilkes, in the fork of the aforesaid Broad river, and the Savannah, for the reception and inspection of tobacco,” and that they were now giving him that authority. There was no mention of a town to be laid out, but, of course, there was no prohibition against Oliver doing so.

It could be easily seen that Oliver had the strategic location, and seeing so himself he speedily drew up a map or plan⁷ of a town he would erect there, which he called Petersburg—a name in honor of Petersburgh, Virginia, in or near which he was born in 1735. The next year Oliver bought 100 acres nearby, probably with the idea of hemming in the new prospective town of Lincoln, or at least to profit from its expansion.⁸

Lamar soon realized that Oliver had the superior location for a town and he lost interest in promoting the town of Lincoln, for
before the end of the year he bought three lots in Oliver's town of Petersburg. It seems that he never took advantage of the permission given him to erect a tobacco inspection warehouse or if he did, then another warehouse was authorized by the legislature in 1797 at the mouth of Broad River on the south side, on the lands of Thomas Walton, Jr. This location would indicate the same spot where the town of Lincoln had been authorized, and suggests that Lamar might have sold his lands there to Walton. In 1796 this region had been cut off from Wilkes County and erected into a new county called Lincoln. The selection of this name for the county may have made it seem desirable to change the name of what was then or what was supposed to be the town of Lincoln to Lisbon. Certainly it was called Lisbon as early as 1805 when it was reported that a mercantile firm there was being dissolved.

Lisbon never reached proportions sufficient for it to be considered an honor to the Portuguese town for which it was named. If it ever erected a warehouse for the inspection of tobacco, it was overshadowed by those in the growing town of Petersburg directly across Broad River. There was little incentive for people to settle in Lisbon and as a service to the few people who did move in and to the planters in the hinterland south of Broad River, a merchant or two set up shop and caught the trade of those who did not want to go to the trouble and expense of being ferried across to Petersburg. In 1827 it was reported that Lisbon had only three or four houses and that it had “dwindled almost to nothing”—an expression which indicates that earlier it might have taken on some life. But there was a germ of life that still lingered in an old store building and a gigantic oak until they were snuffed out by the waters of Savannah and Broad rivers which were backed over them in the mid-twentieth century by a gigantic dam some miles below.

Lisbon, as well as Petersburg, had a rival across the Savannah in South Carolina, which sought all the trade it could get. This town was called Vienna, to honor the gay and cultured city of Austria-Hungary. It was set going about 1795 when the South Carolina legislature appointed public packers of beef and pork to be located at this point on the Savannah River. And a few years later it was predicted that “this village bids fair to participate in much of the upper country trade.” Although there was a long-standing rivalry between Georgia and South Carolina, this fact had little to do with the prosperity or lack of it that accompanied
Vienna's struggle for supremacy. The compelling force of money and economic trends cannot be turned aside by mental attitudes—even in time of war it is difficult to keep enemies from trading with each other. It was, therefore, no dislike that might have been between the governments of Georgia and South Carolina that hindered the progress of Vienna. Its growth was stunted by its location as compared with that of Petersburg. It probably got a good share of the hinterland trade of the Carolinians but little of the Georgians. The ferries plying across the Savannah likely carried more trade to Petersburg than Petersburg and the Georgians lost to Vienna. This little river town having been laid out "in expectation of becoming a place of considerable commerce," had by 1829 been almost deserted. In its heyday of great expectations it had promoted a little satelite town on the hills above, which was called South Hampton. It showed so little life that it soon faded away and its very name was soon forgotten.

The promotion of Petersburg became the marvel of the times. Its location between its two rivers made it appear to all who had its position described to them or its location viewed on a map, as the commercial center of all the upper Savannah River country. Here was a bonanza for investors that should not be ignored. All those Virginians who had settled up the Broad River Valley would be tributary to Petersburg as would the people living up the Savannah, on both sides of the river. The down river towns of Augusta and Savannah would court the trade of this upcountry metropolis. Its fame would not stop short of Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. This was the era of the Yazoo Speculation, when Georgia lands and lots were being hawked and bought as far away as Europe.

