The Decline of Petersburg and the Broad River Valley

THE FIRST INDICATION that all was not well with Petersburg came with the decline in real estate. Near the end of 1809 John Williams Walker, contemplating a move to the westward, wrote, “I could hardly give away my lands now—they are in so little request.” This stagnation was not entirely the result of any fundamental decay in Petersburg; the embargo on trade with Europe had caused a similar situation in many other places as the prices of cotton and tobacco reached almost the vanishing point. The war which broke out in 1812 made the situation worse, for this very year the sheriff of Elbert County sold for taxes a one-acre lot adjoining Petersburg, which Archibald Stokes bid in for $36.00.

The spurt of prosperity following the end of the war in 1815 gave new life to Petersburg, when in 1818 Lot 81 with improvements sold for $2,500; but the recession which set in the next year and continued for some years led to the resale of this lot in 1826 for $275. It would seem that there must have been other considerations or that disaster had in the meantime hit some of the improvements since in 1821 a half-acre lot with a house on it was sold for $1,200; in 1824 three acres of land adjoining Petersburg was sold for $1,000, and as late as 1832 Henry Kneeland bought for $1,400 a two-acre lot containing a dwelling house large enough to have a part of it devoted to a store.

By the late 1830's Petersburg was fast falling into decay. In December, 1834, this transaction took place: Henry Kneeland sold to Zinny (Zimri?) Tate and Drury B. Cade for $8,500, 2,322 acres extending all the way from the Savannah River across the Broad into Lincoln County, including nine Petersburg lots, eight
slaves, and all ferry privileges from Petersburg to Lisbon and across the Savannah to the site of Vienna.\footnote{7}

The Cades were gradually buying up the remnants of Petersburg during the next thirty years. In 1837 Drury B. and Guilford Cade, Sr., bought a lot with a dwelling on it for $800; in 1863 the latter Cade bought the Archibald Stokes' storehouse lot for $200; and in 1876 this lot was bought by Drury B. Cade, Jr., for $100.\footnote{8} The previous year Cade had bought for $100 two lots in the "old town of Petersburg" and fifty acres lying on the road to Elberton.\footnote{9} What had previously been Petersburg was now becoming a cotton plantation.

The town government having been abandoned some years before 1831, the citizens who were left appealed this year to the legislature for relief against "sundry persons" who had "obstructed and closed up some of the public streets . . . to the inconvenience and injury of the owners of property and others residing in said town." The legislature complied by passing a law giving the road commissioners the right to order all obstructions removed and to fine any offender two dollars a day for refusal to act.\footnote{10} The encroachment of the countryside in extending its fields and pastures into the very streets of Petersburg was not long stayed; the town had disintegrated so far by 1850 that an attempt was made in the legislature to repeal the law of 1831. The dying town supporters were able to hold out a while longer by killing the bill in the House of Representatives by the close vote of 56 to 51.\footnote{11}

A recognition of Petersburg's growing insignificance in the financial world appeared in 1815 when the legislature in apportioning stock in the act incorporating the Bank of the State of Georgia awarded none at all to this town.\footnote{12} The same omission was made three years later when it incorporated the Bank of Darien.\footnote{13} Postal receipts gave a valid index to a town's business prosperity, and in this respect Petersburg was fast falling by the wayside. The Petersburg postal receipts for the year ending March 31, 1827, were only $105.17, as compared with $10,493.26 for Augusta. Some of Petersburg's rivals for oblivion were at this time not much ahead: Frederica, in Glynn County, $145.49; Hartford, in Pulaski County, $143.09; Jacksonboro, in Screven County, $150.06; Powelton, in Hancock County, $172.78; and Sunbury, in McIntosh County, $127.36. Only the following towns, destined to die, had smaller postal receipts: Salem, in Clarke County; Shoals of Ogeechee, in Warren County; Mount Zion, in Hancock County; Scull Shoals, in Greene County; Standing Peachtree, in
Gwinnett County (with $4.34); and Wrightsboro, in Columbia County.¹⁴

