PETERSBURG sprang up as a sort of miracle town. Thus it attracted people who knowing what was going on in the world were ready and able to seek a high status in life and a fortune. They came not only out of previous migrations from Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas, but also a smattering of them heard the call of Petersburg from as far away as Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey. One who was born in Petersburg and grew up on a Broad River plantation within the social shadow of the town wrote in his old age that Petersburg had “the very best society in the state.”

Traveling troupes of theatrical players soon discovered Petersburg and made their periodic visits. A troup of eight actors appeared there in 1799 and spent a whole week giving different plays every night. John Williams Walker, now a schoolboy, wrote to his friend Larkin Newby, who had moved over into South Carolina at this time, “The play Actors have been in Town and went out on Sunday.” He must have gone to every performance, for he gave their complete program. Every night they gave two plays, a comedy or a tragedy followed by a farce. The first night, it was the comedy *Provoked Husband* and the farce *Spoiled Child*. The second night, *Child of Nature* and *The Lawyer Nonsuited or no Song no Supper*, “which was peculiarly funny.” The third night, *Tragedy of Jane Shore* and the farce *Virgin Unmasked*. The fourth night, the comedy *Country Girl* and the farce *The Poor Soldier*, “which was as funny a thing as I ever saw.” The fifth night, the comedy *The Stranger* and the farce *The Sultan or a Peep into the Seraglio*. The sixth night, the comedy *The Mountaineers or Love and Madness* and the farce *Ramp*. That Petersburgers were able to support twelve plays indicated their lively
interest in intellectual excitement; the price of admission was fifty cents.  

Dancing and formal balls were a social diversion in Petersburg and up and down the long Broad River Valley. In Petersburg the “Senior Gentlemen” announced regularly their “High and Honorable Balls,” from which the “younger set” were excluded. But the juniors were not to be denied their right to dance, for they organized their own club and were enjoying its activities by 1799. Sixteen-year-old John Williams Walker kept his friend Larkin Newby informed of what was going on. By 1803 Newby had moved to Fayetteville, North Carolina, and Walker, now advanced in age and social status could tell him much more about the social whirl in Petersburg, where in early youth they had enjoyed life together—Walker having been born in 1783. Cupid always played an important part in these newsy letters, and Walker never failed to tell

Who danced with whom and who are like to wed  
And who is gone and who is brought to bed.

In 1803 Walker was twenty years old, and although he was thoroughly in tune with Petersburg society, he was not a giddy empty soul. Under the guidance of Moses Waddel he was preparing to enter Princeton and also much of his time was taken up with the management of the estate of his lately-deceased brother Memorable. He could well write near the end of 1803 that it had been some time “since I have shuffled a reel or hopped a congo.”

However, he was not one to give up balls, hops, and social visiting. The New Year’s Ball ushering in the year 1805 was to be an outstanding event, “at which it is expected a great number of ladies will be present.” Yet he looked forward to it with some trepidation, fearing that he would be “overpowered by the charms” of someone because he was holding his affections for another who was off at school in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania—none other than Matilda of the “royal family” of LeRoy Pope. Recently for the first time he had realized that he was in love with “a little creature scarce 12.” It turned out that he had to be in the Abbeville Courthouse on a little mission on the last day of the year and January 1 caught him there. However, he was determined to ride to Petersburg for the ball that night. It was a bad day, raining, sleeting, and snowing by succession, but he got there in time to “huddle on my Sunday clothes for the ball.”

“Apollo played, the Graces danced, and I enjoyed the scene.”
His Sunday clothes hardly fitted the occasion because they were too "plain, perhaps too unadorned, for such an assembly, where almost all the young bucks appeared in a new suit purchased for the set purpose." When he entered the hall, the manager "handed" him a seat. He was "surprised that many ladies were present 'who knew not Joseph' and whom Joseph knew not." That situation called for his presentation to the ladies, and when he was asked to "take the rounds in a general introduction to all the ladies in the room," he refused, "observing that the custom was hateful to me, because too formal." One of the ladies especially attracted him, and he finally got acquainted with her by casually taking a vacant seat next to her. "Conversation ensued—the badness of the weather—the rusticity of our up-country manners in comparison of those who dwell in the lower part of the state—the superiority of our climate—and fifty other things which I have forgot supplied me with a never failing theme, till the lady in whose place I sat came to resume her seat." He now took a fling with his newly-acquainted partner and could hardly prevent Cupid from taking over.

