

Rose Hill Plantation

The Union County Home of South Carolina's "Fire-Eating" Governor Today Is a State Park

Article & Photos by Jason Peevy

The Fire-Eater fury is gone. Allegations of murder, deadly duels and downtown shootouts have been reduced to echoes of century-old rumors. Ante-bellum honor, the horrors of slavery and the fervor for secession all have vanished with the beautiful and pungent landscaped rose gardens that once covered the front lawn and gave this historic landmark its name. All that remains is Rose Hill.

Rose Hill Plantation, serenely situated in rural Union County near the Sumter National Forest, was built by "Secession Governor" William Henry Gist in 1832. It is now a South Carolina State Historic Site. Interestingly, Rose Hill is not where secession began, but where it ended. The mansion survived the Civil War and Sherman's southern rampage because the Broad River was in flood stages and the Union troops could not get through. It survived 50 years of deterioration after the Gist family abandoned the house and the property was purchased by the federal government—to be used as a bombing range during World War II. Rose Hill's rescue and restoration culminated with its dedication as a state park December 20, 1960, exactly 100 years from the day Gist signed the Ordinance of Secession and officially separated South Carolina from the Federal Union.

Tour the mansion and you almost can see a southern belle at the top of the signature spiral staircase, wearing a flowing dress fashioned from curtains ripped down during the war. You can smell food from the busy kitchen out back—enough to feed the family and more than 170 slaves. You can feel the wood carving and molding in the parlor, symbols of wealth. You can hear the fiery gentleman at the bottom of the stairs saying sternly, "Frankly, my dear. . . ."

"We get the *Gone With the Wind* stuff all the time," said Rose Hill park superintendent Brenda Majors-Strole. "But movies like that give a lot of false impressions. The glorious, glamorous images of



The Gist family Bible and other period items are kept on a marble parlor table that suggests the statesman's wealth.

women being taken care of, coming down the stairs and making grand entrances . . . it was not like that at all. It was a working environment. There were livestock and slave overseers. There were menus and cooking in the kitchen and people polishing the silver. No one was sitting around with her hand over her forehead on the fainting chair."

Gist was a militant radical southern nationalist, labeled a "Fire-Eater" in his day, and was either a southern hero or a despicable villain, depending on whom you ask. The illegitimate son of a Charleston merchant, Gist sued to obtain his father's name and got kicked out of college for boycotting the cafeteria. In a Fourth of July toast in what is now Union in 1851—nine years before South Carolina seceded and seven before he was elected governor—Gist said, "South Carolina . . . cannot be seduced by federal gold or intimidated by federal bayonets. She will secede." He arrived in fanfare, with talk of secession, and left in welfare, his plantation dropping in value 93 percent during the Civil War and his son and beloved first cousin killed in action.

His grandfather William Gist moved to South Carolina from Maryland in the 1760s and served the South Carolina Royal Government as a surveyor. He remained loyal to Great Britain during the Revolution, joined the Loyalist militia and was captured twice. He was tried for treason but bribed the only witness against him, and was exiled to England for seven years. When he returned to South Carolina after the revolution, he ran a mercantile business in Charleston and rebuilt much of his wealth, although he vainly petitioned the state legislature three times to restore his citizenship. William Gist died in 1802, leaving the mercantile business and considerable wealth and property in Union District to his sons.

Gist's father Francis Fincher Gist died at 40, but before his death was elected to the state legislature and bought three tracts of land near the Tyger River, where Rose Hill is located. He moved to Union District from Charleston in 1811, four years after his illegitimate son was born to Mary Boyden. Francis and his brother Nathaniel funneled their mercantile profits into property purchases and became rich landowners.

Little is known of William Henry Gist's childhood or his mother, but the boy was acknowledged by his father and came under his father's control before the elder Gist died in 1819. Uncle Nathaniel, also living in Union District, became the boy's guardian. Nathaniel successfully petitioned the Charleston District Court of Equity to allow his late brother's son to assume the Gist name.

The fire was almost certainly in their veins. Nathaniel named his own son States Rights. He sent both William Henry and States Rights off to college to study law, William Henry at South Carolina College in Columbia and States Rights at the new Harvard Law School. Both returned to Union to practice—William earlier than expected. William led a boycott of Steward's Hall at the college after the trustees imposed compulsory boarding regulations. Poor food was one of the students' gripes, and in 1827 they all were expelled. Gist studied for the bar on his own, and passed.

Thus equipped with the property left to him by his father, his father's last name and his law degree, Gist married Louisa Bowen of Laurens in 1828. He began construction of Rose Hill, importing bricks from Switzerland that were carried by wagon from Charleston. The three-story Federal-style mansion

would become the center of Gist's plantation and the nucleus of his future land acquisitions.

Rose Hill took four years to complete. In the meantime, Gist's fire began to burn over. His promise, and his life, began to unravel shortly after the death of his first child at birth in 1829. His second child, Maria, was born in April 1830, but his wife died 11 days later. She was 18 years old. Two years later, Gist married Mary Elizabeth Rice.

Before the first gun was drawn on July 1, 1833, according to *The Narrative History of Union County* by Allan D. Charles, Gist and his 17-year-old brother-in-law Samuel Rice had the town of Union in a frenzy. The Fire-Eater was about to enter the public arena. The heat was on.

Samuel Rice apparently had his honor called into question over a lady by Barham F. Bobo, a Union store owner. Rice and several friends happened upon Bobo in Columbia and beat him with walking sticks. Bobo threatened revenge. He returned to Union and waited, fuming.

