

Magnolia Messenger

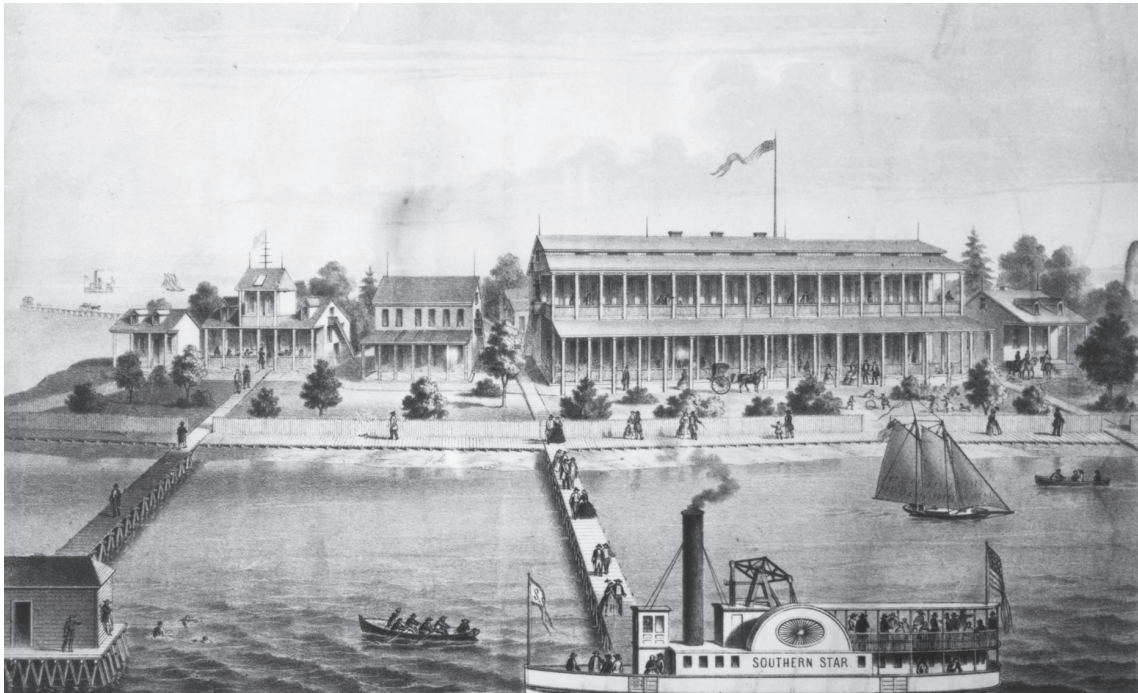
THE FRIENDS OF MAGNOLIA CEMETERY
NEWSLETTER

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"Remove not the ancient Landmark"

Summer 2015

A Melancholy Fate



Point Clear had become a popular summer resort by the 1850's when Joseph Lesesne had made it his permanent home. His yacht, called the Vesper, allowed a pleasant commute but would share his "melancholy fate" in 1856.

McCall Library/USA

A South Carolinian

The weather along the Gulf Coast can range from unpredictable to deadly. Violent squalls can erupt out of an otherwise ordinary afternoon on Mobile Bay with deadly results. Five sailboat enthusiasts lost their lives in a matter of minutes on an April afternoon this year. And once the storm passed through the waters were eerily calm and the temperatures unseasonably cool.

History has a way of repeating itself. Nearly 160 years earlier a sudden squall capsized a sailboat headed for Point Clear. Three of the five passengers would never be found, and the weather was much cooler than normal. The news of the tragedy hit papers all across the South in 1856. The owner of that yacht was a prominent lawyer and judge: Joseph White Lesesne.

Joseph Lesesne was born in Georgetown, S.C. where his 1810 baptism is recorded in the city's Methodist church. Georgetown is a coastal city located midway between Myrtle Beach to the north and Charleston to the south. The Lesesne family traced their lineage to a French Huguenot who had arrived in South Carolina by 1679.

