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Spring 1990

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Thomas U.P. Charlton

by

Edward M. Buttimer, Jr.

Scanned from 2011 from The Savannah Biographies Volume 18

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Thomas Usher Pulaski Charlton was born in Camden, Kershaw County, South Carolina in November of 1779.<sup>1</sup> His family was quite prominent among the political circles of the time. Thomas U.P.'s father was Dr. Thomas Charlton, a native of Maryland.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Charlton had married Lucy Kenan of North Carolina.<sup>3</sup> After migrating south Dr. Charlton joined the Revolutionary Army of South Carolina in 1775.<sup>4</sup> He served as a surgeon and held the rank of lieutenant.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Charlton was subsequently elected to and served in the South Carolina State Legislature.<sup>6</sup> He died sometime in the vicinity of 1789.

The Charlton family has some interesting connections to other notable families in Georgia/American History. Dr. Charlton's sister, Anne Phoebe Penn Dagworthy Charlton, married Mr. John Ross Key. Their son, Thomas U.P.'s first cousin, was Francis Scott Key who became a composer of some importance.<sup>7</sup> Another "genealogical footnote" on the Charltons is their relation through marriage to the Nathaniel Pendleton family. Though I will not attempt to detail the exact nature of this relationship because of my compassion for the reader, it is a fact that there are people who can rightfully claim descendantship from both the Charlton and the Pendleton lines.<sup>8</sup> The "U" in Thomas U.P.'s name comes from the maiden name of his great grandmother, an Usher by birth.<sup>9</sup>

After the death of her husband, Lucy Kenan Charlton came with her son to Savannah in 1791.<sup>10</sup> Thomas U.P. was sent off to school at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. Also enrolled there was Francis Scott Key,<sup>11</sup> and during this time I think that a solid friendship developed between the two. They would continue to correspond throughout their lives.

Upon the completion of his education, Thomas U.P. returned to Savannah. There is a report of an incident in his early twenties that he and a friend, George Troup, horsewhipped an editor of a local newspaper for refusing to divulge the name of the author of an article which had been printed.<sup>12</sup> I am not aware of the contents of the article, and this alleged indiscretion is the only blemish on what would become an impressive record of public life and civic duty. By the way, George M. Troup eventually became Governor of Georgia. He was elected to that office in 1923.<sup>13</sup>

One of Thomas U.P.'s closest friends was Major General James Jackson, a man who had gained a bit of notariety for his hand in exposing the Yazoo land fraud in 1795.<sup>14</sup> Thomas U.P. had served as Jackson's aide-de-camp in the military and had attained the rank of Major.<sup>15</sup> In 1809 he had the general's biography published titled The Life of Major General James Jackson.<sup>16</sup> He had written several shorter biographies of Revolutionary War heroes of Georgia, some of which had appeared in local newspapers.<sup>17</sup> The Jackson biography, as much as any other single factor, has contributed to the preservation of the name Thomas Usher Pulaski Charlton. The book is extremely rare, but a copy is included in the Wymberly Jones DeRenne Collection at the University of Georgia in Athens.

Thomas U.P. was admitted to the state bar in 1800 at the tender age of 20.<sup>18</sup> He quickly gained fame as an excellent lawyer and was appointed to the post of State's Attorney General in 1804<sup>19</sup> by Governor John Milledge. Governor Milledge was at the time well acquainted with the young Savannahian,<sup>20</sup> and it is likely that the two were first introduced by James Jackson. Jackson himself had served as governor from 1798 to 1801.<sup>21</sup> The position had become

vacant upon the resignation of William B. Bulloch.<sup>22</sup> Thomas U.P. was quite successful in his latest role and became thoroughly experienced in the field of criminal justice. In 1807 he was elected judge of the Eastern Circuit of Georgia, and he held this position until 1811.<sup>23</sup> At the time this court was the highest in the state.<sup>24</sup> Thomas U.P. returned to serve another term in this capacity from 1821 to 1822.<sup>25</sup>