Dividing his town into eighty-six lots of one-half acre each (later increased to 93 with some irregularity in sizes) Oliver was almost besieged with buyers. From 1786 to his death in 1808, he had disposed of all of his lots and his adjacent lands. To some purchasers he sold several lots, but to his favorite son, John, he sold all out-lying lands he had between the two rivers. First in 1793 he sold him 300 acres, a tract which surrounded the town but which, of course, did not include the town lots which John did not already own. In 1805 Dionysius sold to John the remainder of his land between the two rivers for $1,000. John bought and sold lots extensively in Petersburg, where he became one of the biggest merchants. Also he ran a large plantation on which at the time of his death, in 1816, he had sixty-four slaves.
Although there were eleven children in the family of Dionysius Oliver, John seems to have profited most from the Oliver estate. Martha, one of the daughters of Dionysius, married Thomas Hancock of Edgefield District, South Carolina, and their daughter Sophia Ann married Benjamin Ryan Tillman, who became the father of Benjamin R. Tillman, the famous governor of South Carolina.  

Not only did the residents of Petersburg speculate in Petersburg lots, but men with money in Augusta, Savannah, and in other parts of the state became interested. For instance, in 1802 Eleazar Early, a merchant of Augusta, sold to Thomas Hills, a merchant of Savannah, Lot 36, for $1,200. One of the outstanding speculators in Petersburg lots was Daniel Dennison Rogers of Boston, Massachusetts. In 1790 he bought from Edward White, a merchant from Burke County, Georgia (a speculator, himself) fifteen lots for 400 pounds, which would be about $1,700 in American money of that time.

The greatest resident speculator in Petersburg lots was LeRoy Pope, an important merchant, postmaster for a half dozen years, and one of the principal men of the town until he moved to Alabama to found the town of Huntsville and become a banker and power in that new state. He was allied through marriage relations with the Watkinses and the Walkers, other prominent residents of Petersburg. He was already buying and selling lots when in 1797 he bought all fifteen lots which Rogers of Boston owned. With this supply, he carried on an active real estate business for some years thereafter. In 1793 Pope became involved in a Franklin County land speculation through which he received a fraudulent grant of 104,000 acres out of a total of more than 2,600,000 acres which went to the other participants.

Since there was no bank in the town, Northern merchants, money-lenders, and speculators played an important part in the economic life of Petersburg. Indeed, there were no banks in all of Georgia until 1807 when one was set up in Savannah, followed by another one three years later in Augusta. These Northern dealers loaned money to Petersburg merchants, acted as their factors, and through accepting Petersburg lots and plantation lands as collateral they sometimes came into possession of much real estate. In such instances they engaged in real estate transactions, but in general they did not primarily deal in Petersburg lots. It is not known when Harry Caldwell and his wife Katherine of Newburg, Orange County, New York, came into pos-
session of Lot 12, but they sold it in 1798 to Jeremiah Walker, II for $150. The previous year they had sold Lot 14 to James Manning for $150, according to “plan laid [off] by Dionysius Oliver . . . and exhibited to the first purchaser.” This couple may have been engaged in a mild case of speculation.

John E. Caldwell Company (John E. or C. and Josiah), who were suppliers and money-lenders, were merchants of the city of New York. In 1808 they became creditors of Joseph Watkins and wife Delia for $3,500 and as security they received Lot 40, on which there must have been a substantial house, as it was described as “improved.” Ferdinand Phinizy, the Lexington merchant who had moved to Augusta, as previously noted, acted as agent for this New York merchant house. In 1811 in supplying credit of $1,500 to Archibald Stokes they accepted as part collateral a mortgage of $750 on Lot 50. Memorable Walker in 1802 secured a loan of $1,500 from Samuel Corp of New York by mortgaging Petersburg real estate. The mercantile firm of Memorable and James S. Walker were heavy debtors to New York supply merchants. In 1802 to secure notes amounting to $1,806.51 given to William Minturn & Robert H. Bowne and Thomas Service, merchants of New York, they offered a plantation on Broad River; and the next year they gave a promissory note to Joseph Strong, a New York merchant, secured by their homeplace on Broad River. Other loans made by New York merchants were $2,000 in 1809 to LeRoy Pope by George Newbold, and another the same year by the same merchant to Thomas Stokes for $3,377.30. The next year Newbold extended another credit to a Petersburg customer, Nathaniel Allen, Jr., for $1,800. All of these credits or loans were secured by Petersburg real estate. Another New York merchant who did business with Petersburg residents was Henry Kneeland.

