

# Fleeing The Fever

## Those Summer Flights From Fever Were a “Ball”

### By Andrew Peeples

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In the little coastal town of Bluffton in Beaufort County mosquitoes are and always have been, a minor public health problem. Yet, strange as it may seem, the town owes its very beginning to a certain species of the little pests.

Like all the other resort communities in the coastal region between Charleston and Savannah, Bluffton was settled by families seeking a safe summer retreat from the “country fever” on their low-lying plantations. They fled to “the salt” because they believed that wind and wave kept the dreaded disease at bay.

Both planters and physicians believed that the cause of the summer “secessions” from the plantations was in the contaminated atmosphere. The female Anopheles mosquito—the little pest that stands on her head when she bites—wasn’t even suspected until a hundred years later.

Dr. David Ramsay, a South Carolina historian and physician, writing of the Lowcountry in about 1800, declared that “sluggish rivers, stagnant swamps, ponds and marshes are common; and in or near to them putrefaction is generated. In all these places, and for two or three miles adjacent to them, the seeds of febrile diseases are plentifully sown.”

In 1826, Robert Mills stated that in the summer and fall months the lowland portions of South Carolina were unhealthful, and that the causes were apparent. The numerous swamps, he wrote, “retain the waters that fall and occasion thick fogs throughout the night. Those exposed to these nocturnal fogs are subject to intermittent fevers.”

In 1831, Frederick Grimke Fraser, a planter living near Beaufort, wrote that “heat and moisture are the causes of disease,” and he mentioned fevers resulting from exposure to the plantations.

What physicians thought of the “country fever” was summed up by Dr. S. H. Dickson in an address before the *State Agricultural Society* on November 28, 1843.

“The beautiful and fertile Lowcountry,” Dr. Dickson said, “is the seat of annual and endemic visitations of disease, which we are accustomed to attribute to malaria. Whatever may be the difference of opinion elsewhere as to the source or origin of

the aerial poison, the medical profession here is unanimous in regarding it as the result of vegetable decomposition in moist places at a high temperature. In the Lowcountry there are few plantations which admit of permanent residence: the whole region being pervaded by a pestilential infection, almost unfailing in the excitement of fevers during the summer months and in the autumn.”

Today it is common knowledge among school children that the “aerial poison” was in fact a malarial parasite transmitted by only one vector—the female Anopheles mosquito. She alone was responsible for the summer migrations from the plantations that brought Bluffton into being.

But before we shed too many tears for the planter families frightened into flight by the little pest that stands on her head when she bites, let us look back and see just how much fun it was to flee from the fever she brought.

According to one writer, a “secession” village like Bluffton was a summer’s dream. There the art of being busy and doing nothing was brought to a fine point by most of the planter families. They might “walk in the shadow of the pine woods or bathe at high tide in the salt water that washed the sandy beach and enjoy the fresh, cool breezes.”

Another writer reported that “everybody knew everybody else, and, having little else to do, went to see everybody else every day and at all hours.”

He went on to say that the round of activities began “almost with the dawn. Having breakfast at an early hour, most of the men left the village. Some rode, or drove in their sulkies, to their plantations to make the daily inspections. Others, who were not riding to their own plantations that day, visited those of friends and neighbors. On occasion all or many of them went hunting.”

“The planters’ wives, having supervised or assigned the housekeeping tasks and checked the provisions, which arrived every day from the plantations, were ready by 10 o’clock to receive informal calls. In preparation for these calls there were plenty of chairs and benches on the piazza, the chief feature and social center of every cottage, and

an adequate supply of fat watermelons kept cool in the dry well or in tubs of water."

While the women were busily engaged in "domestic chatter at their piazza receptions, the children played marbles, shinny-ball and other games in the yard."

The men who remained in the village and others who returned from their jaunts early would gather at the post office or the stores to talk shop or to play games.

"Thus passed the time until dinner, which came between 1 and 3 o'clock and was followed by a village-wide siesta for two or three hours. Then the visiting was resumed and reached its height at tea time, which was just before sundown."

Every piazza was the scene of "much gaiety and hospitality. With the coming of dusk the lightwood knots and pine straw piled high in the fire stands were ignited. Around these fires, which served not only as floodlights but also as mosquito magnets, the children played and attendant Negroes hovered. The piazza parties usually ended about 11, and the guests departed in processions, lighted on their way by link-boys, or in couples preceded by a single servant with a lantern."

So there we have it. Fleeing the fever a hundred or so years ago was a flight of fun. One is almost tempted to ask why a monument has not been erected to the little pest that stands on her head when she bites. For, believe it or not, it was she who brought beautiful Bluffton into being.