The picture I have drawn of Thomas U.P. Charlton is one of a politician's politician. In much of his surviving writings he seems to have mastered the practice of beating around the bush. And how eloquently he does! A prime example of this may be found in a correspondence between himself and William Crawford.<sup>26</sup> They discuss congressional candidates, presidential appointments, and local politics. It is quite a coincidence that both men would later suffer defeats in elections for national seats: Thomas U.P. lost his bid for the United States Senate in 1828,<sup>27</sup> and Mr. Crawford was the unsuccessful opponent of John Quincy Adams for the office of President in 1824.<sup>28</sup>

Thomas U.P. took full advantage of his prestigious judgeship to express his personal opinions to the grand juries of the many counties in his district. In many of his presentments to these grand juries, he instructs them to consider a reform of the Georgia and national penal system.<sup>29</sup> "The sanguinary cod of Great Britain which in part is still sanctioned in this state is incompatible with the enlightened and mild principles of the American government"<sup>30</sup> Thomas U.P. had formed these ideas even before his appointment as State's Attorney General; in 1801 he had written an essay, "A Sketch on Crimes and Punishments", which had been distributed through a Savannah newspaper.<sup>31</sup>

Another of Thomas U.P.'s favorite themes was his call for the prohibition of the abhorrent custom of dueling. He considered the idea barbaric, nonsensical, and repulsive.<sup>32</sup> His stand against this "honorable" tradition perhaps arose from an incident of 1801. In November of that year Thomas U.P. got a taste of dueling firsthand, or perhaps I should say secondhand. He had been the second to a Major Thomas Johnson in a duel against a Captain Gresham of Greene County.<sup>33</sup> Shots were avoided at the last instant only with the intercession of Dr. Robert Fisher, who brought about a peaceable settlement of the argument.

In 1824 Thomas U.P. had his Reports of Cases argued and determined in the Superior Courts of the State of Georgia published.<sup>34</sup> This tome became a fixture at virtually every law office in the state.<sup>35</sup> It would later include cases heard and decided by not only Thomas U.P. himself, but also those of his son, Judge Robert M. Charlton.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to his prowess as a jurist, Thomas U.P. exhibited a talent in the areas of public service and civic affairs. He was elected to the Georgia State Legislature in 1801,<sup>37</sup> promising his constituents that he would see to the protection of their investments in the infamous Yazoo fraud.<sup>38</sup> I am sure that he was honestly intent on addressing this situation, but the land scheme was not settled until 1814,<sup>39</sup> much too late for many of its victims.

In June of 1803 the Savannah town council appointed Thomas U.P., Samuel Howard, and Ingraham Manno as superintendents of the election of a city alderman from Warren Ward.<sup>40</sup> When the votes had been tallied, a tie existed between Thomas U.P. and Mr. Howard.<sup>41</sup> As to the outcome of a new election that was held, I am unsure. I think that Howard probably won since I have found no record of Thomas U.P. as a Savannah alderman.

Thomas U.P. was a prominent member of several local civic groups. Among the organizations he was involved in were the Chatham Rangers,<sup>42</sup> the Chatham Artillery,<sup>43</sup> and the Union Society.<sup>44</sup> He was one of the founding members of the Hibernian Society, and became its first vice-president on May 11, 1812.<sup>45</sup> He almost certainly would have belonged also to the Society of Cincinnati as his father was an officer in the Revolutionary Army, but I found nothing to indicate his affiliation directly.

In July of 1807 Thomas U.P. was appointed by Mayor John Noel as secretary of a committee to determine a method of response to the British attack on the United States warship Chesapeake.<sup>46</sup> The committee resolved to call for the citizens of Savannah to wear black armbands in memory of those who had been killed.<sup>47</sup> It was also declared that all citizens must be prepared, if necessary, to place themselves at the disposal of the American government, and that no citizens were to have any private dealings with British vessels.<sup>48</sup> The Chatham County Regiment was advised to stand ready to prevent supplies from being furnished to British ships of war.<sup>49</sup> Thomas U.P. served as chairman of the Committee of Public Safety during the War of 1812.<sup>50</sup> In 1814 he was appointed to a three member vigilante committee to "see to the defense of Savannah".<sup>51</sup>