These transactions with Northern firms seem to have been mutually advantageous; but occasionally misunderstandings arose. In 1825 Archibald Stokes was in dispute with a New York firm which insisted that he had guaranteed certain notes. Stokes denied that he had done so, and in a letter to a kinsman, William S. Stokes of Madison, Georgia, he remarked that they could “prove what ever they wish to in New York”—an expression that might have meant that a New York jury would accept any charge against a Southerner, or that Stokes would not pay, whatever the verdict might be.
It is quite evident that merchants and other businessmen in Petersburg, and in other parts of the South for that matter, were much dependent on Northern firms for credit. And apparently prices of merchandise bought on such terms were accordingly high. As one Petersburg merchant reported in 1821 on a visit to New York: "Money is a great article here; for cash you may buy goods at your own price."\(^{33}\)

Not all of Petersburg's financial transactions in real estate and mercantile supplies were with Northern firms; many were transacted with Augusta and Savannah houses, and quite a number with South Carolina businesses. Some of these Georgia and South Carolina firms may first, however, have secured their supplies from Northern markets. It would seem that better prices might be secured from the North direct, rather than through Southern middlemen firms. Some of those firms and individuals in South Carolina dealing with Petersburg were George Whitfield & Joseph Bunkley of Abbeville, James Hamilton of Columbia, James Russell of Vienna, and Jonathan Care and David W. Credie of Charleston.

The time of Petersburg's greatest prosperity and prospects for future growth was around the turn of the nineteenth century and the first decade following. These are some of the prices for lots from 1798 to 1809, depending, of course, on how far they had been developed: $2,000; $1,800; $1,500; $1,250; $1,000; $650.

As an indication of Petersburg economic instability and the fluctuation of real estate values, the life history of Lot 34 for twenty years should prove of interest. In 1787 Dionysius Oliver sold it to Robert Watkins for an unstated price. For the next ten years it passed through unknown ownerships until it reached Mary Easter, who in 1797 sold it to L. O. Whitfield for $100. It then reached the ownership of George Whitfield & Joseph Bunkley of Abbeville, South Carolina, who included it as part collateral for $1,300 owed to J. Holliday & Company. In 1801 J. Holliday & Company in a transaction involving $1,800 passed the ownership to Eleazar Early, the Augusta merchant, who the next year mortgaged it to James Hamilton of Columbia, South Carolina, which was involved in a debt of $1,470.47. After changing ownership a few more times it was back under mortgage to James Hamilton again, who in 1817 foreclosed on it—the highest bid was $15.\(^{34}\)

Unlike that closely-knit group of Virginians who were going
into the Broad River Valley and giving tone to it, those who boomed and settled Petersburg a little later were a conglomeration with origins as far north as the New England states. As has been seen, Dionysius Oliver, the promoter of Petersburg, was a Virginian and also were many of the others who were to play prominent parts in the growth and decline of Petersburg; however, speculation and business ventures drew people from farther north after Petersburg began to announce itself to the world.

One of the most prominent families to settle in Petersburg and its environs was that Virginia family of Watkineses out of Prince Edward County. They must not, however, be confused with the Thomas Watkins of Chickahominy, whose branch settled around Augusta and produced Robert and George Watkins, compilers of the famous Watkins Digest of the Laws of the State of Georgia, published in 1800. The Petersburg Watkineses were not only prominent in the business life of the town but they were also notable in their many marriage connections and in their migrations westward, principally to Alabama.

James, I, a son of William Watkins, in his old age moved to Petersburg in 1796 and died there two years later. He lived with some of his children who had previously come to Petersburg and its vicinity. He had married Martha Thompson of another prominent Virginia family, which was also to become outstanding in Petersburg, and to this union came nine children. His eldest son William became a merchant, tobacco warehouseman, and a dealer in real estate, before moving on to Tennessee and from there to Alabama in 1808. A daughter Sarah Herndon married her first cousin Captain Robert Thompson, a Petersburg merchant familiarly known as “Old Blue”—so-named because he kept his money in blue denim bags. They later moved to Huntsville, Alabama. One of their daughters, Pamelia, married Thomas Bibb, the second governor of the State of Alabama, his brother William Wyatt Bibb having been the first.

