GEORGIA'S PLANTING PRELATE

By Hubert B. Owens

Recorded information concerning landscape gardening in Georgia and the lower South during the first half of the nineteenth century is rare. The same is true, to a lesser degree, with horticulture. It is the purpose of this booklet to bring to light a little known address dealing with these subjects, which was delivered before the Southern Central Agricultural Society in Macon, Georgia, in 1851. This address gives a good picture of the horticultural and ornamental gardening situation in Georgia at that time. It also points out Georgia's opportunities and needs in the development of commercial horticulture, and reveals the unusual possibilities afforded by the climate for creating beautiful country seats and gardens. The address is especially interesting today because of the unprecedented activity in landscaping private and public grounds during the past few years, and in Victory Gardens since the beginning of World War II. It is not only interesting for these reasons, but also because of the man who wrote and delivered it.

Strange to relate, the author of this dissertation was neither a landscape gardener nor horticulturist by profession, nor was he a planter whose interests were wholly absorbed by the agricultural pursuits of the day. Instead, he was first of all a clergyman, and in addition, was an educator, a brilliant scholar of the arts and sciences, a writer, a widely known and much sought after orator, and today is...
regarded as one of the great Southern gentlemen of the ante-bellum period. The person to whom I refer is the Right Reverend Stephen Elliott, the first Bishop of the Episcopal Church in Georgia.

When one becomes acquainted with Stephen Elliott’s background, education, and duties as first Episcopal Bishop of Georgia, it is not difficult to comprehend his profound interest in landscape gardening and horticulture. He was also interested in other fields of endeavor, all of which aimed at the general improvement of Georgia; but this treatise deals mainly with his convictions regarding horticulture and landscape gardening.

Stephen Elliott was born in Beaufort, South Carolina, August 31, 1806. His father, Stephen Elliott, was a widely known editor of two volumes on botany, founder and co-editor of *The Southern Review*, and a founder and president of the Bank of South Carolina. He also helped found the Medical College of South Carolina, and became its first professor of Botany and Natural History. In 1796 he married Esther Habersham, a member of one of Georgia’s best known families. The future Bishop claimed the states of both of his parents as his own, and always evinced a deep interest in the affairs of Georgia and South Carolina.

Stephen was given a thorough education. In 1812 his parents moved to Charleston where he studied at a private school. At the age of sixteen he entered the sophomore class at Harvard University. The next year, because his father wanted him to complete his college training in his native state, Elliott transferred to South Carolina College and graduated in 1825 with third honors. He then studied law under Mr. James L. Petigrew, one of the foremost lawyers of the South, and helped in editing *The Southern Review*.

Stephen Elliott was admitted to the bar in 1827, and after practicing law in Charleston a few years, moved to Beaufort, South Carolina. The charm, refinement, and culture of this secluded coastal town appealed deeply to him and he came to love the people of the community. In the midst of a gay and successful life in Beaufort, he was
caught up by the challenge of the new religious awakening sweeping the country, and it was here in 1832 that he made the decision to enter the ministry.

He was ordained a deacon three years later and after officiating for a brief period as minister in charge of the parish at Wilton, South Carolina, was elected chaplain and professor of Sacred Literature and Christian Evidences at South Carolina College. In this position he exerted a great influence on the student body, while his reputation for scholarship and eloquence became widespread. He was ordained a priest in 1836.

Elliott filled the post of professor and chaplain at this institution for five years. In 1840, at the age of thirty-three, he was elected first Bishop of Georgia and was consecrated Bishop at Christ Church, Savannah, on the 28th of February, 1841. To this new Diocese of Georgia he brought the prestige of his name and a missionary zeal.

The first several decades after the War of the Revolution was a rather barren period for the Episcopal Church in Georgia. This was due, in part, to the association in the minds of the public of the Episcopal Church with the Church of England, at a time when feeling was strong against Great Britain both because of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. Another contributing factor was that the Episcopal Church had no Bishop in Georgia at that time, and was loosely organized. When Stephen Elliott took over his duties as Bishop of Georgia there were only six active congregations in the State—Christ Church, Savannah; St. Paul's, Augusta; Christ Church, St. Simons Island; Christ Church, Macon; Trinity Church, Columbus; and Grace Church, Clarksville.

Within the next ten years Bishop Elliott established Episcopal Churches in the following places: Darien, Savannah, Milledgeville, Marietta, Glynn County, Effingham County, Athens, Rome, Etowah Valley, Atlanta, Talbotton, St. Marys, Augusta, Madison, and Montpelier. In addition to his regular visits to the churches in these places, he also made missionary trips to Lexington, Washington, the Ogeechee
River section, Albany, and other scattered points in the State. This was the period when "cotton was king" and the Georgia planters were prosperous, but the remarkable success in organizing and establishing the Episcopal Church in Georgia seems to have been due almost entirely to the inspired ability and personality of this one man.