The weather was so bad the night of this ball that it prevented "many ladies in the vicinity" from coming; so it was decided to hold another ball the next evening. The weather moderated and fifty ladies showed up. The "young bucks" of Petersburg and the surrounding plantations, including Vienna and Lisbon, had another evening of enjoyment. Before the month was out another ball was held which Walker attended only to be mildly infatuated with another beauty. However, at the beginning he was a little hesitant in awarding her this accolade, for "she had one personal fault—and that is the color of her hair—I never thought handsome before—perhaps they should be dignified golden locks." Undoubtedly, these Petersburg grand balls made a lasting impression on the young ladies, for in 1888, a newspaper correspondent who was interested in Petersburg in all its glory reported that "one old gentleman told me that sixty years ago an old lady friend of his said she attended a grand ball in Petersburg." There were picnics, promenading the streets of Petersburg, celebrations, and visiting in Augusta, Athens, and other Georgia towns, and in the nearby towns across the river in South Carolina. An interesting place for holding picnics was a spot about three miles above Petersburg near the banks of the Savannah River. Here were some Indian mounds which had greatly attracted William Bartram when he came this way in 1776. He referred to them as "remarkable Indian monuments, which are worthy of
every traveller's notice." There was a group of smaller conical mounds and square terraces, with a large mound having a spiral path leading to the top, about forty or fifty feet high and two hundred or three hundred yards around. The top was flat and on it was growing "a large, beautiful spreading Red Cedar." 11

A picnic might well include a little fishing as a diversion, which would inevitably lead to a "fish fry," for the Savannah and the Broad and their tributaries were teeming with fish. 12 The fish wealth in these rivers was of special legislative concern. Had there been a method of preserving the catch, there might have developed here another extractive industry, but fishing never got beyond local consumption.

The Glorious Fourth was a day always to be celebrated with an oration followed by eating and drinking toasts to the heroes of the Revolution and to the political leaders of the day. It has already been stated that William Wyatt Bibb gave the oration in 1802. Also there were convivial gatherings with no day to be celebrated or no one to be honored except those who were present. There was such a day in June, 1799, when "a Large Company of Gentlemen met at the Spring to Drink Grog." The extra energy developed by the grog led to trials of strength, including a wrestling match between a Mr. McGrath and Littlebury Wilson, a merchant, in which the former won. McGrath bragged so much about it that Wilson replied with some mean remarks which McGrath resented and thereupon challenged Wilson to a duel. They selected their seconds "and went over the River and measured off the Ground took their Pistols and were almost ready to fire when Wilson asked Pardon and all was done with—for they are as good friends as ever." 13

There was some promenading up and down the streets of Petersburg, but it is not known what kind of trees, if any, provided shade. It is possible that there might have been some Lombardy poplars, for the Petersburg newspaper editor published an article relating to the hazards of walking under this kind of tree, the incidents mentioned apparently not applying to Petersburg. It was reported that "the Lombardy poplar produced a worm whose bite was almost instant death." A cat bitten by one died soon afterwards, and a worm fell on the hand of a lady walking under a Lombardy poplar, and "though it did not bite, but only grazed her hand as it fell on the ground, yet the hand inflamed and became very sore." The author of this article was not opposed
to having Lombardy poplars planted on the streets of towns, but
they should be interspersed with other trees.  

There was much visiting back and forth between Petersburghers
and families of planters in the neighborhood, especially if one had
ever lived in Petersburg and then moved out into the country to
a plantation, as was true of the Hillyers. There were longer trips
both for social occasions and for pleasure otherwise, as in the
latter instance when Petersburghers went down to Augusta in 1799
and paid a half dollar to see an elephant, a “stupendous animal,
the only one in America.” Then there were visits to the North,
wives accompanying merchant husbands on buying missions.

During the warm summer months some Petersburghers made
tours into the mountains of the Carolinas. In 1803 Shaler Hillyer
set out at two o’clock on June 7 and drove seventeen miles before
putting up for the night. He was on his way to the warm springs
of North Carolina, there to meet some other Petersburghers, the
Freemans, whose daughter Rebecca was the special object of his
journey. Walker, who was keeping Newby informed on the social
happenings and especially on “who are like to wed,” reported this
same month that Shaler and “Miss Rebecca Freeman have some
idea of ‘Joining issue,” and that they and her parents and “some
other relations” have been for sometime “at the warm springs in
the upper part (I think) of South Carolina [really North Caro-
lina].” Walker was otherwise right; Shaler married Rebecca and
they raised a family. Within a few years they built a summer home
far up Broad River at a summer resort known as Madison Springs,
for a hundred years a favorite with Georgians and South Carol-
linians.