Samuel, a son of James Watkins, I, married Eleanor Thompson, a sister of “Old Blue.” He became a Petersburg merchant in partnership with “Old Blue,” and also ran an extensive cotton plantation, which lay up the Savannah River, above Petersburg. His wife, quite an aristocratic lady, took great pleasure in her home and flowers, and when riding about in her coach she was always attended by her black maid. Most of their children moved to Alabama, but Samuel and Eleanor did not follow until 1825.
Another son of James Watkins, I, was Robert Herndon Watkins, who married Jane Thompson, a niece of Dionysius Oliver’s, being the daughter of Eleanor Oliver, who married Drury Thompson.

John was the sixth of James Watkins’, I, children. He married Susan Daniel, a lady from North Carolina (or Virginia, as is sometimes stated), and lived a few miles out from Petersburg on his plantation, which he named “Thornville,” sometimes called “Thorn Hill.” After her death he married Mary Moseley, a daughter of Joseph Moseley, from Virginia. His son John Daniel Watkins married a daughter of Joseph Christopher Yates, governor of New York from 1822 to 1824. John remained on his plantation until his death in 1841.

The seventh child among the nine children of James Watkins, I, was Thompson Watkins. Thompson married a sister of old Benjamin Taliaferro, the Revolutionary hero who had settled some miles up Broad River from Petersburg, in the south side. Like so many other Broad River people, Thompson caught the western fever and moved to Alabama.

James Watkins’, I, eighth child was Joseph, who married Mary Sayre, and after her death, her sister Delia. There were no children by either marriage. The Sayres were of a New York and New Jersey family. A persistent tradition grew up that Joseph Watkins invented the cotton gin, for which Eli Whitney received a patent and the credit—though not much cash. “Robert Watkins of Petersburg,” who must have been his brother, was advertising a gin in 1796; but the story of Petersburg’s part in the cotton gin invention must be reserved for its proper place in this narrative.

Isham was the youngest of James Watkins’ nine children. He married Emily Taliaferro, a daughter of Benjamin’s and had ten children, who spread out over Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

The second son of pioneer James Watkins’, I, in his family of nine children was named James, II, also. He married another Jane Thompson, also a niece of Dionysius Oliver by Isham Thompson (a brother of Drury Thompson) having married Dionysius’ sister Mary Ann. All of this means that two Oliver sisters had married two Thompson brothers, and that each couple had a daughter which they named Jane—this would mean that the two Janes were “double first cousins.” James, II, son of pioneer James, I and his wife Jane lived on a plantation on the
Savannah River above Petersburg and raised a family of eleven children. Most of them made significant marriages and some of them and their children moved on to Alabama. They follow:

Robert H. Watkins (named for his father's brother), became a planter and a merchant in Petersburg, and in 1812-1813 he was a member of the Georgia Senate. He married Prudence, a daughter of John Oliver (Dionysius' favorite son) and later moved to Alabama.

Mary Watkins married Dr. Asa Thompson and lived in Petersburg, where he practiced medicine and engaged in cotton-planting. Later he moved to Alabama.

Sarah Watkins married Stephen Willis Harris, who later became a Superior Court judge and lived in Eatonton. After his death his widow moved to Athens. Judge Harris was a graduate of the University of Georgia in the Class of 1805; he became a Trustee of the University in 1820 and continued until his death in 1828.

Martha Watkins brought in another tie with the Taliaferros; she married Benjamin, a son of old Revolutionary Benjamin Taliaferro.

Jane Watkins married James Minor Tait, a brother of Charles Tait (eminent in Georgia and Alabama history). After his wife's death he moved with his children to Mississippi.

Susan Watkins became the second wife of John Oliver, her brother Robert H. (as previously mentioned) having married Prudence, Oliver's daughter by his first wife Frances Thompson. After Oliver's death, which occurred in 1816, Susan (also called Susanna) married Dr. William N. Richardson, an outstanding Petersburg physician, and they later moved to Alabama. Mary, one of the children by her second marriage, became the wife of Gabriel Toombs, a brother of the famous Robert Toombs.

Eliza Watkins married William McGehee, a son of Micajah, as his second wife. After some mercantile experience, not very successful, he moved to Mississippi.

Sophia Watkins married Eli S. Shorter, who became an eminent jurist. After a residence in Eatonton, they moved to Columbus, where he died in 1836.

Garland Watkins, the oldest son, served in the War of 1812, returned home and studied law, and died early unmarried; Theophillus died when only fifteen; and James (III), married Jane, a daughter of John Urquart of Augusta.

