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Armenius Oemler
(1827-1897)

Prepared by:
William J. Towler, Jr.

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Armenius Oemler was an outstanding resident of Savannah whose innovative ideas in truck-farming and the formation of the Oemler Oyster Company, the south's first oyster packaging plant, brought forth new industry to Chatham County. His headings were numerous consisting of physician, scientist, author, agriculturalist, entomologist, Captain, and businessman. He was an informative source for scientists worldwide and a scholar in his own rite.

Armenius Oemler was born on September 12, 1827. He was the son of Augustus Gottlieb Oemler and Mary Ann (Shad) Oemler. Augustus was "...born in Hettstedt, Germany, son of a Lutheran pastor, direct descendent of Nicholas Oemler a botanist who married Martin Luther's sister."¹ Augustus Oemler came to America when he was eighteen. He was a pharmacist, entomologist, and botanist. He owned the Oemler Drug Store and was a prominent member of the Georgia Historical Society. Armenius' mother came from a distinguished Savannah family; her father was Major Solomon Sigismond Shad, a famed veteran of the Revolutionary war.

Armenius attended primary school at the Chatham Academy. When he reached the age of twelve his father enrolled him in the Dresden Technische Bildungsanstalt in Germany. He graduated, with honors, in 1848. He then returned to the United States and studied medicine at the University of the City of New York where he received his M.D. in 1856. He returned to Savannah and practiced medicine in the offices of Dr. Stephen N. Harris. He was unable to continue his practice because the "strain of his sympathies affected his health."²

Armenius was married to Elizabeth Pritchard

Heyward on April 10, 1856. (There was no record found in Chatham County Marriages in the County Courthouse or the Book of Georgia Marriages in the 19th century, but the date was documented in the Dictionary of American Biography Vol. 7.)

Elizabeth was the daughter of John and Constantina (Pritchard) Heyward of South Carolina. There was not a lot of information found after this time period concerning exactly where Armenius and family were located, however the Dictionary of American Biography stated that he was a rice farmer in the South Carolina, but there were several business transactions taking place in Savannah during the late 1850's by Armenius found in the Deed Room in the Chatham County Courthouse.

The business aspect of armenius life was started at an early age when soon after his 26th birthday on September 16, 1853 he bought a lot on the Eastern fourth part of lot letter "C" Derby Ward, located south by Congress St., bounded east by Johnson Square, north by St. Julian St. and west by the remaining lot for \$500.00 from Thadden S. Norton.³ On July 1, 1856 more of this lot was purchased from Henry Taylor.⁴ Over the next 8 years Armenius rented the area to boarders and businesses. He finally decided to sell this property and on November 25, 1864 Magnus Lowenthal became the purchaser. Lowenthal,

however, could not make payments and therefore quit claims on the deal losing \$5,000.00 in the process.⁵ Thus Arminius sold the property to John C. Roland for \$5,500.00.⁶ He gained quite a lucrative profit from this transaction.

Armenius did not only have a great business mind, his profession and expertise was in farming. The land acquired for his trick-farming business was purchased from Tom Holcomb on March 8, 1857, when he purchased the northern halves of lots number 3,4,5,6, and 7 of the Heampstead Plantation off WhiteBluff Road in Vernonburg in Chatham County.⁷ On November 1, 1859 Armenius began the buyout of E. H. Bacon, the owner of the southern halves of of the above mentioned lots, for \$3,315.00.⁸ The deal was completed on July 1, 1863⁹ and on the same day was sold by Armenius to Frederick K. Grosland for \$4,000.00¹⁰ another small surplus acquired.

Arminius re-organized the DeKalb Riflemen of the Confederate Army and was elected Captain of Company B on June 3, 1861 and was commissioned as such on July 4 the same year. The exact role of the DeKalb is unknown to myself; there is not much documented evidence of the exact function of the DeKalb company, Armenius became a member of the Confederate Engineer Corps under the command of Major McCreary after his service with DeKalb which

he made topographical maps. He made the first map of Chatham County during this interval. After his employment in the war he returned to his home on Shad's plantation on Wilmington Island.

Although we have seen that Armenius was a connoisseur in real estate gains, his main aspect of enterprise was truck-farming. Truck-farming is farming devoted to the production of vegetables for a desired market. With the purchase of 17 negro slaves from Thomas Heyward for \$13,832.00 on January 10, 1862,¹¹ used primarily for crop-picking, Armenius was then able to become the dominant figure on truck-farming in the south. For the next twenty-five years Armenius grew several different crops for the northern markets and finally drew together all of his knowledge to write his book Truck-Farming at the South, first published in 1883. "His book was received as authority in such matter by all horticulturalists."¹² This book spoke on matters such as labor, types of crops, how to grow them, fertilizers and controlling insects.

