



# Tidelands

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# Mansfield: back in Parker hands

BY DAVID FARROW

It is a sterling morning in late December. As we drive the two-mile dirt road from Highway 701 to the stately Mansfield Plantation, we are transported from the early 21st century to the early 18th century. As the years peel off with the miles, one passes by an old brick gate. The sun gleams off the original slave cabins and beautifully-restored slave chapel.

One arrives at the handsome 18th century home with brick outbuildings and is struck by the loving care evidenced by the attention to detail. The back of the house faces the wide expanse of rice fields. The new South melts away as the affability of the old South begins to reassert itself – strip malls replaced by the row of cabins, 1960s architecture replaced by the gentle lines of the 1760s.



JASON LESLEY/TIDELANDS

Avenue of oaks leads past slave cabins to the main house at Mansfield Plantation.

My wife and I have been invited to breakfast with the owners of this obscure jewel. We are greeted at the door by John and Sallie Parker. They are a striking couple. John Rutledge Parker is tall and lanky, with the demeanor of a

gentle Alan Ladd. Sallie Middleton Parker looks 15 years less than her true age, her eyes sparkle with the effervescence of youth.

They lead us through the living room into the dining room. There, seated at the

long dining room table, are an array of people with different accents ranging from Oregon to New York. Mansfield serves as a bed and breakfast and is thought to be one of the finest in the U.S. if not the world. The outbuildings serve as the bed. We are lucky enough to be seated for the breakfast. The side table is laden with an exquisite French toast, fresh sausage, an array of fresh fruit and other wonderful side dishes.

Graciousness cannot be bought, but only acceded, and the Parkers are proof of this concept. The lost art of polite conversation reasserts itself at this table. The guests are in awe of the Old South.

Finally after good riposte and better victuals, John Parker excuses himself to go work at trimming back the rice fields and Sallie takes us on a

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# Mansfield Plantation a B&B

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tour of the slave cabins, all in the process of being restored.

We enter the chapel and she says, "There was a wedding here not long ago. The people came down here to get married. Imagine how pretty it was with the chapel decorated in candle light."

We walk to the front of the house and talk some more. In the distance one can hear the roar of the bush hog and see John Parker's head bobbing up and down.

For John Parker, working in the rice field is part of his DNA. Indeed, the land was in his family for 156 years. Parker owns a car dealership and explains, "I feel quite fortunate and grateful that I have done well enough to bring Mansfield back to the family where it belongs."

Sallie Middleton Parker is a writer. She says her biggest influences are "Grimm's fairy tales, Nabokov — whoever I happen to be reading at the time if they are any good. I find my own writing mimics their style for awhile. I'm still looking for my distinctive voice. Actually, I pretty much know what it is, but it goes against the rules."

There is some small irony in this statement for, writing under her maiden name, Sallie Middleton, Mrs. Parker writes an etiquette column for *The Times of Georgetown* and now for the *Asheville Citizen-Times*. As she once told this writer, "You have to know the rules before you can break them."

## Circumstances

While it may have taken years for John Parker to return to Mansfield, His and his bride's path towards marriage was somewhat arduous as well. Although they are both from Charleston, age and circumstance delayed their meeting to the most precipitous moment.

Mrs. Parker spent much her life in Asheville, N.C., where her mother, the renowned

watercolor artist (also Sallie Middleton) lives and paints. Her mother and father had separated years ago, so Mrs. Parker spent much of her time in the mountains where she and John live today.

She says that years ago she was at a really low time in her life. Her best friend had recently committed suicide, and she had broken up with the man to whom she was engaged. Her father suggested she come home to Charleston to get away from her travesties for awhile.

## A party for Sallie

Once in Charleston, she explains, "Daddy announced one morning that he was going to have a party for me at the Yacht Club and for me to go to the beach, have fun, and when I came home the party would have been arranged.

"So I went to Sullivan's Island to see an old friend from Ashley Hall. While I was there, my former fiancé drove up in his big, black, shiny Mercedes Benz. He had come to Charleston to see friends, heard I was in the area, located me, and once again asked me to marry him. I had a feeling that I would soon be meeting the man I was destined to end up with. It was hard, but once again, I told this man no. He packed up his huge diamond ring and told me goodbye. My brain was scared to death I'd made a mistake, but my heart knew I had not.

"That evening, Daddy and I went to the Yacht Club. He had spent the entire day calling people and one hundred guests showed up. That was where I first saw John. I was 40 years old — he was 43. The moment I saw him, I knew he was the man God had chosen for me. We only talked for four minutes, but the next morning I told Daddy, 'If I lived in Charleston, I'd be dating John Parker.' Daddy did not know at the time that John was divorced.