An indication of some of the plantation possessions of a Peters-
burg planter may be had from a peep into the will of the father of all these children. After giving slaves, money, and land to them, he singles out his son James (III), for the lion’s share: “I give my son, James Watkins, Jr., all my crop of cotton and corn, my sheep (eleven excepted [which he had given to Robert H.]), cattle, hogs, horses and mules, together with all my household and kitchen furniture and all my plantation tools, my jinns, also my ox cart and log chain, together with all my land on this side of the river where I live, also an island opposite the mouth of Beaverdam creek containing 330 acres, also an island in Savannah river opposite my mills called Hanna’s island, with the mills, saw and grist, and another tract of land in South Carolina, Abbeville District, on both sides of Rocky river and bounded by Savannah river, together with all the appurtenances thereto belonging, also the following negroes [sixteen in number, which he names] with every other thing which I possess not named in this will.”

Another Virginia family of culture and standing whose members have herein been frequently mentioned in their marriage connections was the Thompsons, some of whom had moved to Petersburg soon after the Revolution and were buying lots there the year the town was founded.

No family which came out of Virginia to Georgia was more famous, prolific, and widely connected than the Bibbs. The original ancestor of the Bibbs in America came to Virginia from Wales, but by tradition the Bibbs were Huguenots. Of the fourth generation of Bibbs in Virginia two brothers became of special note—Richard and William. Richard moved to Kentucky; his son George M. Bibb had a distinguished career in that state as judge, United States Senator, and Secretary of the Treasury under President John Tyler. William moved to Georgia in 1789 and settled up Broad River and died seven years later. His first wife having died, he married Sally Wyatt, described at the time as “an amiable young lady, with a handsome fortune.” By his first wife there were four children, and by his second wife, eight. Sally Wyatt Bibb becoming a widow in her old age, was induced by old William Barnett (previously mentioned) to become his wife. The truth of the old adage “There’s no fool like an old fool” was borne out in this case. The children of each were grown and married; and as this old couple had no common property they “began to separate in visiting their children, until they finally ceased to live together.”

All of Sally Wyatt Bibb’s children married and did well. As previously noted, Thomas married Pamela Thompson, a daugh-
ter of Robert Thomson and his wife Sarah (the only daughter of James Watkins, I). They later moved to Alabama where Thomas became the second governor of that state. Peyton became a Methodist preacher, moved to Alabama, and married into the Cobb family. John Dandridge Bibb married Mary Xenia, a daughter of John Oliver (a son of Dionysius). He studied law under William H. Crawford, but soon gave up the practice and moved to Mississippi to become a planter. Later he moved to Alabama and became an important leader in state politics. Joseph Wyatt Bibb studied medicine at a medical college in Philadelphia. He later married Louisa Du Bose, a sister of Mrs. Robert Toombs. He practiced medicine in Petersburg some years before moving on to Alabama. Delia Bibb married Alexander Pope, and true to the custom of the day in Petersburg and the Broad River Valley, they moved to Alabama. Martha Bibb married Fleming Freeman, a grandson of the original Holman Freeman, who came to Georgia in 1773, from Virginia. Benajah Smith Bibb married Lucy Ann Sophia Gilmer, a sister of Georgia Rockingham Gilmer (Congressman and governor of Georgia, previously mentioned). They moved to Alabama in 1822, where Benajah became prominent in state politics. Sophia was a devoted Confederate, founding a soldiers' hospital in Montgomery, and after the war, organizing the association which erected the Confederate monument on the capitol grounds. She played a sentimental part in the ceremonies of laying the cornerstone in 1886 when Jefferson Davis spoke.

The oldest of Sally Wyatt Bibb's children was William Wyatt Bibb, her most famous one. Born in 1780 in Prince Edward County, Virginia, he came to the Broad River Valley with his parents when he was nine years old. He attended the College of William and Mary according to many accounts and is so listed by the College (though the original records for that period have been lost.) He then studied medicine in the Medical College of the University of Pennsylvania, and after completing his course began his practice in Petersburg in 1801. He was soon attending patients far up the Broad River, even in Lexington, where George R. Gilmer received his administrations.