Some of the principal leaders in Petersburg and the hinterland began leaving as early as 1810. They believed the town had reached its zenith, as far as their opportunities were concerned, when they heard the beckoning cry of the West, which at that time meant the United States public domain beyond the Chattahoochee River, organized as the Mississippi Territory and extending to the Mississippi River. LeRoy Pope’s interest in land and land speculation was well known, and as early as 1804 he could not resist making a trip to inspect these public lands. John Freeman, the father-in-law of Shaler Hillyer, wrote to “Dear Children” on July 9 saying, “Capt. L. Pope has returned from the westward, has stirred up the citizens of Petersburg. They are all offering their property for sale.”¹⁵ From this time on, Pope could hardly keep his mind from wandering “westward,” and in 1808 he made another trip. This time he went on horseback with Thomas Bibb all the way across the Mississippi Territory to New Orleans. On the way back he was joined by his prospective son-in-law, John Williams Walker.¹⁶

Back in 1803 when the United States purchased Louisiana, Walker had been much impressed with the possibilities there and thought of going to embrace some of them, but he observed, “an immediate departure from this country to dwell in that would be quite imprudent.”¹⁷ After graduating at Princeton and returning to Petersburg, to remain only a short time, he took passage by ship to New Orleans in search of health and fortune. After two months there he pushed on up the river and over to Washington, in the Mississippi Territory. He was much impressed with the country, finding the land “exceedingly fertile & productive, beyond all comparison superior to that of Georgia.”¹⁸

In 1809 a land office was opened in Nashville, Tennessee, for the sale of Mississippi Territory lands in the Big Bend of the Tennessee River country (later to be northern Alabama), and a group of Petersburgers, including LeRoy Pope, John Williams Walker, William Wyatt Bibb, and his brother Thomas immediately made purchases.¹⁹ The next year Walker married his Matilda, and in company with his father-in-law he set out for their new lands. Writing on May 20, 1810, to Dr. Samuel Brown, a former professor in Transylvania University in Kentucky, whom Walker had met in his 1808 travels, he said, “In less than a fortnight we shall take up the line of march toward your own blessed
At this time Brown was living at Fort Adams, on the Mississippi River. Pope was the principal commissioner appointed to choose the county seat of Madison County, and having selected the site of Huntsville he was often called thereafter the "Father of Huntsville." He became a judge, a banker, and otherwise a man of outstanding importance in Alabama history.

From this time on, Petersburgers and other Georgians began moving to the Mississippi Territory, the eastern part being cut off in 1817 to become the Territory of Alabama and two years later the State of Alabama. The "Westward Movement" in America was now in full swing, to take uplands at $2.00 an acre with some variations in price in the course of time. Advertisements of fertile lands and the promotion of towns in Alabama began appearing in the Georgia newspapers as well as in letters from some of those settlers who had gone there. Praising the opportunities to be had in Huntsville and Madison County and generally throughout Alabama, a Huntsville resident wrote in 1817, "The planters in the county have become wealthy by their own industry in a few years, in the worst of times." Concluding his panegyric, he asked, "I say, with all these privileges and luxurious bounties of nature, which are not mere creatures of fance, but substantial realities, who is not ready to exclaim that the Alabama is an American Canaan."

Yet to prevent a headlong migration to Alabama and Mississippi, the Georgia newspapers were always glad to publish any news of a discouraging nature. There were Indian troubles, floods, and disease. In the summer of 1811 a great flood on the Mississippi River had covered up several hundred cotton plantations; 5,000 head of stock had drowned; and the river was still rising. A few years later it was reported that crops were a failure, that there was hardly any corn to be had, and that "many families, almost in a state of starvation, are retracing their steps, and endeavoring to get back to this state."

Yet the tide could not be stemmed; the Western fever was spreading among the high and the low. George Weissinger, down below Petersburg in Columbia County, "contemplating a removal to the Western country" was offering his plantation for sale, and many other Georgians were doing likewise. John Williams Walker, now no longer a Petersburger but a full-blown Alabaman, was in correspondence with Senator Charles Tait in 1816-1817 relative to the division of the Mississippi Territory into the two states of Mississippi and Alabama. He urged the Senator to come to Alabama. In 1817 Mississippi became a state and Alabama
a territory. The next year Tait announced that he would not run for the Senate again, as he was contemplating moving to Alabama. The next year he moved there. The following year Secretary of the Treasury William H. Crawford, representing a friendship extending back to the duelling days around Petersburg, saw to it that President Monroe appointed Tait a district judge for Alabama.

