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Biography of John Dorsett

Ric Brenner

From *The Savannah Biographies*, Volume 5. Lane
Library, Armstrong Atlantic State University,
Savannah, Georgia 31410-1997

John Dorsett came to Savannah from New York City sometime prior to July 1838. During his brief eight year residence in Savannah he became well known in both the social and business communities. At the time of his death he left a wife and three children, but the absence of a will has decreed that the value of his estate be lost in history.

The first mention of John Dorsett in Savannah comes in 1838. An article in the Georgian dated July of 1838 states:

...That the Augusta Steamship Company will receive delivery of a new ship, named Hamburg, on July 15th. The ship was constructed at the ship yards of Watts, Corwin and Dorsett and the public is invited to the launching. The Hamburg will service coastal Georgia and South Carolina¹...

In September of 1838, John Dorsett married Sarah R. Fletcher of Savannah in an Lutheran service conducted by Reverend Kealy of the Lutheran Church of the Ascension here in Savannah.²

The week after John and Sarah's wedding an announcement was placed in the Georgian that "the company of Watts, Corwin and Dorsett was being bought out by John Dorsett and his new partner, Henry Sagurs".³ This new-formed partnership was short lived. There appears to be no extant records of any ship building or repairs by this company and it too was dissolved according to the announcement in the Georgian dated March 21, 1839.⁴ The year 1839 also marked the birth of John and Sarah's first child, Maria.⁵

By 1840 John Dorsett had gone into business for himself.

He appears to have taken up the task of opening his own shipyard. An article dated April 29, 1841 shows John engaged in the construction of a new marine railroad and shipyard. The article states that "the facilities being constructed will be a major improvement to the port of Savannah and that this new facility will be able to handle ships from 100 to 600 tons, which is greater than any present facility in the area".⁶ The first public record of a ship brought in for repairs at the Dorsett yard was the 350 ton Victory under the command of a Captain Beck, but the article does not show the extent of those repairs.⁷

The Dorsetts at this time were residing in a home listed as 536 State Street according to the census taken in 1840. Present in the household were John, his wife Sarah, daughter Maria and one slave, a female between the ages of 10 to 24 years. All of their children were born in this house. The next daughter was named Sarah, who died during infancy and is buried by her father in Colonial Park Cemetery.⁸ Next was Frances (Fanny) born in 1844, followed by Charles H. born in 1846.⁹

On October 4, 1846, John Dorsett died at the age of 33 years. His funeral services were held at Solomns Lodge No. 1 YFM at 3:30 p.m. on October 6, 1846. There were also memorial services held at two other lodges of which he was a member.¹⁰ The extent of his estate is undeterminable due to the lack of a will or similar document. It is known that his wife Sarah lost their home to a carpenter when a bill of approximately \$100.00 was not paid.¹¹

Sarah Dorsett moved her family to 217 Price Street¹² where she lived until her death at the age of 88 on August 22, 1898.¹² The daughters also resided with their mother until their deaths. Maria died at the young age of 15 on September 14, 1854.¹³ Their other daughter, Fanny, went on to become a teacher at the

Chatham Academy for Girls and remained a teacher there until her death on August 26, 1924 at the age of 80 years.¹⁴ Neither of her daughters ever married. Fanny Dorsett did manage to build a reasonable estate which she left to her brother Charles H. Dorsett as her sole beneficiary.¹⁵

The longest surviving member of John Dorsett's family was his only son Charles who became quite prosperous and at one point was involved in a number of businesses. The City Directory of Savannah for 1888 shows Charles as Vice-President of RE&I Company, Real Estate Agent and Auctioneer. His office was listed at 156 Bay Street with his residence at 169 Gwinnett Street.¹⁶

Charles Dorsett lived in Savannah until his death on October 26, 1939 at 6:45 a.m.¹⁷ His funeral was held at his home and both the service and internment were private functions. Charles left no will, and as for the settling of his estate, there are no records to determine the net worth of the estate or its disposition.

END NOTES

1. The Georgian: July 14, 1838 pg. 2 col. 2
2. The Georgian: Sept 15, 1838 pg. 3 col. 4, Their marriage licence is on file at the Chatham County Court House, the licence number is 2063.
3. The Georgian: Sept 22, 1838 pg. 3 col. 4
4. The Georgian: Mar. 21, 1839 pg. 3 col. 2
5. The census records of 1850 show Maria to be 11 years old.
6. The Georgian: Apr. 29, 1841 pg. 2 col. 2
7. The Georgian: Aug. 10, 1841 pg. 2 col. 1
8. The Colonial Park Cemetery records
9. The census records of 1850 show Frances age 6 and Charles age 4
10. The Colonial Park Cemetery records. Also, the obituary of John Dorsett, The Georgian Oct. 6, 1846 pg. 2 col. 6
11. Research paper on the Dorsett home-534 E. State St.- on file at the Georgia Historical Society, Whitaker St., Sav. Ga. 31401
12. Laurel Grove Cemetery records.
13. Laurel Grove Cemetery records.
14. Laurel Grove Cemetery records. The City Directory of Savannah, 1925 p. 2
15. Fanny Dorsett's will. on file at the Chatham County Court House No. # 877
16. The City Directory of Savannah 1888 pg. 205
17. The Savannah Morning News Oct. 27, 1937 obituary colum Sec. B
City Directory of Savannah 1938 pg. 311

Bibliography

- ① The Georgian Newspaper Index and Microfilms on file at The SAVANNAH Public Library SAVANNAH, GA
- ② The Census of Georgia 1850. Index and Microfilms on file at The Georgia Historical Society, Whitaker St. SAVANNAH, GA.
- ③ The Colonial Park Cemetery Records, Colonial Park Cemetery SAVANNAH, GA. A copy is on file at the Georgia Historical Society SAVANNAH, GA., WPA Project workers Vol. 1
- ④ The research paper on 534 E. State Street SAVANNAH, GA. On file at the Georgia Historical Society SAVANNAH, GA.
- ⑤ The Groundskeeper's Records of Laurel Grove Cemetery. A copy is on file at the Georgia Historical Society, SAVANNAH, GA.
- ⑥ The City Directories of SAVANNAH Georgia. The most complete set is on file at The SAVANNAH Public Library, Bull Street SAVANNAH, Georgia.
- ⑦ FANNY Dorsett's will. On file at the Chatham County Court House (Probate Court) West Broad St. SAVANNAH Georgia.