In addition to his practice of medicine on his return from Philadelphia, Bibb began making himself a useful citizen of Petersburg in other ways and in gaining popularity and the confidence of the people. As proof of the standing of this twenty-two-year-old doctor of medicine, he was invited to deliver the Fourth of July oration in 1802. The Augusta Chronicle considered it of
sufficient importance to publish a part of it. In referring to the
"Matrons and Daughters of Columbia," he declared that the fate
of the nation rested with them. Their responsibility was great,
for "mankind receives more knowledge previous to the age of
seven years, than in the whole subsequent part of life." Address-
ing himself to the young ladies, he said, "Remember that he who
neither loves liberty nor his country, is incapable of loving you;
and grant him that punishment which every virtuous American
views with more horror than death itself—let him be banished
from your engaging society." 37

On February 19, 1803 this news item appeared in the Augusta
Chronicle: "MARRIED, on Thursday the 10th instant, Doctor
William Wyatt Bibb, of Petersburg, to the amiable Miss Mary
Ann Freeman, of Wilkes County." Mary Ann ("Polly") was a
sister of Fleming Freeman, who had married Bibb's sister Martha.
The Bibbs and the Freemans had been close neighbors across
Broad River in Wilkes County, and the children of both families
must have attended the same school. This fact lends some credi-
bility to a little sentimental tradition which seems never to have
been denied: One day at school Mary Ann came up not knowing
her lesson, whereupon the teacher (in keeping with those stern
times) threatened to whip her. Young William arrested the up-
lifted switch and said, "Don't strike her. Whip me. I'll take it for
her." The teacher seeing the nobility in William's action relented
and said, "William, you are a noble boy, and, for your sake, I will
excuse Mary." This was the Mary Ann he married ten years later. 38

John Williams Walker, three years younger than Bibb and to
graduate three years later from Princeton College—and destined
for an eminent career in Alabama—now living in Petersburg, wrote
to his friend Larkin Newby, who had moved away to Fayetteville,
North Carolina, that Dr. Bibb had "taken to his embraces the
'amiable' Miss Polly Freeman a few days since; and they have just
arrived in town this evening, to fix their permanent residence
here.—He's a clever fellow, I wish him well." 39

In 1805 Bibb bought from John Williams Walker for $1,000
the house on Lot 38, which his father Jeremiah Walker, a
Baptist preacher and a merchant, had occupied before his death. 40
The practice of medicine was not sufficient to satisfy Bibb's world-
ly ambitions nor to fill his pockets with needed money—especially
so the latter—for in 1805 he was notifying through the press that
he wanted people owing him to pay up. He said that he expected
his patients to pay "immediately after his services are rendered." 41
So, the very year of his marriage, he decided to enter politics by running for the Georgia House of Representatives. He was successful and continued to be elected, serving from 1803 to 1806.

Now with politics uppermost in his mind he allowed his medical practice to gradually play out for he entered the race for the United States House of Representatives in 1806 while still a member of the legislature. He was successful, taking his seat in 1807, and continuing through successive elections until 1813. Bibb's election in 1810 was hotly contested by John Clark (son of Elijah Clarke), in which he received the highest number of votes in the state. A poem, sung to the tune of Yankee Doodle contained this stanza:

"With one accord BIBB shall be sent
To represent the state, Sir,
While Clark in sorrow shall lament
The just decree of fate, Sir."42

Bibb resigned in 1813 to accept election to the United States Senate in order to fill the vacancy made by the resignation of his friend William H. Crawford. He served in this position until 1816, when he resigned to accept the appointment of governor of the Territory of Alabama. He now moved to Alabama, and when the territory was admitted as a state in 1819 he was elected its first governor. The next year while Bibb was riding horseback his steed became frightened in a sudden thunderstorm and threw him. This accident resulted in his death. William Wyatt Bibb was succeeded in the governorship by his brother Thomas; and so Petersburg provided Alabama with its first two governors.43

It would be a singular occurrence in the history of Georgia or of any other state in the Union, that both United States Senators should come from a small town or its vicinity. But this was the fact in Georgia from 1813 to 1816, when Bibb's colleague was Charles Tait. Both Bibb and Tait lived near Petersburg, Bibb having moved out of Petersburg to a plantation a few years previously.

