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**A Biographical Study of  
Capt. Robert Flourney**

**By**

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History 445  
Dr. Roger Warlick  
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Capt. Robert Flourney (1763-1825)

Robert Flourney was born into an affluent family in Prince Edward County, Virginia in 1763. After moving to Georgia and fighting in the Revolutionary War, Robert amassed large land holdings in 11 counties. Mr. Flourney married Mary Willis Cobb and fathered 9 children. Robert served several terms in the Georgia legislature as a Representative and Senator. Capt. Flourney moved to Chatham County late in his life and purchased three plantations. Mr. Flourney separated from his wife and died in Lexington, Georgia.

### Family and Early Life

Robert Flourney born in 1763 is from Prince Edward County, Virginia and descended from French Heugenot stock.<sup>1</sup> Robert's grandfather, Jean Jaques is an immigrant from Flornay, France and his father, Mathews is the first generation American of the Flourney family born in Prince Edward County, Virginia.<sup>2</sup> Mathews marries Elizabeth Pryor Smith in 1755.<sup>3</sup> From all indications, Robert was from a fairly affluent family because the house the Flournoys live in is the first house in their region with window glass.<sup>4</sup> The Flournoys produce ten children with Robert as the oldest, followed by Samuel, David, John, John James, Francis, Mathews Junior, Patsy Caroline, Thomas, Lucy (who dies young), and finally, Elizabeth Julia.<sup>5</sup> Mathews moves his family to Kentucky around 1783 or 1784.<sup>6</sup> Robert and his brother Thomas do not move with the family and Robert actually leaves his family before Mathews moves to Kentucky.<sup>7</sup> Sources conflict concerning when Mathews leaves Virginia. Robert definitely leaves Virginia around 1780 because of his participation in the Revolutionary War which ends in 1783.<sup>8</sup> Thomas also appears to leave about the same time Robert does and follows him to Georgia.<sup>9</sup> Speculation and conjecture indicate that Robert may have left his family because of his desire to become his own man and participate in the Revolution.

Robert Flourney joins a Continental Army unit, the First Georgia.<sup>10</sup> Robert is a young man now at 17 when he enlists

as a private. Records do not indicate if Robert engages in actual combat during his service in the Revolution. Information concerning Robert's military activities is scarce. The title of Captain, which follows him throughout his life is based on his rank during his military service. Specifically, after the Revolution when his old unit is reactivated as the First Regiment of State Troops, he becomes the *company commander in 2nd Company*.<sup>11</sup> Robert does not appear to have risen to the captain's rank during the Revolution because he is mentioned as specifically being elected as the captain in 1787 when the First Regiment is reactivated for trouble with the Indians in Georgia.<sup>12</sup>

After the Revolution, Robert settles in Wilkes County in 1783.<sup>13</sup> In two years, Robert begins receiving many land grants for his military service in Wilkes and Richmond Counties.<sup>14</sup> Robert's occupation during this period is in doubt because he is reported to be a land surveyor, but close examination of deeds from Wilkes, Columbia, Greene and Richmond suggest that he may be a land speculator.<sup>15</sup> The tracts of land he is buying and selling at this time are not larger than 400 acres and many are 200 acre plots.<sup>16</sup> By 1785, there are many deeds which show Robert living in Wilkes and Greene Counties.<sup>17</sup> This discrepancy is explained by remembering that Greene County is laid out and settled in 1785.<sup>18</sup> Since Robert's land transactions are taking place when Greene County is formed from some of Wilkes and other

lands, a certain amount of confusion may be expected.<sup>19</sup> The matter of where Robert lived is clarified from 1787 to 1793 when the deeds report him as living in Greene County.<sup>20</sup> This time period between 1787-1793 is a formative time for Robert because his land grants for military service continue.<sup>21</sup> It is not coincidental that Robert is living in Greene County, because a vast amount of land is granted to him in Greene County.<sup>22</sup> During this time period from 1783-1793 Robert appears to be making his fortune and at 30 years of age, seems to be well on his way. Robert should not be viewed during this time as a greedy, amorous miser who hordes his possessions. Robert provides encouragement and financial support for his brother Thomas, who attended the University of Georgia to study law.<sup>23</sup> Another example of Robert's kindness is found in a transaction in 1787 in which he gives a Quaker Society in Greene County 43 acres for the establishment of a house of worship.<sup>24</sup> Numerous other examples of Robert's philanthropic activities exist, one of which involves Robert selling 200 acres of land in Greene County for 1 dollar.<sup>25</sup>