In 1816 Congress voted to change the method of Congressmen’s pay from $6.00 a day for every day in attendance to a salary of $1,500 for the year. Although this system might well have actually reduced the amount paid Congressmen, depending on the length of the sessions, there was a furious outcry all over the country against this “pay grab.” William Wyatt Bibb, now a Senator, voted for the new system and was pilloried all over the state of Georgia for having done so—as, indeed, were all the other Georgia Congressmen who had voted for it. The Grand Jury of Wilkes County (into whose dominion Bibb had moved up the Broad from Petersburg) made a stinging presentment, calling for universal detestation of those who had voted for the “grab” and recommending their defeat in any subsequent attempt to re-enter Congress. Bibb was hurt by this attack and in a long communication he made an excellent defense, high-toned and convincing: “Deplorable indeed is the state of man, if against such foul aspersions a life of unimpeached and unimpeachable integrity affords him no protection. . . . From my public labours I never have derived pecuniary profit; nor in that respect is there any thing in the present compensation to render a continuance in congress desirable. But to lose your good opinion would be to lose the richest, the only reward for years of toil in the country’s service. Such an event I should most deeply deplore; but still there would be a source of consolation, which we owe to the bounty of Providence, and which cannot be taken away—the consolation of ‘a conscience void of offense.’” A few months later (November 9, 1816) he resigned from the United States Senate and moved to Alabama.

It was not for nothing that Bibb had from early days in politics been aligned with the Jackson-Crawford-Troup faction. When Alabama became a territory Crawford recommended Bibb to President Monroe for appointment to the governorship, which he received. Georgia was proud of her self-exiled son, who never lost his love for his native state, and the legislature in 1822 named a county for him. On the occasion of Bibb’s message to the Alabama legislature in 1818, the Augusta Chronicle remarked, “He
was highly esteemed by the good and learned as a distinguished statesman, and an amiable and honest citizen. A public ebullition of intemperate feeling, however, drove him from our state. His loss was poignantly felt by all who properly estimated talent and virtue." But his appointment as governor could not “palliate the ingratitude of his native state.”

When Alabama became a state in 1819 Bibb was elected governor by the people, and when he died the next year as a result of being thrown from a horse, his brother Thomas, who also had moved from Petersburg to Alabama, succeeded to the governorship. With two Petersburgers as governors in succession, another as Federal judge, and others from Petersburg and the Broad River Valley in responsible positions, it became almost a matter of Petersburgers running the State of Alabama during its infant years—indeed, with the help of other Georgians who had moved to Alabama, this group came to be called the “Georgia Party.”

No one of these Petersburgers became more distinguished than John Williams Walker, in succession a member of the Territorial House of Representatives and its speaker, president of the State Constitutional Convention in 1819, and Alabama’s first United States Senator. He and his wife Matilda Pope Walker were the parents of another United States Senator, Percy Walker, and also of the first Secretary of War of the Confederate States of America, LeRoy Pope Walker.

Thus had Alabama absorbed much of Petersburg. Other Petersburgers drifting away levied further on the life of the town. One moving away in 1831 “regretted leaving very much but his interest compelled him to go,” and a young lady of Petersburg, reporting this fact, added, “Petersburg is duller of course now than ever, since Mr. Turnbull and Dr. Johnson have left.”

