

REDISCOVERING THE WILLIAM BURROWS LEGACY

By Peg Eastman

Editor's Note: The story of the Burrows family (and the ill-fated Burrows House) was documented more than forty years ago in an article by Harriett P. and Albert Simons that appeared in the *Winterthur Portfolio* and the *South Carolina Historical Magazine*. Now, with a collection of remarkable images from the SCHS collection and beyond, Peg Eastman reintroduces us to the significant contributions of this family.



The memory of Judge William Burrows has all but disappeared in Charleston, yet this remarkable colonial immigrant has given this nation a legacy that continues to this day.

According to family tradition, William Burrows was in his mid-teens when he sailed into Charleston (or Charles Town, as it was then known) in 1741. There were already families named Burroughs and Burrows in the province before he arrived, but his descendants do not know under which protection he came. Regardless, he flourished in his adopted homeland.

Young Burrows arrived at a time when Charleston was enjoying a period of expansion and prosperity that was unparalleled in the other colonies. Rice was the primary cash crop, and fortunes were also made from indigo and an immense Native American fur trade. Wealth brought rich trappings to the privileged planter culture. Many outlying plantations had magnificent homes adorned with lush decorative parklands. The city's elite wore elegant attire and coiffed wigs to concerts, theaters, and fancy balls. Gentlemen enjoyed discussing the latest books from London and raced horses that often boasted pedigrees of English thoroughbreds.

Burrows was admitted to the practice of law in 1748; the following year, he married Mary Ward, the daughter of a prominent Englishman who had settled in the colony. They had three children who survived to young adulthood: William Ward Burrows, Mary ("Polly"), and Sally.

Advancing steadily in his profession, Burrows became justice of the peace for Berkeley County in 1756 and master in chancery in 1761; he continued on to assistant justice in 1762 and judge in 1764.

Image credits: 1740s view of Charleston waterfront, from the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society; Simons and Lapham plat, from the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society; eighteenth-century view of intersection of Broad and Meeting Streets (with William Burrows House visible), courtesy of College of Charleston Special Collections, Gene Waddell Collection; early-twentieth-century view of exterior of William Burrows House, courtesy of the Charleston Museum, Charleston, South Carolina; William Ward Burrows, courtesy of the United States Marine Corps; USS Enterprise and HMS Boxer, courtesy of the Library of Congress; early-twentieth-century view of interior of William Burrows house, courtesy of the Charleston Museum, Charleston, South Carolina.

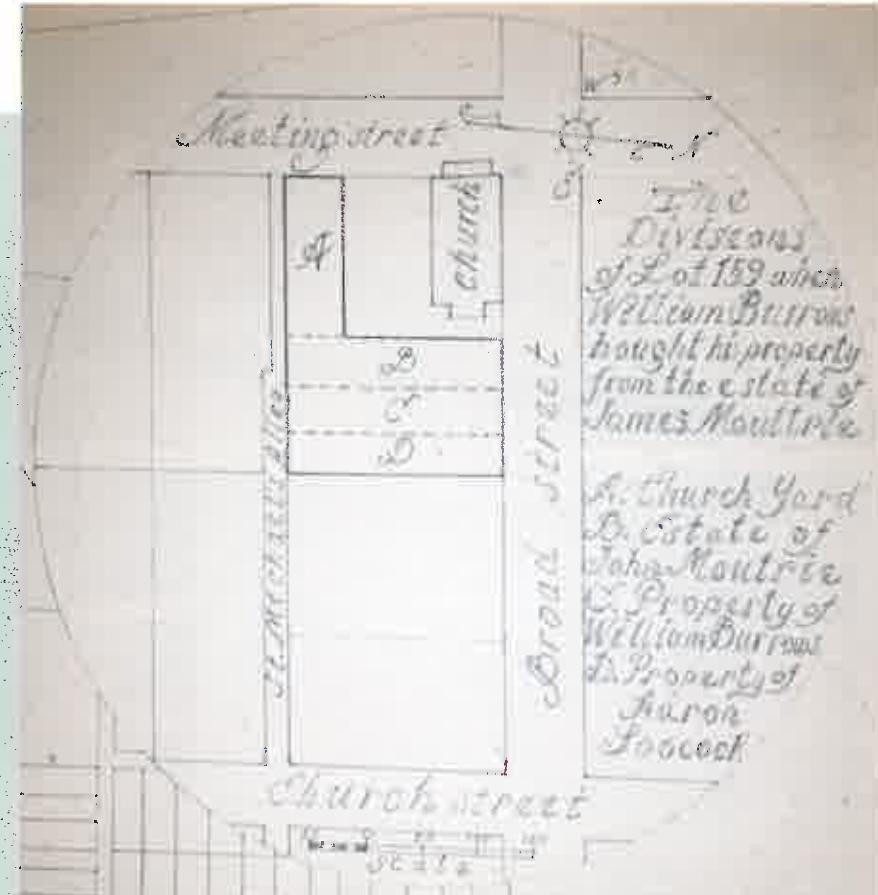
Like his peers, Burrows purchased land. In 1767, he purchased a country seat on Charleston Neck, on the west bank of the Cooper River (now the site of Magnolia and St. Lawrence Cemeteries). Known as Magnolia Umbra, it included 184 acres of high land and one hundred acres of marshland. By 1775, his holdings included over ten thousand acres in Berkeley, Colleton, and Craven Counties.