Robert moves to Hancock County in 1794.<sup>26</sup> Where exactly he settles is not clear, but a plantation outside of Sparta in Hancock seems to be the most likely homestead.<sup>27</sup> Robert marries in the year he arrives in Hancock to Mary Willis Cobb of the famous Cobbs of northern Georgia on May 9, 1794.<sup>28</sup> Mary Willis is born April 15, 1777 and is 18 years old at the time of the marriage.<sup>29</sup> Robert starts his own family now,

much the same way his father Mathews does after attaining some degree of financial stability. Robert and Mary have the first of their nine children, Marcus Aurelius on October 9, 1795.<sup>30</sup> Marcus marries three times in his life before dying deaf in Chambers County, Alabama in 1849.<sup>31</sup>

#### Robert Flounoy - Building his Fortune

Robert is serving in the House of Representatives of the Georgia Legislature at the time of the Yazoo Land Fraud in 1796.<sup>32</sup> Since the terms of representatives are only one year, then Robert has been in the legislature since 1795.<sup>33</sup> Robert's part in the Yazoo Land Fraud is in opposition to Senator James Gunn.<sup>34</sup> Robert writes a letter to the public which charges Gunn with attempting to corrupt his vote concerning the sale of western Georgia lands.<sup>35</sup> This letter appears to be an attempt to explain Robert's stand on the controversy as a victim of James Gunn because Robert states his position as being against the sale and Gunn trying to influence his vote. Should Robert's own words be taken as the truth, he is against selling the Georgia lands. Robert's version of the events concerning the Yazoo affair is supported by four other representative who all charge James Gunn with influencing their votes. Since Robert's stand is in opposition to Gunn, he must have then voted for rescinding the act in 1796.<sup>36</sup>

Robert's personal life is not going as well as his political and business life. Robert and Mary lose two

children, Thomas Howell, born March 19, 1797 and Elizabeth America, born May 18, 1800 to early infant deaths.<sup>37</sup> Robert's financial holdings are increasing. Land grants are awarded from Liberty, Richmond, Greene, and Montgomery Counties.<sup>38</sup> Robert now has 68 Georgia Certificates from Revolutionary War service in 1798.<sup>39</sup> Robert's business fortunes are becoming even larger. Mary and Robert are finally able to have a child, Robert Willis, December 11, 1802.<sup>40</sup> Robert Willis follows in his father's footsteps as a military officer and legislator who manages Bona Bella Plantation after his father's death until he dies in 1844 at Bona Bella Plantation.<sup>41</sup>

Robert Flournoy continues in his career in the legislature as a representative in Jefferson County in 1805.<sup>42</sup> In an 1805 speech to the Georgia Legislature, Robert appears to be relating his experiences in his early life and in the military. Robert describes the veterans from the First Regiment of State Troops as poor men who had recently moved from the north to serve their country.<sup>43</sup> Capt. Flournoy's supplies the best views of this man. Robert is again reelected as a representative and is now mentioned as a candidate for the Senate.<sup>44</sup> This recommendation which later turns to his candidacy in 1809, shows how much Robert is respected and acclaimed by his fellow legislators and voters in his district. As Robert's political life continues to prosper, he and Mary have Mary Mildred, their fifth child,