As Petersburg began to decline as a town, society there also
began to fade out, so that those young ladies who were coming
along at that time and hungering for social activities had to find
them elsewhere. There was that sensitive soul Jane Kneeland of
a cultured Petersburg family, who in the 1830’s did much visiting
around in Georgia and South Carolina. In 1831 she had been visit-
ing in Augusta and Athens, and in a letter to a friend, comparing
society in Athens and Petersburg, she wrote that “the contrast
between Petersburg and Athens is I must warn you very great as
we have no society here and no amusement of any kind,” but for
Athens “it has indeed many attractions more especially for the
young and gay. I shall ever remember my visit there with de-
light.”
She had recently been visiting in Abbeville on a brief stay of only two weeks (social visits in those times might last a month or two), and she wrote, “I assure you that I enjoyed myself as much there as I ever did in my life.” But with all her social inclinations, she had a streak of Puritanism which would not down. Oh why should the spirit of mortal be proud when life is short and one is so unworthy: “This is indeed a world of trial and disappointment and they that have the least feeling get along the best. I sometimes wonder that I should ever feel gay. . . . I must not devote all my time to amusement.” She then remarked to her friend to tell an inquiring one (probably an interested young gentleman) that “there is nothing remarkable in Miss Kneeland, that she is superior to few and inferior to hundreds.”

Although Petersburg was by now taking on a melancholy look, which may have had its effect on Miss Kneeland’s personality, yet there was still life and the amenities of the cultured few who were left. People traveling from upper South Carolina over into Georgia would likely be passing through Petersburg and stopping for a few social hours or more. Mary Morange, the cultured South Carolina girl, after a visit to Sparta was on her way to her home near Willington. She spent the night in Washington (Wilkes County) and reached Petersburg about one o’clock, “just as Mrs. Stokes was rising from a fine watermelon dessert.” Mary sat for a piece, and after spending a few social hours, continued her journey to Willington. It was in July, 1839.

This woman’s world was not all inclusive of Petersburg’s social activities and amusements; there was also a man’s world into little of which women were supposed to enter. Every town large enough to claim the name should have one or more taverns. For stagecoaches and their passengers and for those traveling otherwise there were tavern stops in the country, but around town taverns there was a certain vigorous life which was for men only.

Regulating and licensing taverns was almost as old as the English common law itself. Coming out of the Revolution, Georgia passed its first tavern act in 1786 to put a stop to tippling houses “being erected by idle and disorderly persons, which are generally frequented by gambling and other profane persons—which tends to the corruption of youth, and the prejudice of virtue.” Any proper person wishing to set up a tavern should secure a license from the Superior Court, which should extend only for one year. The court would fix the rates which must be posted “in some conspicuous part” of the tavern, for “liquors, diet, lodgings, prov-
ender, stablage and pasturage.” Anyone running a tavern without a license should be subject to a heavy fine, but merchants might retail liquors in quantities of not less than one quart, which beverage, however, might not be drunk on the premises.  

As this act was not successful in suppressing tippling houses, the legislature two years later passed a more elaborate act. No person without a license should set up a tavern “or house of entertainment, or retail spirituous liquors by less measure than three gallons,” or have a billiard table or shuffle-board. The act set up uniform rates for the whole state. A license for a tavern in a town or within four miles should pay a fee of ten pounds—but if at a greater distance the fee would be five pounds. Now a license would be required to retail liquors in less than three gallons but not less than one quart and would cost three pounds. A billiard table required a license of forty pounds and a shuffle-board, twenty pounds.  

To reduce the license fees and to make other changes, a new law was passed in 1791. Now the Inferior Courts were given the duty to issue licenses for taverns and the sale of liquors and also to fix tavern rates. Applicants for licenses must give bond “for their keeping an orderly and decent house, with good and sufficient accommodations for travellers, their horses and attendants.” Any person without a license should be fined ten pounds for selling at retail “any wine, beer, cider, brandy, rum or other spirits, or any mixture of such liquors, in any house, booth, arbor, stall or other place whatsoever.” But there was no prohibition against a merchant “retailing liquors [in] not less than one quart; nor to prevent any planter or other person from disposing of such brandy, rum or whisky, as they may make from their own grain, orchards, or distilleries, so that it be not sold in a less quantity than one quart, nor drank or intended to be drank at the house, store or plantation, where the same shall be sold.” But in Chatham, Liberty, and Effingham counties merchants might not sell less than one gallon. Tavern licenses were now reduced to two pounds and a billiard table, to five pounds. Shuffle-boards were to be free. Later it was made illegal for a tavern-keeper or any other person to sell spirituous liquors to a slave.  

In 1791 the Inferior Court of Elbert County fixed tavern rates for Petersburg and for all other licensed places in the county. With the passing of time, rates were changed, but in 1791 these were the rates: breakfast and supper, 1 shilling 2 pence, each; dinner, 1/6; lodging 6 pence; Jamaica rum, 16 shillings per gal-
Old Petersburg •

Old Petersburg • I

don; brandy, 14/0; whiskey, 9/4; corn per bushel, 4/0; oats, 3/0;
oats per dozen bundles, 1 shilling; "Stabalize [use of stable for
one night]," 6 pence. In 1801 a post boy and his horse were
charged $1.00 per night.

