

THE MERRY WIDOW OF GEORGETOWN;
OR
THE FIRE STORY

George Cuttino
Candler Professor Emeritus of
Medieval History
Emory University

Thomas Peter Smith was born on 18 November 1814 in Georgetown, SC. He lived until 15 January 1903 and left behind written recollections of various events in his life.¹ His mother was Elizabeth Cuttino (1773-1827), the second child of William Cuttino (1765-1817). One of Elizabeth's younger brothers was Peter Cuttino (1786-1833), who married Elizabeth Mary Gaillard (1786-1859) and had five daughters. Our story concerns the eldest, Mary Catherine, born 21 May 1811; but let Thomas Peter Smith tell it in his own words and even in his occasionally quaint spelling:

A few years before I left Georgetown, an occurrence took place of an alarming and diabolical nature, which profoundly moved the whole community. It was this, an attempt by some malicious or envious person to destroy the family of my Uncle, Petter Cuttino (self, wife and 5 d[ughters]) by burning down his dwellings in the night.

Three different attempts were made to destroy the family by fire. The first, in the dead hours of the night, his home in town was burned--entirely consumed; the family barely escaping--this was nothing uncommon that a man's house should unexpectedly be destroyed by fire at night. They then went into the County to a small plantation on Sampit owned by him, Peter, and his brother, Henry Cuttino [1794-1856], where they had a house furnished, and where, not expecting danger, for they were not conscious of having an enemy (Peter Cuttino was most highly esteemed by everybody in Geo[rge]town) they expected to remain in quiet, until arrangement could be made for returning to Town. But the fiend followed him there, and by hiered servants repeated the act. About 2 or 3 nights after family going into the County thair home there was burned, all lost except the lives of the family. Then they had to return to town--fortunately his brother Henry had a house in town and unoccupied. To this Peter Cuttino and family went, but as before, they had been there only a few days when this attempt 3rd time was again

made to set fire. This time not so late in the night and family more suspicious and watchful, one of the employed agents was caught in the act.

The fellow caught in the act of setting fire was the house servant of Peter Cuttino, his confederate was not seen at the time (though he was or might have been on the lot). This boy implicated as his coadjutor, the servant of a Widow lady of the town, who he said was with him and aided or assisted in the other acts of burning, first in town and in the County. He stated that the diabolical act was instigated and they (the two men) were employed by the Widow referred to above, to accomplish the deed. Negroes, Slaves were not at that time allowed to go on the stand to testify when a white person was concerned. But this boy must have been closely examined to get at any facts connected with the case. He asserted without variation from first to last that he and the other man did try [to] destroy this family as a means of accomplishing the death of one member, the eldest daughter.

The two Negroes were duly tried in court and convicted and sentenced--the boy caught in the act to be hanged and the other servant of the Widow, to be banished from the state. I witnessed the hanging, which took place in 'Potters field', on the edge of town. There were a large crowd present. The boy--I say boy, he was not fully grown at 19-20--talked freely at the gallows, at times alluding to the 'handsome Widow'. About his last words were 'O that wretched Widow, she has brought me to this.' I can't recall the year that this happened. I must have been 14-15. A very short time after my coming to Cha[rle]ston I met on the streets the fellow that had been ordered to be banished from the State.

Now all this created considerable alarm and excitement, specially after the second attempt to destroy this family, though even after the first many had suspicion of foul play. Great sympathy was manifested of the community. suspicions were aroused and rumors and reports circulated freely through the town. Most of which was believed by many, if not a majority of the people. The gist of it was 'Mary, the daughter of P[eter] C[uttino], was engaged to be married to A[nthony] W[hite] Dozier a handsome and prominent young lawyer of Georgetown, a junior partner of the late husband of the young Widow. The Widow was

greatly enamored with the young lawyer and disappointment incited the desire and effort to destroy the life of the affianced, that she being out of the way, his affection would be tranfered.'

This Gothic vignette might be dismissed as another fascinating but incredible instance of a proverbial skeleton in the family closet were it not for the fact that there is another, independent account, even more graphic and even more Gothic. Thomas Peter had another first cousin, Anna Susan Cuttino McNulty (1818-1900), third daughter of Peter Cuttino. Her granddaughter, Edith Lester Harbin (1876-1960), remembered her "as a good looking dignified old lady with two grey curls on each side of her face, held in place by little combs. She was a marvelous story teller and old and young enjoyed listening to her. One story we never got tired of hearing was 'The Fire Story.' This sounds fantastic but is absolutely true. I can't tell it in detail as Grandma did, but here is a brief outline:"

Anthony Dozier was a brilliant and handsome man, and a Mrs. Sam [*recte* John]² Porter was in love with him. He married a lovely young lady, Esther Gaillard, and when they returned from their wedding trip Mrs. Porter gave a big party for them, and some time during the evening proposed a toast to the bride and handed her a glass of wine already poured up. In fact, she had several poured up, but handed Esther hers first. It was poisoned and she died that night.