At the age of 17, Lesesne entered Yale and is listed there in 1829. According to information found within his papers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Lesesne left Yale when "he refused to inform on a fellow student." Finances may have also played a role since as late as 1836 he was writing a New Haven bookseller promising to repay debts incurred while he was a student.



South Carolina College

Joseph White Lesesne's alma mater where his father-in-law presided. The school would be rechartered in 1906 to become the University of South Carolina.

Lesesne entered South Carolina College where he graduated in 1832 with first honors. That college had been founded in 1801 and over a century later would be re-chartered as the University of South Carolina.

The president of South Carolina College, would become his father-in-law.

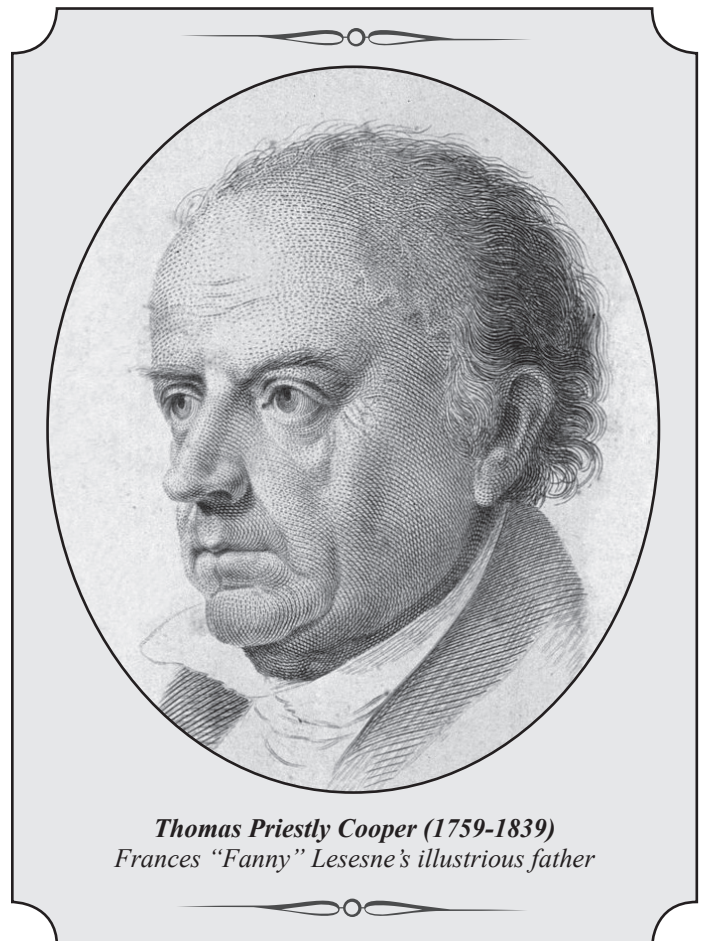
Thomas Priestly Cooper: From Abolitionist to Slaveholder

Thomas Priestly Cooper had been born in London in 1759 and graduated from University College at Oxford. Cooper had an insatiable desire for knowledge, going on to study medicine in London and then moved up to Manchester where he was hired by cotton mills where his knowledge of chemicals used in bleaching cloth was invaluable.

When the French Revolution broke out, Cooper's curiosity and interest in both politics and philosophy took him to France. When he got back to England, he began to espouse his ideas about the good that came from the revolution. Apparently the British authorities did not agree and he was warned twice by government officials about what was termed his "seditious speech."

In 1793, perhaps to avoid further problems with the authorities, Cooper arrived in Philadelphia and had settled there permanently a year later.