The biggest news to reach the town since Lee’s surrender at Appomattox in April, 1865, came the following May 3. On the verge of death itself, Petersburg now saw the last dying grasp of the Southern Confederacy, as Jefferson Davis and those accompanying him fleeing southward crossed the Savannah River on a pontoon bridge a short distance below town. Judah P. Benjamin, a member of Davis’ Cabinet, left the party here, after throwing the Great Seal of the Confederacy into the river and thereafter traveling in a hack disguised as a French gentleman. To add to the drama after Davis had left, a detachment of Federal troops intercepted at the pontoon bridge some Confederate cavalrymen under Col. George G. Dibrell, who had been accompanying the
fleeing President, and forced their surrender—but not before they had received a distribution of some of the Confederate treasure which they had been guarding on the retreat. As Col. Basil W. Duke remembered the occasion about twenty years later, "At Savannah river all of the silver coin, amounting, to the best of my recollection, to some $105,000, was paid out to the troops composing the escort and to paroled Confederate soldiers who were present." The remainder of the treasure, amounting to about $300,000 in gold, was seized a few miles west of Petersburg by a motley band, never certainly identified but thought to have been made up principally of former Confederate soldiers. Years later a few old cannon were still lying around in the vicinity of Petersburg as a reminder of the war that nearly reached that place; children who knew not their significance played marbles around them.

Long before the Civil War, gazetteers and geography books began singing dirges over Petersburg. In 1827 Adiel Sherwood referred to it as "once a large and flourishing village and the great depot for the Tobacco raised in the country North, and thence floated to Augusta." And mentioning its two rivals, Lisbon and Vienna, he said further, "these little towns have dwindled almost to nothing." George White, a Georgia historian, visited Petersburg in 1849, or perhaps a year or two earlier, and wrote, "This was once among the most prosperous towns in Georgia; but it is now in a state of dilapidation. A feeling of melancholy and loneliness is experienced by the visitor when he remembers what the town was in former days." A national gazetteer called it in 1854 "a decayed post-town . . . once an important place. It now has only 3 families." The post office was discontinued in 1855.

The melancholy note which White struck was echoed in accounts by almost every other person who visited the place or who wrote about it without the added pathos instilled by a sight of the spot. It was especially a poignant experience for those whose ancestors had once helped to add to the brilliance of the community. A son of Moses Waddel wrote, "A visit to the spot once occupied by these towns [Petersburg, Lisbon, and Vienna] at a later period of his life filled him with melancholy emotions, as all that once made them so flourishing and pleasant is obliterated by the restless sweep of time and change, and buried by desolation and ruin." An Alabaman thinking of a visit by some descendant of a former Petersburg family, who by leaving had helped to hasten the town's decay, remarked that in "seeking to find 'where the home of his
forefathers stood,' would have to employ a guide to show him the site of the ruined town.”

Charles C. Jones, Jr., a historian who lived in Augusta, always attracted by the sad fate of dead towns, must have visited the place about 1878, when he wrote that “now sunken wells and the mounds of fallen chimneys are all that attest the former existence of the town. Its corporate limits are wholly included within the confines of one well-ordered plantation; and extensive fields of corn and cotton have obliterated traces of warehouse, shop, town-hall, church, and dwelling.” Seven years later it seemed that the plantation was not so “well-ordered,” to a person who described the spot as “a wilderness of cotton-wood, broomsedge, and blackberry bushes, with not even a solitary chimney to mark the spot where once it stood.”

A newspaper correspondent visiting there in 1888 “found it a very difficult matter to glean authentic information in regard to the early history of the town, for the oldest citizens can only remember the place after its desertion, and when only a few scattered families inhabited it. . . . What was once the flourishing city of Petersburg is now occupied by Captain Cade as a cotton field and stock farm. Lands that once sold by the foot, and streets that were thronged by busy tradesmen, are now given over to the more peaceful and quiet pursuits of agriculture. Had the curse of God fallen upon this town, its obliteration from the face of the earth could not have been more complete.” Also he visited the old town graveyard whose atmosphere cast even a greater spell upon him. “There is not a sadder sight on earth than a discarded graveyard,” he continued; “The vaults fallen in, the stately marble shafts toppling over, and the monuments and tombstones wrenched as if by some convulsion of nature.” It was now “a dense and almost impenetrable thicket of vines and all manner of shrubbery, that have been allowed to run wild.”