It was natural that Elliott would be interested in education. Coming directly from his professorship at South Carolina College to Georgia in 1841, to find that the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians had, in the 1830's, established colleges at Penfield, Covington, and Milledgeville, respectively, he doubtless felt it his duty to promote an institution of higher learning for Episcopalians. The first year he took over his duties as Bishop, he started the Georgia Episcopal Institute at Montpelier, located near Forsyth in Monroe County.

At the annual Convention of the Diocese in Macon in 1841, he reported, "The Christian liberality of G. B. Lamar, Esq., of Savannah, has enabled our Diocese to commence this work under the very best auspices. Having purchased the beautiful spot known as Montpelier Spring, he has presented it, with seven or eight hundred acres of land in its vicinity, to the Episcopal Church, vesting the property in a Board of Trustees, all of whom are members of our Church, the Bishop of the Diocese being, ex-officio, its President, with the injunction that the school shall be conducted upon Episcopal principles. The school has been organized by the election of the Rev. Charles Fey and his wife, late of Vermont, as its instructors, and of Samuel H. Fey, Esq., late of Savannah, as its Treasurer and Steward. Its growth must, at first, from its distinctive principles, be slow, but I trust that prudent management and strict discipline, and a religious spirit will win for it the support of the Christian Church."

In the beginning it was a school for both boys and girls, and in 1843 the Bishop engaged a graduate of Oxford University and a graduate of Leipzig University as teachers. It was his aim to provide the Diocese with the means for having their children educated according to Christian principles and the usual academic and classical attain-
ments. Despite discouraging obstacles and financial difficulties, he persevered in this venture for several years. It was his plan to establish a stock farm to be cultivated by a slave force owned by the institution. The income from the farm should pay all the expenses of the school except the salaries of the professors, which would be charged against the amount received from tuition.

It became necessary for him to assume personal control of the Institute in 1845, for which purpose he removed his residence from Savannah to Montpelier. Due to the difficulty in finding a suitable headmaster, the boys' school was abandoned. In December, 1852, he resigned his position at Montpelier, as he felt the school no longer needed his presence. He secured an experienced lady, Miss M. M. Buell, to take charge of the Institute, and he returned to Savannah to assume the rectorship of Christ Church, along with his duties as Bishop.

It was during his residence at Montpelier that he was invited to address the Southern Central Agricultural Society at the annual Fair in Macon, October 29, 1851. The fact that he was chosen to speak on the subject of horticulture is evidence that he was regarded as an authority in this field, all of which is amply substantiated by the content of his address. Although he was not a "professional," apparently he was better informed on horticulture and the art of gardening in general than any other person living in Georgia.

His duties as Bishop carried him to all parts of the state, for in 1844 Bishop Elliott traveled six thousand miles. This gave him the opportunity to meet the leading planters and to observe and discuss with them their accomplishments in all fields of agriculture. On occasions, between 1841 and the time he presented this scholarly lecture at Macon, his duties carried him to points outside of Georgia. On one such trip to New York in 1841, he visited schools at Flushing so as to enable him to manage the Institute at Montpelier more intelligently. June 15th, this same year, he preached before the Board of Missions at St. James Church, Philadelphia. At various times after 1843 he
visited Florida (which had no Bishop of its own until 1851) where he ministered to the parishes of Tallahassee, Monticello, Quincy, and Apalachicola. In his report to the 29th Annual Convention of the Diocese, held at Trinity Church, Columbus, in May 1851, he tells of a meeting of the Council of Bishops which he attended in Cincinnati on October 1, 1850. Such trips to other sections of the country gave him the opportunity to become acquainted with the state of horticulture and landscape gardening in these places, and provided a basis for comparative statements made in his address.

The Bishop's speech shows that he read the current agricultural periodicals of the day and that he was well acquainted with the writings of Andrew J. Downing of Newburgh, New York, the leading authority on landscape gardening and horticulture in the United States between 1841 and 1851. Downing, who is regarded as the father of landscape architecture in America, wrote a number of books which dealt with the art of landscape gardening, rural architecture, etc., and edited a magazine entitled The Horticulturist, during the first decade of Elliott's bishopric. Downing's most famous book, A Treatise on Landscape Gardening, was published in 1841. This book carried the imposing sub-title, "... Adapted to North America; with a view to the improvement of country residences, comprising historical notices and general principles of the art, directions for laying out grounds and arranging plantations, the description and cultivation of hardy trees, decorative accompaniments of the house and grounds, the formation of pieces of artificial water, flower gardens, etc., with remarks on rural architecture." It was the first book by an American written on this subject, and it attained instant popularity both here and abroad. This book and all of Downing's works were widely read in the South, as well as other parts of the country, and the Bishop's address indicates that he was strongly influenced by Downing's writings.