Cooper enjoyed the new freedoms of the young republic and vigorously endorsed the benefits of the freedom of speech. Not



surprisingly, Cooper became a strong critic of President John Adams and his Federalist party which espoused a strong central government and the suppression of free speech. In 1800 his criticism of the president landed him in jail for six months under the Federalist's Sedition Act. He was released after six months and Thomas Jefferson's landslide victory would end the power of Cooper's enemies.

With the defeat of the Federalists, he was awarded the position of district judge. Political turmoil once again meant the end of his judgeship and he was hired by the University of Pennsylvania to teach chemistry. In 1812 he married Elizabeth Heming, a Pennsylvanian, and seven years later they moved to Charlottesville to teach at the University of Virginia. For reasons not entirely clear they remained in that city only a year and he never taught. The following year they moved to Columbia, S.C. where he presided over Charleston College.

Cooper would preside over the college for 14 years until he was ousted over what was described as "student disciplinary problems" as well as professing anti-Protestant sentiments. In retrospect the man was 75 years old and may have been ready for retirement.

It was also in 1834 that his daughter Frances, known as Fannie, married Joseph Lesesne.

Cooper died five years later at the age of 80 and ironically is buried in a Protestant churchyard: that of Trinity Episcopal Church. And in another bit of irony, Cooper, who had been

an outspoken abolitionist in the north obtained a slave family upon his arrival in South Carolina. Perhaps he recognized this hypocrisy as his will granted freedom to that family.

Mobile

After receiving his undergraduate degree, Joseph Lesesne entered politics in Columbia where he began writing for the "Columbia Telescope." That publication was supportive of nullification, or the theory that any state in the union could nullify or invalidate, any federal law which it deemed unconstitutional. That theory is as controversial in the 21st century as it was in the 19th.

In 1834, Lesesne completed his legal apprenticeship and passed the bar. He married Frances "Fannie" Cooper in December of that year and began practicing law in York, S.C. Two years later he had followed a flood of other South Carolinians to Mobile, Alabama.

Lesesne went into partnership with another recent arrival, John Forsyth. Forsyth had graduated from Princeton as valedictorian and would later serve as editor of the Mobile Register. His next law partner was William D. Dunn who was active in Alabama's Whig Party and in the early 1840's served in the state legislature. By that time Lesesne was in partnership with yet another attorney, John Hall and city directories indicate that he and Fannie were living in the vicinity of Ann and Dauphin streets.

According to Florence Scott's book, Battles Wharf and Point Clear, the Lesesnes built a summer home at Point Clear in



In 1869 the city directory for Mobile lists Fanny Lesesne's occupation as "Principal, Church Home, Spring Hill." That entity has long been known as Wilmer Hall and survives today. The 19th century structure shown here was replaced long ago.

1835. As the couple did not arrive in Mobile before 1836 this is obviously incorrect, but the couple certainly was summering there a decade later.

His career was quite successful and in 1847 he was elected Chancellor (judge) of the Southern Division. In 1848 he was one of the founders of the Alabama and Tennessee Railroad. City directories by the 1850's list his office first on Conception Street facing Bienville Square, and later as simply on St. Michael Street. The 1855 directory lists his residence as "Point Clear."

Lesesne had grown up in a coastal community and he apparently was an avid sailor. He contracted with a boat builder, John Pearce who was known at the time for producing "very fast yachts." The sailboat he created for Lesesne was christened the Vesper. It allowed the judge to do something taken for granted to day: commute daily from downtown Mobile to waterfront property at Point Clear.

On an October day in 1856, Lesesne and his two sons, boarded the Vesper at a dock in downtown Mobile. Also on board was a young male house servant of the Lesesnes'. As the vessel cut across the bay they found themselves in a sudden squall. Apparently the storm struck so quickly that they were unable to take down the sails in time and the boat was blown over. Judge Lesesne and a son were lost in the waves. Their bodies were never found.