Charles Tait, born in 1768, was the oldest child in a family of ten children born to James and Rebecca Tait, in Hanover County, Virginia. The family moved to the Broad River Valley in 1783 and settled near the site of the future town of Petersburg. Charles attended the Wilkes County Academy, and probably through the influence of Bishop Francis Asbury, he continued his education at Cokesbury College, in Maryland, remaining there from 1788
to 1794—the last several years there he instructed classes in French. He studied law while at Cokesbury and was admitted to the bar when he returned to Georgia; but instead of practicing, he accepted election to the headship of Richmond Academy in Augusta. He remained there two years, during the last of which, William H. Crawford was one of the teachers. In 1797 he resigned and entered the practice of law and politics, living on his plantation "Retreat," not far from Petersburg. In 1803 Tait made a bitter fight against John Griffin for election by the legislature to the judgeship of the Western Circuit. Tait and Crawford were leaders in the faction against John Clark, Griffin being allied with Clark, especially since both had married sisters, daughters of Micajah Williamson. Tait was elected and remained as judge until 1809 when he was elected to the United States Senate. At the end of his term in 1819 he retired and moved to Alabama the same year. In 1820 through his old friend and associate in politics, William H. Crawford, now Secretary of the Treasury, Tait was appointed by President Monroe to be United States District Judge for Alabama. This was another Petersburg casualty for the up-building of Alabama.

Tait had married Mrs. Anne (Lucas) Simpson of Baltimore in 1790, while at Cokesbury College. The year before Tait moved to Alabama she had died, and in an obituary the Augusta Chronicle referred to her as "a lady of great piety and benevolence." The Taits were strong Methodists, with whom Bishop Asbury often stopped on his trips to Georgia. Tait named one of his sons for the Bishop—James Asbury Tait, who preceded by one year his father to Alabama. By the time Judge Tait had been in Alabama three years, his longings for his old Georgia surroundings of former days drew him back on a visit; and he returned to Alabama with a new wife, the widow of his old political enemy Judge John Griffin. In 1826 he resigned his judgeship and spent the next eighteen months traveling throughout the eastern United States during which time he attended a Yale commencement and visited many prominent people, including former president James Madison. He died in 1835.

Another Virginia family which was planted in Petersburg was the Walkers. They were brought there to preside at the very birth of the town by Jeremiah, a Baptist preacher, whose name in the vernacular of the day was spelled like it was pronounced "Jar- mah." He bought town lots, an island in the Savannah River, plantation lands, and slaves—thereby accumulating a small for-
tune. Yet he had time to preach sermons and funerals and to inculcate Baptist principles into some of his Petersburg listeners. He died in 1792, leaving land, city lots, slaves and books to all his seven children.45

Following the custom of giving to children such names as these, Moaning, Lamentation, Prudence, and Charity, he named one of his sons Memorable, who later became an outstanding merchant in Petersburg. As an indication of how a successful merchant lived and what he accumulated, the appraisers of Memorable’s property at his death in 1803 listed 23 slaves (valued at $1,000), 7 horses (“Post Boy,” “Paddy,” “Kiddy Caddy,” and so on), 2 yoke of oxen, 17 head of cattle, 75 hogs, 25 geese, 2 stills with 18 hogsheads for “stilling,” a variety of plantation tools and equipment, a mahogany side board and other furniture (including 11 Windsor chairs), silver cutlery, 3 pictures (probably paintings of ancestors), 40 books and pamphlets, 9 trunks, a half dozen saddles (2 for women), and a great many other items which would go into a well-furnished residence. In addition were his mercantile supplies and plantation lands. Certain items were offered at a sale, at which Dr. W. W. Bibb, John Oliver, and other prominent residents of Petersburg bought many items; Charles Tait bought a History of Modern Europe for $17.50, and another attendant bought William Gordon's History . . . of America . . . .46

Memorable Walker was only 26 years old when he died. The Augusta Chronicle in announcing his death said, “We would wish to pay his character the eulogy it merits. But his virtues were so eminent that perishable materials could add nothing to their indelibility.”47

The most famous of Jeremiah Walker’s children was John Williams Walker, who after receiving his preparatory education under the tutelage of the well-known schoolmaster, Moses Waddel, was graduated at Princeton in 1806. He married Matilda, a daughter of LeRoy Pope, and moved in 1810 to Alabama, where he took a prominent part in organizing the Territory and State government of Alabama and became the first of its two senators to take his seat in Washington.48