The references to Montpelier in his speech reveal that Elliott also put into practice his own ideas regarding agriculture, floriculture,
pomology, gardening, and architecture. Due to financial difficulties, the church discontinued its management of Montpelier Institute, and it went into private hands a few years after Bishop Elliott delivered his address at the Fair in Macon. Although little remains today to suggest the original layout, it must have been a delightful place in its time. White's *Historical Collections of Georgia*, published in 1849, contains the following account of the Institute:

"The Episcopal Church is chiefly indebted to the liberality of G. B. Lamar, Esq., formerly of the city of Savannah, for this invaluable seminary.

"This school is located in Monroe county, about seventeen miles from Macon, fourteen from Forsyth, and six from the Macon and Western Railroad. Its advantages are not surpassed by those of any school in the United States. Until the property was purchased by Mr. Lamar, it was a favourite resort for invalids, who were attracted by its medicinal springs, healthful climate, and delightful temperature. Its natural beauties, which are rarely equalled, have been improved with the finest taste. The visitor needs only to see its extensive lawn, majestic groves, shady walks, beautiful gardens, and spacious buildings, to be in love with the spot. In addition to this, it is the permanent residence of the bishop of the diocese, a gentleman long distinguished for devoted piety and extensive literary attainments. His large and well selected library affords an inexhaustible source of entertainment and knowledge to the pupils. The course of instruction is thorough and complete; embracing every item that can contribute to fit a lady for the first stations in society. Its teachers are persons of high character and first rate abilities. They have been procured at great expense in Europe and America. It may be truly said that in this school true religion, useful learning, and polished refinement are inseparably united. The number of pupils varies from sixty to ninety. The applicants have generally been more than could be accommodated."

In the *Transactions of the Southern Central Agricultural Society*, published in 1852, are detailed lists of premium winners at the State
Fair staged by this organization in Macon in 1851. These lists show that people from all parts of Georgia entered exhibits in the following classes: Agricultural Products; Domestic Manufactures; Machinery; Livestock; Poultry; Furniture; Silk Manufactures; Horticulture; Floriculture; Painting; Printing, Drawing and Drafting; Needle, Shell and Wax Work; and Household Department. This publication includes a copy of Bishop Elliott's address delivered at the Fair and discloses the fact that he also entered exhibits. The judges on Horticulture awarded him a silver cup for the best and greatest variety of vegetables raised by one individual. Following is a report of the judges on Floriculture:

"The Committee on Floriculture beg leave to offer the following Report:

"That the limited time allowed for the inspection of the rare and beautiful specimens of green-house plants exhibited, did not permit so entire an examination as their merits deserved; and where all presented such high claims to meritorious mention, they can only select a few for particular notice. In the professional list, they cannot forbear to particularize Eriobotrina Japonica, Crinum Amabile, Torenia Asiatica, Melocactus Communis, Araucaria Brasilensis, from the collection of Bishop Elliott, at Montpelier, as excellent, and some magnificent specimens of their respective genera. They accordingly award—

IN THE PROFESSIONAL LIST

Rt. Rev. Bishop Elliott, of Montpelier, for the greatest variety and quantity of flowers, a Silver Cup worth $5.00.

Robert Nelson, for the greatest variety and quantity of Dahlias, a premium of $2.00.

Robert Nelson, for the greatest variety and quantity of Roses, a premium of $2.00."

Bishop Elliott's display of vegetables is included on the non-professional list, but the committee of judges on Floriculture classed him
as a professional. This was doubtless due to the facilities of the Montpelier Institute at his disposal for growing green-house plants, shrubs, roses, flowers, etc., and also the services of two gardeners, Mr. Patrick Fleming and Mr. Carolan.

A few years after leaving Montpelier, Bishop Elliott became identified with another educational enterprise. He, together with Bishop James Hervey Otey, of Tennessee, and Bishop Leonidas Polk, of Louisiana, founded the University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee, the cornerstone of which was laid October 10, 1860. Moultrie Guerry in *Men Who Made Sewanee* says:

"Bishop Polk's devoted friend and idol was Stephen Elliott. 'Twin brothers,' they were called because of their age, congeniality, and partnership in founding the University of the South. In Elliott, Polk saw the cultural ideal for the University: he was a scholar in things scientific and literary, and a thinker ahead of his day. Polk eagerly enlisted Elliott's influence, which was great indeed both within and without the Church, and his matchless pen, which was eloquent in the cause of education and which has left its tracing in the early documents of the Founders."