Esther Berresford Gaillard, daughter of William and Esther (Barton) Gaillard, was born on 6 July 1809. She married Anthony White Dozier on 18 March 1828, died in Georgetown on 29 April 1828, and is buried at Old St. James's Church (Old Chapel of East on Echaw Creek). Besides the vital facts, her tombstone reads:

Can we weep too much, shall time e'er end
Our mourning for so dear a friend,
Youthful and fair like the flowers,
Bloomed to Grace a few Transient hours.

She and Mary Catherine Cuttino were first cousins, the common ancestors being Charles and Ann (DuPré) Gaillard.³ The Fire Story continues:

Later Anthony was to marry Mary Cuttino

(Grandma's oldest sister) and Mrs. Porter planned to kill her. She bribed a not too bright slave who was a house servant to set fire to the Peter Cuttino town house. He feared the family would be burned and awakened them just before the stairs fell in. They lost practically everything in it. (Ashes of the burned house were sifted to find melted silver. The recovered silver was made into tableware by the Wilmot Silversmiths. Some of it is now in the possession of Susie McNulty [Anna Susan (1879-1962) of Chattanooga].)⁴

In its issue of 18 November 1829, the *Winyaw Intelligencer* put it thus:

On Sunday night last [15 November] our citizens were aroused by a cry of fire when it was discovered that the dwelling of Capt. PETER CUTTINO was enveloped in flames, which, with the adjoining house, owned by Capt. C., together with the outbuildings of each, were, in a short time, reduced to ashes. The wind was, fortunately, light, or many other houses must have been destroyed. A house in Screven street, owned by Col. WILLIAM ALSTON and the stable of ROBERT HERIOT, Esq. took fire from the sparks, but the flames were soon extinguished. We are sorry to add, that Capt. CUTTINO has lost his furniture--not even the clothing of his family was saved.

Mrs. Harbin continues: "The family then went to the plantation and that was also fired. Grandma was only a girl but she remembered everything, especially the smell of the meat burning in the smoke house."

Again the *Intelligencer*, issue of 28 November 1829:

It is with feelings of no ordinary nature that we announce the destruction by fire of the dwelling house of Capt. P. CUTTINO, on Sampit, which took place on the morning of the 26th. Scarcely a fortnight has elapsed since this unfortunate and worthy gentleman lost his town house, together with an adjacent building from the same cause. In both instances the family narrowly escaped with their lives. Capt. C. lost his furniture in both conflagrations, and every thing of value.

Mrs. Harbin concludes:

Peter Cuttino, in looking around for trace or evidence of who set the fire, recognized the foot print of the bribed slave, as he had a lame foot. The Negro then confessed everything, and was sentenced to be hung. Peter went to Columbia and did everything in his power to save the boy, (as he did not think he was really responsible) but to no avail.⁵ Then no Negro's word was taken against a white person's, and as Mrs. Porter was related to some very prominent people nothing was done about it. Anthony finally married Mary and they were the ones who later moved to California.⁶

Mary Catherine Cuttino (1811-1873) married Anthony White Dozier (1801-1870) on 5 December 1829. They had thirteen children. He was the son of John and Lydia (White) Dozier of Black Mingo, South Carolina. A. W. Dozier attended Mt. Zion Institute in Winnsboro, South Carolina, afterwards read law and was admitted to the South Carolina bar in 1823. He served as intendant of Georgetown in 1830 and 1831 and again in 1834 and 1835. While intendant he was elected to membership in the Winyah Indigo Society, of which Peter Cuttino was already a member. He served in the South Carolina House of Representatives from Prince George's Parish, Winyah, in 1829-30 and in 1832-34, was elected to represent Williamsburg District in the Southern Rights Convention of 1852, and was a delegate to the Secession Convention from that district and signed the Ordinance of Secession.⁷ Not being able to stomach Reconstruction in South Carolina, Anthony and his entire family moved to California in 1869. He died at Rio Vista, California on 2 June 1870.