Armenius was a notable author having two articles, "The Cabbage Worm and its Parasite" and "Are Plants Fed and Watered Through Their Leaves?"

in Southern Farmer's Monthly on January 1, 1880.¹³
He also wrote many articles for the American
Agriculturalist and Mehars Monthly.

Armenius could well have made a name for himself worldwide uncovering a key hypothesis. In a letter written to Armenius from the United States Department of Agriculture on June 3, 1886 declared "Your idea... that clover or cow-pease or any kind of plant might be a source of utilizing the free nitrogen of the air must be regarded at the present time as untenable."¹⁴ Thus, Armenius ended his experiments and the credit and an important discovery that would have been his due were claimed by another.

Not only was Armenius a key figure in promoting truck-farming but was instrumental in bringing the Oyster industry to the south. "The Oemler Oyster Company filed a petition for a charter capitol-\$10,000.00 increase to \$500,000.00. The incorporators were A. oemler, Col. John Screven, Col. W.W. Gordon, Thomas D. Bertody, and George A Hudson, On July 27, 1889,¹⁵ His two essays, "Past, Present and Future of the American Oyster" (Bulletin of the U.S. Fish Commission for 1893) and "The Life History Propagation and Protection of the American Oyster" played major roles in insuring the Georgia Oyster Law. The Oemler

Oyster Company located of Wilmington Island , was a very successful operation well into the 20th century eventually moving to St. Catherines Island. It was the first oyster packaging plant located below Maryland. Other notable achievements and accomplishments in the life of Armenius were first and foremost his formation of the Chatham County Vegetable and Fruit Growers Association on March 17, 1882, Armenius was elected President. Armenius was a prominent member of the Georgia Historical Society with several references to his readings of intellectual essays at the meetings of the Society in the Savannah Morning News and was a member of the Grand Jury on several occasions.

There is a time in Armenius' life where he seemed disgruntled with the American political system. In a rough draft of a letter written by Armenius found in his manuscript collection this view was shown. The letter was obviously written well past the Civil War with Armenius showing discontent with the policy of slavery, and was written to a boyhood friend in Germany. "My life in Germany was the happiest part of my existence and I constantly recall it with delight."¹⁶ Armenius longed to "return to the fatherland" but was unable to embark on such a journey. There were many other useful artifacts in the manuscripts including many notes, an account

book and many references to his family.

Armenius and Elizabeth had six children. Augustus who was to become the superintendent of the Oemler Oyster Company, Constantius who died of pneumonia in 1896, John Norton who married Marie Conway the famous author, Elizabeth, a school teacher, Mary Alexandria and Charlotte. References were found in the early 1890's editions of the Savannah City directory showing the children moving into city limits having various jobs with the Chatham Railroad (Norton) and as a school teacher (Elizabeth). Armenius himself moved back to Savannah in 1893 living at 160 Harris St. and the following year at 37 Habersham St.. He was the Inspector of Fertilizers.

On August 8, 1897 Armenius Oemler was pronounced dead at 10:20 P.M. at the Savannah Hospital from Apoplexy.¹⁷ His funeral took place at St. John's Church at 1:00 P.M. on August 9th, he was buried at the family cemetery on Wilmington Island.¹⁸ Armenius Oemler was instrumental in bringing two of the south's most important businesses in truck-farming and oyster packing. He was an extremely intelligent man, brought for innovative ideas through his writings and a prominent member of society in Savannah.

As I have pointed out in this paper there were many vague points in Armenius' life, for instance where he resided after his departure from the medical field. His residence in South Carolina is well conceivable but he had so many business transactions taking place in Savannah at that time he may well have been dwelling in Chatham County although the idea of business from accross the Savannah River was not out of the question.

The role of the DeKalb Rifleman during the Civil War was also uncertain. I checked many Confederate Registers but was unable to retrieve any information. A person doing any follow-up examinations of Armenius could start at this point exhausting any information from reliable documents of the Confederacy. Furthermore, the Chatham County Vegetable and Fruit Growers Association was not well-documented. There were some references to annual and monthly meetings found in the Savannah Morning News but to define the exact function of the association, except for the area farmers to gather to discuss agricultural matters, which may very well may have been the concern, more information is needed. Some clarity can be resolved if there were minutes taken at the meetings and if they can be reserected.