Soon Petersburg was doing a thriving tavern business, licenses
having been granted by the early 1800's to James Coleman, George
Cook, Thomas Oliver, John Ragland, William Oliver, William
Patterson, Henry Graves Walker, and others. In 1802 Henry
Graves Walker announced that he had taken the dwelling house
lately occupied by Memorable Walker "and the large red house
nearly opposite thereto." The first was to be operated as a board-
ing house to accommodate travelers and town boarders and the
"red house" was to be used as a public tavern. They were far
enough apart to "entirely remedy the inconvenience, and disagree-
ableness too often experienced where a boarding house and a
tavern are associated together." In 1809 William Oliver an-
nounced that he had set up the home formerly occupied by Mrs.
[John R.?] Ragland as a "House of Entertainment," and for all
who come he "assures them they will at all times find the best
accommodation and the utmost good order and regularity in
his place.

In 1811 William Patterson invited the public to "Stop at the
Sign of the Farmer's Arms," which was his old home now turned
into a boarding house. He would serve the best the country pro-
duced—"this with a good assortment of the best Liquors, and a
Stable well supplied with good provinder." For many years he
was a merchant and tavern-keeper in Petersburg, and annually
swore the following oath required after 1810: "I, William Patter-
son do solemnly swear that I will not during the next twelve
months sell barter give or furnish to any slave or slaves or free
persons of color any measure or quantity of distilled spirituous or
intoxicating Liquors without the verbal or written consent of the
owner overseer or employer of such slave or slaves or without the
like consent of the Guardian of such free person of color and I do
further swear that I will not suffer or allow any other person or
persons to do so for me by my approbation knowledge or consent
so help me God.

Those Petersburgers who did not care to have a solitary drink
of spirituous liquor could go to a tavern to play billiards, have a
game of cards or, indeed, have a social drink with either activity.
John Williams Walker greatly disliked to see any young men of
Petersburg playing cards. He mentioned one of his acquaintances
having been ruined by another having taught him to play cards. They were, he said, "pretty good customers at High, Low, Jack & the Game. Thus you see the Young and Giddy are Led to Destruction Like the Sheep to the Slaughter." If a person liked to engage in chance not afforded by a game of cards, he could buy a lottery ticket, as some Petersburghers did, but he would have to send to Augusta to get it.

A healthy bet could be laid at the Petersburg Race Track, where the Petersburg Jockey Club held three-day races beginning as early as the late 1790's. These races were open for "any horse, mare or gelding in the United States." The first day was a "three mile heat" for a purse of $250; the second day, a "two mile heat," for $150; and the third day, "the mile heats, for the entrance money of the two first days." The breeding of fine horses was assured by at least two dozen stallions, which were stood in the vicinity of Petersburg and the outlying regions from Augusta to Washington (Wilkes County) and Greensboro. There were "Sterling Medly," which stood at Vienna; "Victorious," at the Robert L. Tait plantation; "Snap Dragon," at Elberton; and others at other places bearing such names as "Young Dare Devil," "Flag of Truce," "Janus," "Black Sultan," and "Democrat.

Petersburg was, of course, not without its petty crimes and a few more serious ones. Horse-stealing was almost as major a crime as murder and was generally made a capital offense. There was no mistake as to how Georgia looked upon it. In 1793 the legislature enacted that if any person should "feloniously steal, lead, take or drive away, any horse, gelding, mare, colt, filly, ass or mule, or be accessory thereto, and being thereof duly convicted, shall be adjudged guilty of felony: Such person or persons convicted as aforesaid, shall suffer death, without the benefit of clergy, by being hanged by the neck, till he, she or they be dead." Some years later (1809) the state mellowed its attitude toward the crime and decided that for the first offense thirty-nine lashes should be applied to the bare back of the criminal on "three several days," who should stand in the pillory one hour each day and be imprisoned at most one month and not less that twenty days. Any one guilty of a second offense should suffer death.

There was not much horse-stealing in Petersburg or its vicinity, but in 1813 William H. Jones reported that his horse had been stolen. He described it as a large black one that "trots slow and somewhat sluggish" but was "remarkable for the best waggon horse in the state." He offered $20.00 reward for anyone arresting
the thief and stopping the horse. Earlier Henry G. Walker announced that his horse had been stolen at Memorable Walker's Mills. He was offering $15.00 reward "and reasonable charges for mileage; or fifty dollars for the horse and thief, if convicted to death." This was at a time when the first offense was death.

With all of Petersburg's stores, it was not surprising that now and then one was broken into and something stolen. Robert S. Sayre reported that his store had been entered by a thief who stole some notes and a few articles of merchandise, and John E. Stokes published the news that a thief had stolen from his store a silver watch, for which he was offering a reward.

It was not recorded that Petersburg was ever the scene of a murder. Its crimes were few, and those who lived there could walks its streets in nighttime or day unterrified and unafraid.