January 18, 1805.<sup>45</sup> Mary Mildred marries Nathaniel Adams and benefits from her father Robert's generosity when she receives a 575 acre plantation with 14 slaves in Hancock County before her marriage in 1821.<sup>46</sup> Mary Mildred dies in 1874.<sup>47</sup> Robert and Mary Willis have their sixth child, John Jacobus, August 15, 1808.<sup>48</sup> John Jacobus is educated at the University of Georgia and marries Eliza Venable, December 21, 1834.<sup>49</sup> John Jacobus develops into quite an activist in north Georgia around Clarke County.<sup>50</sup> John Jacobus dies senile and a bit of an eccentric in 1879.<sup>51</sup> Robert's family continues to grow during his years in Jefferson County, but his land grants have all but stopped since 1807.<sup>52</sup>

Records indicate that Robert moves to Montgomery County in 1810 or 1811.<sup>53</sup> Robert's exact residence is known as Mount Vernon where his son Robert Watkins is born March 5, 1811.<sup>54</sup> Robert Watkins marries twice and serves in the Georgia Legislature from Washington County before moving to Pontotoc, Mississippi where he dies October 24, 1894.<sup>55</sup> Robert and Mary Willis have their last male child, Howell Cobb, March 21, 1813 who dies in 1872.<sup>56</sup> Robert's last child, Elizabeth Julia is born May 25, 1815 and who marries Charles G. McKinely in 1834.<sup>57</sup> Information detailing Howell Cobb and Elizabeth Julia's lives is not forthcoming. During the time period between 1809 and 1815, Robert is no longer mentioned as being in the legislature. He is not even mentioned in the state capitol's newspaper, The Georgia Journal. Robert seems to

withdraw from politics during these six years. Robert reenters politics in 1815 as a Senator from Montgomery County.<sup>58</sup> Robert's 52 years of age seem to be taking its toll on him because he is not as active in the Senate as he was in the House of Representatives. Capt. Flournoy is not mentioned in a legislative capacity from this point on and probably drops from public eye after his term is over in 1816.<sup>59</sup>

Robert exhibits strange behavior on October 1, 1816 when he draws up a Deed of Gift.<sup>60</sup> The Deed of Gift distributes Mr. Flournoy's property and holdings among six of his surviving children excluding his oldest child, Marcus Aurelius.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps Robert is becoming paranoid over the wealth he has and wants to protect his property from being lost to the state through dying intestate. It would be remembered that Robert Flournoy is a wealthy man by this time due primarily to land grants and acquisitions in ten different Georgia counties.<sup>62</sup> Another explanation for the Deed of Gift is beginning to fear death. This last possibility is plausible because Robert would be 53 years old and a father of seven children, two of which are less than 3 years old. Robert's true motivation for drawing up the Deed of Gift will never be known, but supposition indicates he merely wanted to provide for his children's future.

#### Mr. Flournoy in Chatham County and Death

Robert Flournoy is still living in Montgomery County when he buys Bona Bella Plantation in Chatham County in May 1817.<sup>63</sup>

Bona Bella Plantation contains 390 acres complete with slaves, a house and the buildings needed to run the plantation.<sup>64</sup> Robert purchases the plantation from Josiah Tattnall for \$2,500.00.<sup>65</sup> Bona Bella Plantation is situated south of Thunderbolt and bordered on the west by Skidaway Road while the southern boundary is marked by an orphanage leaving the eastern boundary to the marsh.<sup>66</sup> Bona Bella at one time seems to have been part of Bonaventure owned by the Tattnalls to the north of Bona Bella.<sup>67</sup> Mr. Flournoy's is a cotton plantation because of the number of foot gins on the property by the time of Robert's death.<sup>68</sup> Bona Bella is also the Flournoy family home in Chatham County and seems to be the only plantation which is managed by a family member after Robert dies.<sup>69</sup>

Mr. Flournoy continues to acquire large tracts of land when he buys Chatham Plantation, June 10, 1817.<sup>70</sup> Robert buys the 738 acre plantation for \$4,000.00 from Francis Hopkins.<sup>71</sup> Chatham Plantation is bordered by Anson Ward on the north, Holmaine on the west, and Cattle Park on the east while Duffy Ward completes the boundaries on the south side.<sup>72</sup> Chatham Plantation is no more than one of the last farmer's wards on the outskirts of Savannah at the time.<sup>73</sup>