Elliott was particularly helpful in serving as a commissioner of endowment and in choosing a suitable location for the University on the Cumberland plateau in Tennessee. Here, again, we find evidence of his convictions on landscape gardening, for, in addition to his helping choose a beautiful site for the University, he was largely responsible for securing a landscape plan to be used for the location of buildings and in developing the grounds of the campus.

For this purpose, Bishop John Henry Hopkins, of Vermont, a close personal friend of Elliott's, adept at landscape gardening, was chosen. His abilities even exceeded those of the Georgia Bishop in this particular field. Because of early training in drawing, painting, and engineering, he was able to draw professional plans. George R. Fairbanks, in his *History of the University of the South* says:

"Bishop Hopkins, of Vermont, among his other extraordinary and
multiform accomplishments was distinguished for his architectural skill and refined taste in landscape gardening."

He was invited to come to Sewanee and prepare a plan for the campus. His great regard for Bishop Elliott and Bishop Polk, his sympathy with the great work they were undertaking, and his desire to earn some money to further an educational project in his own diocese, led him to accept the invitation. He spent three happy but laborious months there during the winter of 1859-1860, during which time he made a careful study of the topography and general features of the ground, "having the advantage of being on the mountain after the leaves had fallen, so that the general lay of the land could be more readily observed." At Christmas time that year, Bishop Elliott made a trip to Sewanee to confer with Hopkins.

An account of Bishop Hopkins' stay at Sewanee written by one of his sons states that Bishop Hopkins was impressed with finding sixty natural springs on the property and that "he was in raptures, too, with the place in other respects. All along the outskirts of the elevated plateau he found beautiful views of the valley and distant mountains; while the interior was filled with noble trees, the oak, hickory, walnut, chestnut, tulip tree, etc., and would constitute, when properly improved, the finest park one could desire. 'If Lake Champlain could be thrown in,' Bishop Hopkins remarked, 'it would be absolute perfection.' " During his three months' sojourn, Bishop Hopkins prepared maps of roads and avenues, plans for buildings, chose sites for buildings, and made several water-color sketches of striking views of Sewanee. Several of these drawings and sketches were destroyed at the time of the War Between the States.

Stephen Elliott was the senior Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the South during the War Between the States. His friendship with Bishop Hopkins, who was the presiding Bishop of the Church in the entire United States, and his moderation and good sense were great assets toward the amicable union of the churches North and South, which was consummated soon after hostilities ceased.
On December 21, 1866, Bishop Elliott died suddenly at his home in Savannah. His last sermon was preached the day before at Montpelier, the scene of his hopes and endeavors. He was only sixty-one years old, but had served as Bishop of Georgia for more than twenty-five years.

A few years before his death Bishop Elliott had been asked to consecrate an Episcopal church for colored people in Savannah named St. Stephen's, not for the first Christian martyr, as he supposed, but for himself. He was the St. Stephen this colored congregation knew and loved first hand. They looked up to him as their finest, wisest and noblest friend. In a memoir of the late Bishop written by Thomas A. Hanckel in 1867, a few months after Elliott's death, is the following account:

"At his burial they gave a touching and beautiful evidence of the love and reverence they bore him. The colored vestry of St. Stephen's asked to have the honor of carrying him to the grave; and it was granted to them. It did honor to them and to their Bishop. Considering the peculiar and momentous issues of the time, we think it was the grandest and most instructive spectacle, amidst all the solemn, mournful and agitating ceremonies of the day, on which the city of Savannah was hushed to listen to the footfalls of those who thus bore their Bishop to the tomb."

Edgar Legare Pennington, in an article written for the Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church, states:

"He was a man of broad and varied interests: a preacher whose gifts were recognized throughout the Episcopal communion, a founder of institutions of higher learning, the president of the Georgia Historical Society. Bishop Elliott was one of the most prominent advocates of the right of the negro to enlightenment and justice; and he showed how a southern bishop, of patrician ancestry, dealt with the problem of slavery; his example suggests that when the cataclysm occurred, the slavery issue may well have been on its way to a peaceful solution."
"In a study of Stephen Elliott, we are able to trace the evolution of the culture of the newer South. Around him clustered movements which gradually moulded a frontier state into a settled one. The Georgia which he first knew was largely the Georgia of the old communities—Savannah, Augusta, and the towns along the Atlantic seaboard; during his lifetime the other sections were rapidly filled by white settlers from another stock, who replaced the red man, and who were at work developing new plantations and industries and laying foundations for a populous section."