Gist and his young brother-in-law came into town, both armed with pistols. Gist said they "had no idea of touching Mr. Bobo, but if he touches us, we will kill him." They walked past Bobo's store, where Bobo sat on the porch. Bobo, carrying a walking cane, met them in the street. When he got close, Gist and Rice drew their pistols. One of Rice's friends took Rice's pistol away and tried to restrain him. When Rice pulled away and drew a second pistol, Gist stepped in to stop the youth. Bobo seized the opportunity and struck Rice with the cane, drawing blood. Rice's brother William came from the crowd and jumped Bobo. Gist released the bloodied Samuel Rice, who drew a third pistol and approached Bobo, who was still tangling with William. Rice fired at point-blank range. Bobo fell dead.

The showdown evidently was viewed as a chivalrous settlement to a dispute. Rice was charged with murder and Gist with accessory, but neither charge stuck. Rice, found guilty of manslaughter, later went to Alabama and became a judge on the Alabama Supreme Court. The state declined to prosecute Gist.

Construction on Rose Hill was complete. Gist and his new wife Mary settled into their lives as planters, with more than 32 slaves working the cotton, Indian corn, wheat, oats, barley, peas and Irish potatoes, and tending a small orchard. Gist was successful as a planter, and the creative and talented





Mary, who would bear him 12 children and outlive the future governor, thrived at Rose Hill. From the 1830s to the 1860s, Gist added some 6,783 acres to the estate. By the time South Carolina seceded in 1860, he owned 179 slaves. In 1850, the plantation was valued at \$34,500; by 1860, it was worth \$80,000.

The plantation succeeded despite Gist's entanglements with the law. Less than a year after the showdown in Union, Gist was indicted for murder for alleged participation in a duel, but acquitted. Reportedly, Gist killed one Samuel Fair over a woman's honor, although the story is difficult to substantiate.

During the 1840s, a lone voice began to emerge from the most radical of southern rights extremists: William Henry Gist. "With very few exceptions, the northern people are arrayed against us, and pledge to our destruction," said Gist, adding that he was "prepared to wade in blood rather than submit to inequality and degradation."

Gist began his political rise by serving in the South Carolina House of Representatives from 1840 to 1843. He followed that with three terms in the state senate. In 1858, the senate elected Gist governor of South Carolina.

Gist's correspondence with other legislators and his public and private letters reveal a well-developed philosophy to justify secession. He asserted that because the Union had been created by a compact of sovereign states, the states retained their sovereign powers and could leave the Union if the federal government failed to protect their rights and privileges. In an early gubernatorial message, he spoke of a southern confederacy that would "protect itself against any enemy, and command the respect of the world."

In 1860, Gist openly opposed Abraham Lincoln's presidential bid. From Rose Hill, which served as the governor's mansion, Gist wrote the governors of Louisiana, North Carolina, Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama and Florida, inquiring what course each state would take if Lincoln were elected. His cousin States Rights hand-delivered four of the letters. Gist wrote, "It is the desire of South Carolina that some other state should take the lead, or at least move simultaneously with her. If a single state secedes, she will follow her. If no other state takes the lead, South Carolina will secede (in my opinion) alone, if she has any assurance that she will soon be followed by any other states. Otherwise, it is doubtful."

Only the Mississippi and Florida governors said their states would follow South Carolina out of the Union. That was enough for Gist. When Lincoln was elected, Gist said defiantly, "The only alternative left, in my judgment, is the secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union." Delegates at a state seces-

sion convention on December 20, 1860, signed an ordinance that severed all bonds between South Carolina and the federal government. By February 1861, six other states had seceded and the Confederate States of America had been formed. On April 12, Confederate batteries opened fire on Fort Sumter.

"Two battles will close the war and our independence will be acknowledged," Gist predicted. "Great Britain and France will offer their mediation and the Yankees will gladly accept it and make peace."

Gist had two sons fighting for his cause. The oldest, William, was killed by a Union sharpshooter outside Chattanooga in 1863. Cousin States Rights Gist, a brigadier general, died leading a charge at the Battle of Franklin, Tennessee, in 1864.

Although he was no longer governor, he continued to serve the state during the war. One year into the conflict, there was a consensus of dissatisfaction with Gov. Francis W. Pickens. South Carolina's secession committee met in late 1861 and created the South Carolina Executive Council, consisting of the governor, lieutenant governor and three members selected by the convention to direct the state's wartime production and mobilization. Gist, one of the councilmen, headed the Department of Treasury and Finance until 1862, when he took over the new Department of Construction and Manufactures. This placed him in control of the foundries and shops used to construct and repair the state's munitions.

The Executive Council was dissolved in September 1862. Gist was free to go back home, and he never returned to active political service.

With the war's end in 1865, Gist traveled to Greenville to take an amnesty oath in which he promised to defend and uphold the constitution and the Union. He received a pardon from President Andrew Johnson, but the cause he had labored for so long had failed. In the end, Gist went quietly, his political proclamations silenced, his ideals and his ego flattened. He returned to Rose Hill to manage his plantation, but it declined rapidly. Without slave labor, he was forced to rent out portions of his land to sharecroppers and hire farm laborers.

Gist died September 30, 1874, of appendicitis. He is buried in the family plot near the mansion.

The fire was gone. Only Rose Hill remained. ❖

Jason Peevy's award-winning article about Erskine College appeared in the Summer 2001 Sandlapper.

For more information about Rose Hill Plantation State Historic Site, call (864) 427-5966 or visit the Web site at www.southcarolinaparks.com.