While Robert is buying plantations in Chatham County, he is also purchasing stock in the Bank of the United States, Bank of the State of Georgia, the Planters Bank and lastly, the Marine and Fire Insurance Company.<sup>74</sup> The stock Robert buys at this time is specifically mentioned in the will he

draws up in 1823, and is part of the controversy surrounding the will.<sup>75</sup>

Robert files for separation from Mary Willis Flourney effective July 1, 1818 on the grounds of mutual agreement between them both.<sup>76</sup> Mr. Flourney also takes this opportunity to name John A. Cobb and William H. Jackson as his trustees of his estate.<sup>77</sup> Since Robert secures a separation from Mary Willis, he does not intend to bequeath her anything.

Mr. Flourney sets about getting his affairs in order by writing his will on July 2, 1823 in his own handwriting and without legal aid.<sup>78</sup> Robert believes he may die soon and even complains in his will about his poor health while relating the soundness of his mind.<sup>79</sup> In this document, Robert wishes for his newly acquired plantations and stock holdings to be distributed as the Deed of Gift instructs his other holdings to be distributed.<sup>80</sup> Robert's 1823 will is the center of controversy after his death.

Robert Flourney's last big purchase occurs on March 17, 1824, when he buys Cedar Grove Plantation from David Johnston who is acting for Robert and George Johnston.<sup>81</sup> Mr. Flourney buys the 1,325 acre plantation complete with house, slaves and all necessary equipment to run the plantation for \$20,000.00 and \$10,000.00 is paid at the deed signing, in cash.<sup>82</sup> The terms of the deed specify the year 1831 to have paid the balance of the purchase price.<sup>83</sup> Robert's Cedar Grove is bordered on the south by Hoover Creek, a tributary of the

Little Ogeechee River, on the west by the Hermitage Plantation while the northern and eastern boundaries are not traceable because stands of trees serve as the boundaries of the property.<sup>84</sup> Mr. Flournoy pays \$9,000.00 of his balance to the Johnston attorney leaving only a small balance remaining on the property.<sup>85</sup>

Robert Flournoy leaves Chatham County sometime after 1824 since he personally signs the deed for Cedar Grove Plantation. The exact month is unknown but at the time he has only 15 months to live.<sup>86</sup> From all indications, Robert travels back to the north Georgia area around Oglethorpe, Greene and Hancock counties. This assumption is based on Robert dying in Lexington, Georgia, June 6, 1825 from an unnamed illness.<sup>87</sup> Robert is buried in City Cemetery in Sparta, Georgia.<sup>88</sup>

Mary Willis who dies February 8, 1829 and Marcus Aurelius contest Robert's will on the grounds that Mr. Flournoy was not in a competent state of mind when he wrote the document.<sup>89</sup> Mary Willis and Marcus lose the suit and the will of 1813 or the Deed of Gift is upheld as Robert Flournoy's last will and testament on March 8, 1826.<sup>90</sup> As a parting shot to Mary, she gets nothing in the will and Marcus receives very little of Capt. Robert Flournoy's wealth.<sup>91</sup>

Certain details about Robert Flourney remain unknown. Robert's religious preference is hinted as Presbyterian, but this aspect of Robert's life is not discussed in sources reviewed. Another of Mr. Flourney's mysteries is what exactly he does for a living after the Revolution in 1783. If he works as a land surveyor, did this occupation help him amass his large land holdings? Probably one of the more interesting problems Robert presents is why does he get a separation from Mary Willis and what does Marcus do to him to cause Robert to have such feelings toward him? Robert Flourney's educational background is not known but I suspect that he is fairly well read, but did not go to college. In many ways, Capt., Robert Flourney is still a mystery.