Burrows was socially prominent. He was president of the St. George's Society and a steward of the South Carolina Society. He was one of the seventeen founding members of the Charleston Library Society and a member of St. Philip's Church. When the parish split, Burrows purchased Pew Eight in the center aisle at the newly built St. Michael's Church, where he was elected to the vestry for three consecutive years starting in 1761.

Within thirty years, Burrows was among the most important personages in the colony. In 1772, his son, William Ward Burrows, was admitted to one of the four Inns of Court in London. This was a prestigious accomplishment: between 1759 and 1786, 114 Americans were admitted to the Inns of Court (of these, forty-six came from South Carolina).

Judge Burrows, his wife, and their two daughters had been living on Tradd Street at that time, but in 1772, he purchased a lot on Broad Street. It was a premier address. As its name implied, Broad Street was one hundred feet wide and functioned as the hub of civic and commercial activity in Charleston.

Burrows's lot was only a few steps from the colonial State House and his church. A portion of Lot 159 as laid out in the Grand Modell, the land had been part of the tract dedicated for the use of the Anglican Church when Governor Philip Ludwell granted it to Robert Seabrooke in 1692. Lot 159 was later subdivided, and the central portion changed hands numerous times before Burrows purchased it from the estate of James Moultrie. The lot was forty feet wide and 195 feet deep; at the back ran St. Michael's Alley. It was spacious enough to accommodate a townhouse, a wooden two-story kitchen, a brick carriage house and stable with servants' quarters, and a large cistern.



The new townhouse was built of black cypress. If a contemporary drawing is correct, a handsome balustrade surmounted the third floor. The ten-room mansion was furnished with trappings suitable to Burrows's social position: sterling silver, mirrors, window curtains, rugs, and mahogany pieces made by Thomas Elfe, one of the best cabinetmakers in the province.

Shortly after the house was completed, Burrows's eldest daughter, Mary, married Joseph Atkinson, a Charleston merchant. Tragedy struck only a few months later, however, when both Burrows's wife and his youngest daughter, Sally, died.

In 1776, the Provincial Congress of South Carolina framed a new state constitution and renamed themselves the General Assembly of South Carolina. They also formed a special legislative council, for which Burrows served as ordinary. Over the next several years, the Revolutionary War raged on, and by 1780, Charleston was occupied by British forces. After these trials, Judge Burrows's health began to decline. He died in 1781, leaving his son and surviving daughter a considerable estate.