Indubitably, the life of Armenius Oemler

was one that left an impression on the Savannah area. In fact the Oemler name is immortalized on Wilmington Island on the area of Shad's plantation. This area is named "Oemler Loop" and there is an apartment complex known as "Oemler Pointe". The intellectual legacy continues today as Augustus Oemler, the great-grandson of Armenius, is a professor at Yale University. Isabel Oemler, the mother of Augustus, still resides in Savannah as well as Constancia Lynes, a great-granddaughter of Armenius, who resides next to Arminius' victorian farmhouse built by two of his sons, Augustus and Constantius in 1881.

This paper is by no means an expansive biography of the life of Armenius Oemler but an abridged version consisting of his most applicable attributes. I hope this concise edition has enlightened the reader and has offered a fresh impression of an admirable individual who played an essential role in the history of Savannah.

1. Dictionary of American Biography, 7th edition, s.v. "Oemler, Armenius."

2. Ibid.

*Note. The following 9 citations are all deeds derived from the Record Room on the 3rd floor of the Chatham County Courthouse.

3. Book 3N Folio 95 Grantor - Thadden S. Norton Sept. 16, 1853

4. Book 3Q Folio 308 Grantor - Henry Taylor July 1, 1856

5. Book 3W Folio 429 Grantee - Magnus Lowenthal Nov. 25, 1864

6. Book 3Z Folio 202 Grantee - John Rowland July 20, 1867

7. Book 3S Folio 180 Grantor - Tom Holcomb Mar. 8, 1857

8. Book 3S Folio 479 Grantor - E.H. Bacon Nov. 1, 1859

9. Book 3V Folio 436 Grantor - E.H. Bacon July 1, 1863

10. Book 3V Folio 437 Grantee - Frederick Groscland July 1, 1863

11. Book 3W Folio 93 Grantor - Thomas Heywood Jan. 10, 1862

12. Dictionary of American Biography, 7th edition, s.v. "Oemler, Armenius."

13. Savannah Morning News, 1 January 1880 pg.2 col.2

14. Savannah Morning News, 1 January 1880 pg.2 col.2

15. Savannah Morning News, 27 September 1889 pg.8 col.5

16. Oemler Manuscript Collection. Ga. Historical Society #00592 item #8. Letter to unknown, date unknown.

17. Savannah Morning News, 9 August 1897, pg. 8 col. 3

18. Ibid.

Chatham County Deeds Index found in the Record Room on the 3rd floor Chatham County Courthouse.

Grantee: Book Folio

3N	95
3P	405
3Q	308
3S	479
3T	191
3V	93
3V	203
3W	437
3W	357
3W	429
3X	204
3Z	202
4D	417
4U	306
5P	292

Grantor: Book Folio

3Q	309
3S	180
3S	479
3V	436
3X	65
4N	110
4N	112
5G	325

Deed references used: Book Folio

3N	95	Sept. 16, 1853
3Q	308	July 1, 1856
3S	180	Mar. 3, 1857
3S	479	Nov. 1, 1859
3V	436	July 1, 1863
3V	437	July 1, 1863
3W	429	Nov. 25, 1864
3Z	202	July 20, 1867

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Dictionary of American Biography, (1934) vol. VII, pg. 629-630

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Oemler, Armenius. (1905) Truck-Farming at the South. Orange Judd, New York, 4rth edition.

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Savannah Morning News. Articles used .

1. 1 January 1882 pg. 2 col. 2
2. 12 January 1882
3. 10 July 1887
4. 27 July 1889 pg. 8 col. 5
5. 8 August 1897 pg. 8 col. 3

Savannah Morning News. Index at the G.H.S.

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 1862-215
 1866-242
 1868-258, 518
 1869-16
 1874-20
 1875-213, 545
 1877-41
 1880-590
 1881-123, 573
 1882-32, 469, 517, 518, 537
 1883-60, 586, 464
 1884-451
 1885-192
 1886-115
 1889-84, 371, 372, 425, 426
 1890-347, 477
 1891-196

Smith, Gordon B. (1978) Vertical File Ga. Hussars/DeKalb Riflemen

Vertical File Letter "O", various newspaper clippings, etc.
 Located at the G.H.S.

Will of Armenius Oemler File #154. Located at the Chatham County Courthouse Probate Courthouse, basement.

Secondary Sources

Census of Georgia 1840.

Census of Georgia 1850.

Chatham County Census of 1860.

Personal interview with Constancia Lynes, November 7, 1990.

Personal interview with Augustus Oemler, November 7, 1990.

Personal interview with Isabel Oemler, November 7, 1990.