Charles, Jr., age 4 and the servant clung to the overturned hull as waves crashed and the temperature dropped. The servant heroically attempted to shield the little boy from the cold and whether rescued by another vessel or able to swim ashore, survived.. According to one newspaper account, the weather "is chilly enough to make thick clothing and good blankets acceptable..." quite unusual for the middle of October in Mobile. The night was "fearfully cold" read another account.

Although the October, 1856 issues of the Mobile Registers are sadly non-existent in the public library files, the sad event and the prominence of Judge Lesesne prompted newspapers from New Orleans to South Carolina to carry news of the tragedy. The Times Picayune in New Orleans reprinted an article from the Mobile Register which read in part:

Mobile, Oct. 16, 1856: A terrible disaster has just reached our ears as the mail boat is ringing her warning bell. Yesterday evening our esteemed citizen, Judge Lesesne was conveying his two young sons from Spring Hill College to their home at Point Clear on his yacht the "Vesper" when a squall capsized the boat, and painful to relate, the Judge and one of his sons were drowned.

Sadly I was unable to find any record of the name of the drowned son or his age. As Charles, who survived had been born in 1852 he may have been out visiting in the vicinity of Spring Hill College the day before the accident but he certainly was not a student there.

And an editorial in that paper also read: The suddenness of the shock, and the melancholy character of the catastrophe, will lend fresh poignancy to the grief with which (this) community will

receive the news of the judge's decease." The editor extolled Lesesne as "A man of rare endowments, varied accomplishments and extensive acquirements."

The Yorkville (S.C.)Enquirer of October 23 editorialized: Lesesne's untimely decease will awaken keen regrets in his native state.

It is unknown when the family gave up on finding either of the men or details of a memorial service – or if there was one. The Lesesne plot at Magnolia Cemetery lacks any marker recalling the two lost family members .

Fannie Lesesne soon sold the family home, a result of her grief or perhaps finances. She purchased a bit over an acre on Battles Lane and built a smaller house for she and her three surviving children. In 1866 she sold it and moved to Mobile permanently.

In reviewing the city directories for Mobile, Fannie Lesesne went to work as a teacher. In 1867 she was listed as "Assistant Teacher, Southern Institute, 62 Monroe Street. Mrs. A. D. Chaudron, Prin." Two years later she was listed as "Principal, Church Home, Spring Hill." Today that institution still exists as Wilmer Hall.

By the 1870's and into the 1880's Mrs. Lesesne is listed in city directories as living on Claiborne at Monroe streets and no occupation is beside her name. She died on September 25, 1900 at the age of 87 and is buried in Magnolia Cemetery beside her son Charles who had survived a watery grace more than 45 years earlier.

Tom McGehee



Lesesne lot at Magnolia Cemetery holds Frances "Fanny" Lesesne and two of her children. The bodies of her husband and son were never recovered for burial

Death in Merry Old England: Exploding Corpses and Black Baize

The passing of a medieval earl required the turn-out and lineup of all his friends, servants, supporters, tenants and hangers-on. If you had no friends, your heirs could buy them for you. A staggering 31,968 people attended the funeral of the Bishop of London in 1303 with many paid just to turn up.

The profession of the undertaker developed in England in the late 17th century to coordinate the activities of the coffin maker, coach-hire company and upholsterer. Previously all had been commissioned separately by the family of the deceased.

The upholsterer was required to hang the main rooms of a house in mourning in black fabric. A period description noted, "The hall to be hanged with a breadth of black baize, the great dining room, where the better sort of mourners are to be, to be hanged with a breadth of baize, the body to be there."

The display of the corpse of an important personage was a hugely important ritual, but sometimes grand funerals could take weeks to arrange. The actual body would have decomposed before then so a wax or wooden image was used to stand in for it, termed a "representation." Creating these funerary representations was the origin of Madame Tussaud's business.

Embalming

The early embalming of bodies was a very inexact science, and if it went wrong the build-up of gases in the coffin could be spectacular and damaging. It was said that Henry VIII's body exploded as it lay overnight in its coffin at Syon Abbey.