A cause of Petersburg’s decline first mentioned by Sherwood in 1827 and restated by almost every writer thereafter was the coming of cotton, which supplanted tobacco as a principal crop. Petersburg had grown up as an inspection point for tobacco; cotton needed no inspection in any given place—wherever it was sold a sample was ripped out of each bale. Cotton was “thrown upon Boats all along the river without being inspected,” Sherwood wrote. Another cause was disease brought on by the damp location and stagnant water allowed to stand in cellars. This sickness was most likely malaria, as has been diagnosed by some writ-
but certainly not yellow fever, which some traditions have pronounced it to have been, and not one grand pestilence of it which drove the survivors away all at once. The yellow fever theory was that Petersburg had no machinery to pump water from cellars and therefore it remained to stagnate, causing "an epidemic of yellow fever. Some died, many fled from the town, the stores and houses fell into decay, and today [1902] broad fields of cotton and corn mark the place where the Savannah and Broad rivers flow together."  

Another theory, as stated by a visitor in 1888, held that "Fulton's invention of the steam boat sounded its death knell." By 1816 steamboats were plying up the Savannah to Augusta, but beyond that point they were not practicable, being stopped by the rapids there and by shoals and other obstructions on up the river to Petersburg. Augusta thus supplanted Petersburg as the center of trade for upper Georgia and South Carolina. Steam applied to land transportation was a most potent cause of Petersburg's final extinction. Augusta's advantage over Petersburg was further enhanced when the Charleston and Hamburg Railroad reached the opposite side of the Savannah in 1833. The river strategy of Petersburg's location in 1786 was its undoing by this time. Rivers were now hazards to railroad construction and never before Petersburg's death did a railroad come within seventy-five miles of the place.

And finally, both as cause and effect, there was the departure of Petersburg's most enterprising citizens, beginning in 1810, when the Popes and the Walkers went to Alabama, followed by the Taits, the Bibbs, the Watkinses, the Thompasons, the Olivers, and many others—many to Mississippi, to Tennessee, and to beckoning lands of promise in Georgia. For the most part, they had caught the "Western Fever" that powerful urge among the inhabitants of the Eastern seaboard states, which led them not only to the Mississippi River but finally all the way across the continent to the Pacific Ocean.

Petersburg and its environs represented only the lower part of the Broad River Valley. Those Virginians who had appropriated the Valley farther up, and especially the Goose Pond region, discovered also that the course of empire led westward and they were caught in the movement as early as were the Petersburgers. They left behind a region soon to be overgrown with broomsedge and blackberry briars, as pathetic reminders of past glory. A traveler passing through the Goose Pond section declared that it was "the
most perfect picture of desolation I have ever seen. For miles not a sign of improvement is to be seen, while a silence as profound as that which reigns over the great desert suggests that the Curse of God must rest over the land.”

A pathetic and more detailed picture of this region came from the pen of a newspaper editor who visited it in 1878: “the desolate wilds of Lower Goose-Pond—a section of country that was once the Eden of Georgia, but since the late war has been given over to decay and Bermuda grass. The wealthy land-owners have moved to a more congenial clime, and their places are filled by vagrant blacks or a thriftless class of whites. Occasionally you see an antiquated old nabob, who in years gone by owned and worked a large number of slaves and was then a leading spirit of his homestead, who still, through affection for his old homestead, or dire poverty, clings to the old farm, and gleans a meagre subsistence by renting patches of land here and there on his place to tenants. It is a sad thing to think that in a few years, at most, even these, the last sad relict of Goose-Pond’s ancient grandeur, will have passed away. The former stately mansions, whose hospitable doors were ever open, have either succumbed to the torch of the incendiary, or, like their owners, are fast crumbling to decay. But even in this dilapidation they present a sad, but interesting study, and it is an easy matter for the stranger to read in them the grand past of this fine old section.”