Endnotes

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3. Unknown, Virginia Magazine, 69.
4. *ibid.*, 68.
5. *ibid.*
6. Unknown, Virginia Magazine, 414.
7. *ibid.*, 414. Lucian Lamar Knight, ed. Georgia's Roster of the Revolution. (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company,, 1967), 147.
8. *ibid.*, 147.
9. "Flournoy Family Genealogy," The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, 2 (October 1894): 203.
10. Hemperley, Marion, ed. Military Certificates of Georgia 1776-1800. (Atlanta, GA: State Printing Office, 1983):147.
11. *ibid.*, 148.
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13. Lucas, Rev. Silas Emmett, Jr., ed. Some Georgia County Records Vol. I. (Easley, SC: Southern Historical Press, 1977):24.
14. Lucas, Rev. Silas Emmett, Jr., ed. Index to the Headright and Bounty Grants of Georgia 1756-1909. (Vidalia, GA: Georgia Genealogical Reprints):204.
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20. Lucas, Rev. Silas Emmett, Jr. Some Georgia County Records, : 210.
21. Lucas, Headwright and Bounty Grants, 204.
22. ibid.
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24. Lucas, Some County Records, Vol. 1.
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26. Georgia Tax Digests 1789-1799. (Spartanburg, SC: The Reprint Company, 1986):25.
27. Coulter, E. Merton. John Jacques Flournoy Champion of the Common Man in the Antebellum South. (The Georgia Historical Society, 1942): 83.
28. "Flournoy Family Genealogy," Virginia Magazine, 68.
29. ibid., 69.
30. ibid., 70.
31. ibid.
32. Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser, 18 March 1796.
33. Saye, Albert Berry. A Constitutional History of Georgia 1732-1945. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1948):159.



34. Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser, 18 March 1796, p. 3, c. 2.
35. ibid., p. 3, c. 2.
36. Ware, Ethel K. A Constitutional History of Georgia. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947):66.
37. "Flournoy Family Genealogy," Virginia Magazine, 69.
38. Lucas, Headwright and Bounty Grants, 204.
39. Bundle F, File 75, Archives of Chatham County, GA #802.
40. "Flournoy Family Genealogy," Virginia Magazine, 70.
41. ibid., 70.
42. Georgia Republican and State Intelligencer, 11 November 1804, p. 2, c. 2.
43. Hemperley, ed. Military Certificates, 147.
44. Georgia Republican and State Intelligencer, 11 November 1804.
45. "Flournoy Family Genealogy," Virginia Magazine, 70.
46. Coulter, John Jacobus, 83.
47. ibid., 71.
48. ibid., 70.
49. ibid., 71.
50. Coulter, John Jacobus, passim.
51. "Flournoy Family Genealogy," Virginia Magazine, 71.

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59. Ware, Georgia, 66.
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61. *ibid.*
62. Lucas, Headright and Bounty Grants, 204.
63. Deed Record 21 Folio 477 in Archives of Chatham County, GA.
64. *ibid.*
65. *ibid.*, 478.
66. *ibid.*, 477.
67. *ibid.*, 478.
68. Bundle F, File 75 in Archives of Chatham County, GA #867.
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70. Deed Record 2Z, Folio 457 in Archives of Chatham County, GA.
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73. Platen Map of 1875 (Chatham County) in the Georgia Historic Society
74. Bundle F, File 75 in Archives of Chatham County, GA #782.
75. *ibid.*, 783.
76. Deed Record 2I, Folio 101 in Archives of Chatham County, GA.
77. *ibid.*, 102.
78. Bundle F, File 75, in Archives of Chatham County, GA #782.
79. *ibid.*
80. *ibid.*, 782-783.
81. Deed Record 2M, Folio 360 in Archives of Chatham County, GA.
82. *ibid.*, 362.
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### Maps

platen Map of 1875 (Chatham County).

Savannah and Its Environs 1773-1897, Vol. II, Plate 16.

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Capt. Flournoy's Chatham  
County Plantations



Savannah and its Environs  
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