After the war Thomas U.P. served six terms as mayor of Savannah.<sup>52</sup> He was highly praised for his efforts in leading the town through a fire and a deadly outbreak of yellow fever.<sup>53</sup> He welcomed Presidents Madison and Monroe in their visits to Savannah.<sup>54</sup> In 1825 he helped to compile the Georgia Statutes,<sup>55</sup> and in 1827 he became Worthy Grand Master of the Georgia Masonic Order.<sup>56</sup>

One political ambition that Thomas U.P. never realized was his wish to become the United States' Ambassador to Mexico.<sup>57</sup> Even with the help of Francis Scott Key in Washington,<sup>58</sup> this dream never came to fruition. Key often offered political advice to his cousin,<sup>59</sup> and my feeling is that he considered Key's judgements and knowledge to be both valuable and reliable.

Public speaking must have become second nature to Thomas U.P.. Throughout his life he spoke at countless affairs on a variety of subjects. He gave the eulogy at the funeral of James Jackson in 1806.<sup>60</sup> In 1807 he read aloud the Declaration of Independence on the steps of the Chatham County Courthouse.<sup>61</sup> He was the first speaker at the annual meeting of the Hibernian Society on March 17, 1812.<sup>62</sup> In 1826 he was honored by being chosen to deliver a speech eulogizing Presidents John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, both of whom had died earlier in that year.<sup>63</sup>

Almost as dynamic and exciting as his public life, Thomas U.P.'s family life was more complex than most.<sup>64</sup> He was married on October 29, 1803 to Emily Walter of Charleston.<sup>65</sup> Emily mothered two sons, Thomas Jackson and Robert Milledge. Thomas was born on October 5, 1805, and Robert was born January 19, 1807.<sup>66</sup> A third child was born in 1808, Emily Bulloch, but Mrs. Charlton was ill with jaundice at the time and the child died in infancy.<sup>67</sup> Complications from the birth caused the death of Mrs. Charlton three days later, on September 23, 1808.<sup>68</sup>

Thomas U.P. remarried on December 15, 1810.<sup>69</sup> His new bride was Ellen Glasco, an Irish woman.<sup>70</sup> They were wed in South Carolina by a Reverend Fowler.<sup>71</sup> Ellen raised Thomas and Robert, and some of their children would bear her name.<sup>72</sup> Ellen died prematurely at the age of 39 of a fever in 1820.<sup>73</sup>



Thomas U.P. remained a widower for three years, but married his third wife, Hester P. Crawford, on August 30, 1823.<sup>74</sup> They were wed by a Reverend Meredith.<sup>75</sup> She died on December 19, 1826.<sup>76</sup>

That's right! You guessed it! Thomas took vows with his final wife, Clemantine Helen Lefevre of Savannah on October 30, 1828.<sup>77</sup> They were married by an Episcopal Reverend Neufville at Skidaway Island on the plantation of Peter Dupont.<sup>78</sup>

Thomas Usher Pulaski Charlton died on December 14, 1835 of a nervous fever at the age of 56.<sup>79</sup> He was attended to by a Dr. Arnold.<sup>80</sup> "Thomas U.P. was buried with the ceremony due a long time judge and six-term mayor of the city".<sup>81</sup> He was buried in Colonial Cemetery, but his remains were removed in 1852 and placed in the Charlton family lot at Laurel Grove.<sup>82</sup>

If I were to pursue the life of Thomas U.P. Charlton more thoroughly, I would start in looking at the city council minutes during the time that he was mayor. Another possibility would be to track down the older records of organizations that he belonged to such as the Hibernians or the Union Society. There are some deeds at the Chatham County courthouse that involve Thomas U.P.: these involve both land and purchases of slaves and even a pew at Christ Church. They are still mostly readable, but I did not find them interesting enough to include in the text. There was no will on record for Thomas U.P., and let me caution the researcher that his son, Thomas J. Charlton died in 1835 also. For this reason it would be a simple matter to confuse the two. A last effort I would like to have accomplished is to read some of the Jackson biography, but it is not an easy volume to come by.

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45. Records of the Hibernian Society of Savannah, collected by the Georgia chapter of the Colonial Dames of America, Georgia Historical Society.
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