Another progenitor of a Virginia family which moved to Georgia was Holman Freeman; however, unlike most Virginians who came to Georgia he arrived before the Revolution. Attracted by Sir James Wright's proclamation inviting settlers to the New Purchase, Freeman came in 1773 and took up 400 acres of land on Chickasaw Creek, a tributary of Broad River flowing in from the
south, not far from old Fort James, the future site of Petersburg. There were five sons and four daughters in Holman’s family.49

Being too old and unwell to enter the war, he could give personally only his loyalty to the cause of Liberty and Independence, but his sons took an active part in the Revolution. In this internecine civil war (“The War of Extermination”) which accompanied the Revolution in Georgia, a party of Tories came to the home of old Holman Freeman and after nearly beating him to death, took him to Augusta (then in the hands of the British). There after catching the smallpox he was allowed to return home in a dying condition. His son John, bent on avenging his father’s death, learned the identity of the two leaders of the Tory party. He went to the home of one of the Tories and found him in the field plowing with his little daughter riding on the plow. John asked the Tory “if he had not plowed enough.” The Tory replied that he wanted to finish the field. John said “it was not worth while to finish it, and shot him on the spot.” Never relenting his quest for vengeance, John traced the other Tory leader to Augusta and found him lying on a blanket in the shade of a tree. When John called his name, the Tory covered his face with the blanket, realizing that his end had come. John shot him dead, and putting spurs to his horse galloped away.50

There was only one child in John Freeman’s family, Rebecca. She married Shaler Hillyer, a native of Connecticut, who had recently come to Petersburg to engage in the mercantile business. (An extended account of Hillyer’s career will appear under a discussion of the merchants of Petersburg.)

Another son of Holman Freeman was named for his father Holman. After the war Holman Freeman, II, secured grants of land amounting to 3,300 acres up and down Broad River and elsewhere.51 Of his three children (Fleming, John, and Mary), Fleming married a sister of William Wyatt Bibb and about 1816 moved to Alabama, and, as previously noted, Bibb married Mary (“Polly”).

Of the many other families who were residents of Petersburg, there were the Remberts, the Welles, the Raglands (in John R. Ragland’s family there were seventeen), the Easters (in Richard’s family there were fifteen), the Patons (from New Jersey), and the Stokes. Another family name was Pope. The Popes had scattered over Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. LeRoy Pope’s branch, it is thought, came from North Carolina, and William and Alexander (Pope brothers), from Delaware.
Another family who helped old Dionysius Oliver found Petersburg was the Cades. Unlike so many other Petersburgers, they stayed there to the bitter end. They lived in the last house in the deserted village before the waters of Broad and Savannah rivers empounded by the Clark Hill Dam mingled their floods fifty feet deep over the site—the Cades being the lares and penates of departed Petersburg.

Many families were tributary to Petersburg, who never lived in the town. The Goose Pond Virginians, up Broad River in Oglethorpe County, were too far away to visit much in Petersburg; but some of their heavy products such as tobacco, cotton, corn, and bacon were floated down Broad River or hauled on the highway to increase the commercial importance of that town. Old Elijah Clarke, living up the Broad River, came to Petersburg now and then when he was not fighting the Indians, or engaging in filibustering on the Florida border, or devising land speculation schemes. After his death in 1799 some of his children found Petersburg a good trading center—his son John, when not governor of the state or too deep in politics, and Elijah's daughter Elizabeth, who married Benajah Smith and lived up Broad River at Millford, dying there in 1813. AND there was John M. Dooly, famous as a Superior Court judge and a wit who lived across Broad River up in Lincoln County. His business in Petersburg was more concerned with practicing law than with trading. Down the Broad at its mouth, the Lisbonites found Petersburg, just across the river, a much more satisfactory place in which to visit and trade than their own little village. And over the Savannah in South Carolina, the Viennese were likewise attracted to Petersburg. Across the Savannah and inland a few miles was Moses Waddel's Willington school, and although his pupils were not allowed to visit Petersburg, he himself did most of his trading there. Likewise from the Calhoun Settlement not far away, Patrick (brother of the great John C. Calhoun) and other Calhouns were often to be seen in Petersburg.

Thus, Petersburg was not simply made up of buildings; it was throbbing with people, some of famous families and some unknown to fame. There was a great deal of intermarrying among these families, which set up power units in trade and politics not only in Petersburg and Georgia but also in Alabama whither so many Petersburgers went to run that Territory and to set it up as a State.