There was a fine barn on one of the vacant plantations, and at the end of the war “a party of thieves went for it and actually tore down and carried off the building—a portion of its timbers being utilized in building a negro church and the remainder going into an illicit still-house.” In addition to “moonshine” whiskey the chief products of the region were “bench-legged ice, blue collards and tow-headed children, with a sprinkling of sorghum and pumpkins,” the latter piled up in yards for sale at two and a half cents each. In the fall, persimmon beer was “the strongest beverage used by the Gooseponders. They have its manufacture down to a science and use it in inordinate quantities.” Another visitor found that “that section of country seems to have sunk at one time into a sort of half barbaric condition, which rendered it almost obnoxious to its more civilized neighbors.”

One other product which this deserted region produced was spooks and haunts, which both Negroes and whites felt sure they saw. As a person might be riding on horseback or in a buggy down one of the roads, the “thing” would be seen darting and
dodging ahead until suddenly it disappeared into one of those plantation burial grounds, which the departing grandees had to leave behind.54

Not being grouped together as were the Petersburgers, who had their own central graveyard, these Virginia planters developed their separate burial grounds, erected imposing monuments or placed impressive marble slabs over graves, and enclosed the whole with attractive metal fences or brick or stone walls. In the course of time, nature crept in upon these plots and scattered over them bramble briars and pine saplings which grew into trees to push over some imposing monument, and at the same time allowing to run riot those mourning tokens of periwinkle, English ivy, and Virginia creeper, interspersed with untrimmed cedars. The Mica-jah McGehee cemetery was surmounted by a monument eight feet high, enclosed by a metal fence, which by the twentieth century had been broken down by a fallen tree. The Gilmer graveyard had suffered a sadder fate. A stone's throw from the old 1800-built homestead, this plot, unprotected by any enclosure, was included in a cow pasture to be trampled upon by grazing bovines and rooting swine, desecrating, overturning, and breaking the gravestones. In the midst of a cultivated field stood a little wilderness of cedars and chinaberries, shading several marble slabs overgrown with brambles. Under one rested a wife of General George Mathews; under another, the wife of the General's son, Charles L. Mathews. In the Huff graveyard were the remains of Richard Huff without benefit of a marker, though at one time he had owned many acres of land and enough slaves to tend them. Nearby were buried many of those slaves who did not choose to accept his offer of freedom and transportation to Liberia.55 These and others were precious possessions which the Virginians could not take with them to Alabama, Mississippi, and even beyond.

The fundamental reason for the migration of the Gilmers, the Mathewses, the Lewises, the McGehees, and others was the opening of the fertile cotton lands to the westward and the soil exhaustion of the tobacco lands of Georgia. Of the five principal towns in the Broad River Valley, only Petersburg disappeared completely. Lexington, being the chief center of the Goose Pond Virginians and deserted by them, continued to live an arrested existence, whose growth was further stunted by the removal from Oglethorpe County of the Barrows, the Cobbs, the Crawfords, the Lumpkins, the Phinizys, the Upsons, and other prominent families, who went to other parts of Georgia. Furthermore, Francis
Meson, an early Lexington merchant, endowed the local academy with much of the land on which Lexington would have grown greater, thereby removed it from fee simple sale.

The other towns—Washington, Elberton, and Lincolnton—had not depended for their growth on those two special groups of Broad River Valley people, the Petersburgers and the Goose Pond Virginians; therefore, their departure was not a devastation to these towns and to the rest of the Valley.

After these migrations there was still life left in the old land, and by the twentieth century it was coming back as resplendent as it had ever been a century previously, but in a changed form. Well-kept plantations and cattle pastures and attractive residences were replacing the desolation which followed the migration of the Virginians. A son of Wilkes County, James Monroe Smith, of Maryland extraction, moved across Broad River into Oglethorpe County, and by the time of his death in 1915 he had become a millionaire by farming and stock-raising and processing the products therefrom.

For Petersburg there was no return, inasmuch as by the mid-twentieth century the waters of the Savannah and Broad rivers had been merged by the Clark Hill Dam into a vast lake which put the site of the old town under fifty feet of water. The living Petersburgers had long since moved away; the remains of those who slept in the old graveyard were taken to the old cemetery of Bethlehem Methodist Church, up on high ground a few miles away, where Bishop Asbury had once preached—there to await the sound of Gabriel’s horn.