William Ward Burrows is one of South Carolina's most distinguished native sons. The younger Burrows returned from England before the Revolution and served as an officer in the South Carolina militia. In a ceremony near Philadelphia in 1783, he married Mary Bond, the daughter of Dr. Thomas Bond Jr., who had served as purveyor-general of the Continental army. Shortly afterwards, the newlyweds arrived in Charleston to settle Judge Burrows's estate. Burrows put his father's mansion up for sale and then returned to Philadelphia.

When the United States Marine Corps was established in 1798, President John Adams appointed Burrows commandant with the rank of major, making him the second commandant of the Marine Corps (Samuel Nicholas of Philadelphia was in charge of the Continental Marines during the Revolution and is considered the first commandant). Subsequently promoted to lieutenant colonel, Burrows is credited with beginning many of the corps's institutions, including the Marine Band, which was partially financed by levying contributions from his officers.

In 1800, the nation's capital was moved to Washington, D.C. Lieutenant Colonel Burrows was a personal friend of Thomas Jefferson, and when he became president, the pair rode through Washington on horseback together to look for a suitable site to establish the Marine barracks and commandant's quarters.

On New Year's Day of 1801, the commandant marched his Marine Band to the executive mansion and gave a concert for President Adams. Concerts were also performed for President Jefferson's inauguration and the Fourth of July that same year.

Lieutenant Colonel William Ward Burrows retired in 1804 due to failing health and died in early 1805, at the age of forty-seven. He was buried in the Presbyterian Cemetery in Washington, D.C. When Arlington National Cemetery was established in 1892, he was reinterred there with full military honors. According to an obituary in Charleston's *City Gazette* published on March 28, 1805, the commandant was the "most benevolent of men." The famed American author Washington Irving even described Burrows as "a gentleman of accomplished mind and polished manners."



The commandant's son, another William Ward Burrows, was born in 1785 outside of Philadelphia. He became a naval officer and, during the First Barbary War, served with distinction off Tripoli in 1804. During a furlough in the midst of the War of 1812, he was captured by the British and sent to a Barbados jail as a prisoner of war. After his parole and exchange, he was given his first command, the *USS Enterprise*. Unfortunately, his first naval engagement was also to be his last.

In September 1813, the *Enterprise* came upon the HMS *Boxer* near the coast of Maine. The two brigs fired off challenges just before the wind began to die down. As they waited for the wind to pick up again, people lined the shore to witness what would become one of the last great battles fought between sailing ships.

The ships jockeyed for position until they were about thirty feet apart. The *Boxer* fired off a broadside. Moments later, the *Enterprise* responded with a fusillade that instantly killed the British captain, Samuel Blyth.

Lieutenant Burrows was mortally wounded by musket fire only moments later. He refused to leave the deck, however, until victory was at hand. He watched the *Enterprise* cut across the *Boxer*'s bow and rake the deck of her adversary. With main topmast and foretopsail yard cut, the increasingly unmanageable *Boxer* continued to fight until she was practically in ruins. Blyth had ordered the ship's colors nailed to the masts, and the humiliated crew had to cut them down. Blyth's sword was taken to the victorious *Enterprise*. The dying Burrows requested that it be given to his family and heroically declared, "I am satisfied. I die contented."

The next morning, the *Enterprise* sailed into Portland Harbor with her prize in tow. The city orchestrated a funeral with full military honors. Black-draped barges brought identical coffins to Union Wharf as guns fired salutes from harbor forts. Church bells rang as the caskets were escorted to the church by a solemn procession of city officials, civic leaders, military officials from Kittery Naval Yard, and the crews of both ships. Then, the caskets of the two brave captains were buried side by side in Eastern Cemetery.

The *Enterprise*'s stunning victory was a much-needed American success after the loss of the *USS Chesapeake* earlier in 1813, and it was enthusiastically received by the nation. Congress officially praised Burrows's bravery and posthumously awarded him the Congressional Gold Medal.