Improvements were made over the years, and one Dr. Martin Van Butchell, had his own dead wife's blood vessels injected with carmine and glass eyes inserted. He kept her in his sitting room and introduced her to visitors. Ultimately the second Mrs. Van Butchell insisted that her predecessor leave.

The increasing intricacy and ritual of mourning during the Victorian era and its petty rules regarding timing began to make this cult of grief appear overblown and insincere. But the great advantage of the funeral with a cast of thousands was that it had a cathartic, crowd pleasing quality. Now our corpses are shuffled off quietly to the cemetery or incinerator and we're embarrassed by loss and sorrow.

Excerpt from "If Walls Could Talk – An Intricate History of the Home" by Lucy Worsley.



Cemetery Symbolism



During the Victorian era in America when the tilt of a lady's fan could indicate anything from "I am interested in you" to "Forget it," it is not surprising to find 19th century cemeteries filled with symbolism. How many of the following can you find during your next visit to Magnolia Cemetery?

- **Animals** – Dog: Signifies loyalty and a master worth loving. Dove: Peace, innocence, purity. Lamb: Christ, sacrifices, innocence. This was the most common figure to be found on a child's grave in the 19th century.
- **Body Parts** – Hands Clasped: A farewell or last goodbye. Hands Praying: devotion. Hand Pointing Upward: Heavenly reward, ascension to heaven.
- **Figures**: Angel Weeping: Grief. Child Sleeping: Death. Woman Weeping: mourning.
- **Objects**: Anchor: hope, life eternal. Bible: resurrection. Column: (broken) sorrow, a broken life. Cross with Crown: sovereignty of Christ. Drapery motif: sorrow, mourning. Garland: victory. Hourglass: Classic symbol for the fleeting of time. Torch (inverted): extinction of life, death, mourning. Torch (upright): immortality, an upright life. Urn: Greek symbol of mourning. Draped Urn: death, sorrow. Urn with Flame: Undying remembrance. Winged Globe: a symbol of the Egyptian sun god, Re. On Victorian monuments this can symbolize "God, Lord of all, creator."
- **Plants and Flowers**: Acanthus: a favorite Greek motif associated with ancient cemeteries. Dogwood: Christianity, resurrection. Easter Lily: symbolic of resurrection. Fern: sincerity or sorrow. Flower(broken): premature death. Grapes: Christ. Grapevine: Christian faith. Ivy: abiding memory, friendship, fidelity. Lily: innocence and purity. Oak Tree: stability, honor, eternity. Palm: spiritual victory over death, peace. Pomegranate: immortality, nourishment of the soul. Rose: condolence, sorrow, brevity of earthly existence. The age of a rose can also indicate the age of the deceased with a bud representing a child under 12, and a full bloom indicating a person in their mid-20's. Weeping Willow Tree: grief, earthly sorrow, Nature's lament. Wreath: victory in death, eternity.

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Summer 2015

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

With a rainy spring season now over, the grounds of the cemetery are looking lush but well maintained thanks to Mark Halseth and his crew. The narcissus gave way to the white bearded iris and yellow jasmine. Today the impatiens at the Ann Street gate are already forming a colorful carpet to greet cars turning into the cemetery. And once inside visitors are sure to notice the freshly painted cast iron fences surrounding many of the most historic sites within Magnolia Cemetery.

Not all local cemeteries reflect this pride. Today I happened to visit a privately owned one just a few miles to the south and observed graves littered with leaves, camellias butchered into stumps and an air of desolation. Water spigots lean mournfully. The water was cut off years ago and there seems to be no interest in making repairs. I passed by members of their grounds crews

hacking at shrubbery with machetes and just shook my head in disgust. And to think families once moved their loved ones from our historic cemetery to this nightmare!

Thank you for your support of the Friends. If it had not been for this organization our cemetery would probably be just as forlorn as that other cemetery.

*Tom McGehee
President*

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