Georgetown did not grow between 1808 and 1830, so that there were approximately only 604 whites and 1,024 Negroes living there at the time of this little drama.⁸ It must have shaken the town to its very roots; and it must have been *the* topic of conversation in the community for years to come. Further, its effect was bound to have been exacerbated by the fact that between 1790 and 1830 the ratio of slave to white in the Georgetown district had risen from 59:40 to 89:9⁹ Anxiety about slave revolt and black arson increased accordingly. Thus the *Winyaw Intelligencer* remarked on 28 November 1829: "We rejoice to see that the Town Council have offered a large reward for the apprehension of the worthless individual who evidently set fire to Capt. Cuttino's buildings. We are authorized to say that an additional and larger reward will be contributed by the inhabitants of the town." The issues of 28 November and 5 December 1829 carried this notice: "\$1500 Reward. THE

CITIZENS of Georgetown will give a reward of ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS TO anyone who will prosecute and convict the Incendiary who destroyed Mr. P. Cuttino's Dwelling House in Georgetwon, or the other on Sampit, in addition to the reward of Five Hundred Dollars offered by the Town Council."¹⁰

As for the Widow Porter, surely the *literati* of Georgetown were quoting William Congreve to the effect that

Heav'n has no rage, like love to hatred turn'd
Nor Hell a fury, like a woman scorn'd.
--*The Mourning Bride*, III. viii

She was Esther Ann Toomer (1802-30 January 1888),¹¹ daughter of Anthony and Charlotte (Cheeseborough) Toomer, who on 16 December 1819 married John Porter, Jr. He was born in 1795 and died on 25 October 1828, six months lacking four days after the poisoning of Esther Gaillard Dozier and thirteen months and ten days before the marriage of Anthony White Dozier and Mary Catherine Cuttino. At the age of twenty-five Esther Toomer Porter was a widow with five children, the oldest a child of eight years and the youngest a baby of nine months. She and her children moved to New Haven, Connecticut in 1832, and her home became the constant resort of Southern students at Yale College. She returned to Georgetown two years later. Her only surviving son, the baby of nine months, Anthony Toomer Porter, D.D. (1828-1902), remembered her thus:

My mother was considered a strikingly handsome woman, and retained her beauty to over her seventieth year. She was highly educated, and of fascinating manners, with brilliant conversational powers. With these attractions, and the reputation of being a rich Southern widow, of course, she had many suitors. . . . Mother was a woman of considerable positiveness herself, and having the sole control and rearing of her children, it was not safe to intrude upon her prerogatives.¹²

Her grave in the cemetery of Prince George, Winyah, now probably contains only dust, or at the most a skeleton, but her Shade, having been refused entrance by the devils guarding Circle II (the Lustful) and circle VII (the Violent against Neighbors) of Dante's *Inferno*, is now permanently frozn, appropriately in the nude, in the ice of Circle IX among the other Traitors to their Guests.

NOTES

¹The originals are in the possession of Mrs. George A. Adams of Margate, Florida; a photocopy is in Special Collections, Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

²'Sam' is clearly impossible. The only Samuel Porter of Georgetown County listed in the census indexes for south Carolina belongs to the year 1800. A. W. Dozier was the junior law partner of John Porter, Jr. and is listed as an executor of his estate in a notice published in the 3 January 1829 issue of the *Winyah Intelligencer*, a newspaper printed in Georgetown between 1817 and 1835. The notice is dated 19 November 1828. See Brent H. Holcomb, *Marriage, Death, and Estate Notices from Georgetown, S.C. Newspapers 1791-1861* (Easley, SC, 1979), p. 84.

³I owe this information to the kindness of Mrs. Larry Spurgin of Carlsbad, California.

⁴Given to Susan G. Harvey of Rome, Georgia as a wedding present in 1959.

⁵"A boy named Charles, the property of Capt. Cuttino accused of firing the buildings of his master, was sentenced to be hung on Friday next by the Court of Majistrates [sic] and freeholders convened for his trial--several other slaves were taken up--but have all been discharged. The boy Charles the property of Capt. Cuttino, was executed yesterday the 11th inst. agreeable to his sentence." *Winyaw Intelligencer*, 9 and 12 December 1829.

⁶Original in possession of Mrs. Warren M. Gilbert of Rome, Georgia.

⁷John A. May and Joan R. Faunt, *South Carolina Secedes* (Columbia, 1960), pp. 136-7.

⁸George C. Rogers, Jr., *The History of Georgetown County, South Carolina* (Columbia, 1970), p. 218 n. 91.

⁹John Barnwell, *Love of Order; South Carolina's First Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill, 1982), Tables A-1, A-2, A-3.

¹⁰I owe the newspaer items to Mrs. Larry Spurgin of Carlsbad, California.

¹¹Mrs. Wright S. Skinner, Jr. kindly made available to me her tombstone records for Georgetown County, which will be published shortly.

¹²A Toomer Porter, *Led On! Step by Step* (New York, 1898; repr. Miami, 1969), pp. 6, 9.