The surviving British officers had a brick cenotaph topped by a marble slab erected over Captain Blyth's grave. Interestingly, Burrows's grave was virtually ignored until a visitor accidentally came upon the site and decided to construct a sandstone and marble cenotaph as a "monument of respect."

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the revered American poet, was six years old at the time of the battle. His family lived in Portland, and the event must have had a lasting effect on him. Years later, he immortalized the battle in his poem "My Lost Youth." Theodore Roosevelt also thought the battle was noteworthy, observing in *The Naval War of 1812* that "the conduct of Lieutenant Burrows needs no comment. He was an officer greatly beloved and respected in the service." Since 1814, three ships in the United States Navy have been named *William Ward Burrows* in honor of the brave captain from an all-but-forgotten war.



Lieutenant Burrows left no heirs, and the male line of the Burrows family became extinct. His grandfather's elegant mansion in Charleston would, in time, suffer the same fate.

When Commandant Burrows sold the property in 1784, it was purchased by another colonial patriot, Thomas Hall. Born in 1750, Hall fought at Fort Moultrie in 1776 and took part in the siege of Savannah in 1779. He was captured by the British during the siege of Charleston, and along with other politically prominent Charlestonians, imprisoned in St. Augustine, Florida. After his exchange, he was at Yorktown when Lord Cornwallis surrendered. Hall was Charleston's first postmaster and served as a clerk of the United States District Court of General Sessions. He died childless in 1814 and left his Broad Street home to his wife, who put it up for sale the following year.

In 1815, Jehu Jones, a free black entrepreneur, purchased the property and converted it into a hotel. Noted for its elegance, Jones's establishment won the approval of author Thomas Hamilton, who advised in *Men and Manners of America* that "every Englishman who visits Charleston, will, if he be wise, direct his baggage to Jones's hotel. It is a small house, but every thing is well managed, and the apartments are good."

Jones's hotel was sold in 1847, and it passed through a succession of owners. During Jane Davis's occupancy prior to the Civil War, it was renamed the "Mansion House," a title Davis had used for the hotel she previously operated at Meeting and Queen Streets. After hostilities ceased, the establishment was turned into a boarding house and became increasingly derelict as the years progressed.

By the 1920s, South Carolina was experiencing an agricultural depression. Banks that had issued loans based on inflated land values began to shut their doors when crops failed, and cotton shipments from the port of Charleston were decimated. The owners of the Mansion House property were likely glad to sell the south section of the lot to St. Michael's Church for \$4,000 in 1922.

Fortunately, the 1920s also marked a period of rising national interest in colonial heritage. Northern money began buying up plantations and rehabilitating a number of Charleston's eighteenth-century houses. A buyer appeared who wanted to purchase the neglected Burrows mansion, dismantle it, and rebuild it upon the Ashley River waterfront. The price was believed to be \$10,000. The building was taken apart, but the Great Depression intervened, and the mansion's architectural elements languished in storage for almost three decades.

In 1957, the drawing room of the Burrows House was acquired by the Winterthur Museum in Winterthur, Delaware, an institution renowned for its collection of American decorative arts. Today, the remains of this grand old mansion serve as a backdrop for the Charleston Dining Room, an ever-present tribute to the accomplishments of Judge William Burrows.

Harriett P. and Albert Simons forever preserved the Burrows legacy in their well-documented article about the William Burrows House. It first appeared in the 1967 *Winterthur Portfolio* and was published two years later in the *South Carolina Historical Magazine*. As for the Broad Street site of the Burrows mansion, it is now occupied by a Beaux Arts-style commercial building that was constructed in 1930.



Peg Eastman is actively involved in the preservation of Charleston's rich cultural history. She is a freelance writer for the Charleston Mercury, and through the History Press, coauthored with her brother Mendel & Me: Life with Congressman L. Mendel Rivers (2007) and authored Hidden History of Civil War Charleston (2012), among other works. She also served for some years as a professional guide at the Winterthur Museum.