"So I went back to Asheville

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# Mansfield listed on Register of Historic Places

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renewed and with hope in my heart. Sure enough, John called. At first we saw each other every weekend, then began to meet in Columbia every Wednesday, as well. Finally, John sold his dealership in Charleston and moved to Asheville. We dated for a couple of more years (I was still afraid of marriage), until I finally got up the nerve to say yes. We were married at Trinity Episcopal Church before about 250 guests Dec. 29 – 13 years ago. The minute we were married my fear fell away and joy soared to the snow clouds (there was a blizzard outside).”

In 2004, John Parker bought Mansfield Plantation thus restoring the land to his family and fulfilling a lifelong dream. Today, Mansfield Plantation covers nearly 1,000 acres and is recognized as “one of the most architectural-



TIMES FILE PHOTO

John and Sallie Parker at Mansfield Plantation.

ly intact rice plantation in South Carolina.” It is a member of the National Register of Historic Places.

## Land grant of 1718

It all started in 1718 when a land grant of 500 acres was given to John Green. It was

one of the earliest grants of land along the Black River. Later, Green received additional grants on the Black River, which he later developed into the plantations of Wedgefield, Peru/Cumbee, Windsor and Beneventum laid out along a creek flowing into the

Black River from the south, which was soon named after the Green family. John and Elizabeth Green settled there and had six children. When Green died in 1750, his will directed that the 500 acre tract be sold to James Coachman. A lawyer, Coachman lived in St. James’ Parish, Goose Creek with his brother William. In the mid-18th century, the two bought and sold numerous tracts of land in Georgetown County.

In 1756 Coachman sold the 500 acre tract to Susannah LaRoach Man, widow of Dr. John Man a surgeon of Prince Fredrick’s Parish whom she had married in 1743. They had two children. Susannah was born in 1745 and Mary, 1748. Susannah began construction of a house and named the property Mansfield, in honor of her late husband.

Susannah utilized the tidal

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swamp on the Black River, and by 1775, sold 60 barrels of rice to the merchants Wragg & Smith of Georgetown. She later bought land on Peter's Creek and inherited property just outside Georgetown. This was apparently the acquisition that brought Mansfield to 760 continuous acres, and it remained that way until the 1980s.

In 1769, Susannah Man married James Castles, a planter of Winyah and Charlestown. She died a year later leaving an infant son, John, who was placed in his grandmother's care at Mansfield. James Castles remained loyal to the crown during the Revolution. He was proscribed — his property was confiscated by the state. He fled to England in 1782 with his son.

Mary Man stayed with her mother at Mansfield. In 1722 she purchased two lots on Front Street in Georgetown and built a two-story house with a central hall and double parlors. Mary and her mother lived in town but continued to ride horseback some six miles each way out to Mansfield to oversee rice production.

When she was 37 years old she married Archibald Taylor and even at that age had

two children: John Man Taylor (1786) and Anna Maria Taylor (1787). After her children were born, she spent summers in Boston and died there in 1801.

John Man Taylor came into possession of Mansfield at age 15 as a residuary legatee under his mother's will. He graduated from Harvard in 1803 and earned a master's degree in 1806. He lived at Mansfield as a bachelor entertaining friends and overseeing the work of 125 slaves. He served as vestryman at Prince George Winyah Episcopal Church and joined the Winyah Indigo Society and the Georgetown Library Society. At his death, at age 37, he left Mansfield to his sister, Anna Maria Taylor.

Anna Maria Taylor married Josias Allston, Jr. They had no children. Josias died on 1808. In 1816 Anna Allston then married the Reverend Maurice Harvey Lance, rector of the parish of Prince George's of Winyah, and had two daughters: Mary Taylor (1818) and Ester Jane (1822). They lived at Mansfield for the next 25 years. Lance also owned Mauricena on the Saunpit. Both of their children made their debut in Charleston.

In 1836, Mansfield came into the Parker family. Mary Taylor Lance married Dr. Francis Simons Parker of Charleston. Dr. Parker was a graduate of the College of Charleston and first honor graduate of the Charleston Medical College, but soon

learned that profits from rice planting were so great that he gave up practicing medicine. In 1840 he purchased Wedgefield Plantation from Samuel Wragg, but the next year he traded it to his mother-in-law for Mansfield and Greenwich. Using his scientific background, Dr. Parker experimented with different fertilizers on the soil at Mansfield and increased the production from 375,000 pounds in 1850 to 1,440,000 pounds in 1860. He discovered that bat dung produced the highest yields of rice. Parker received advice from and shared his results with fellow members of the Planters Club on the Pee Dee and the Winyah and All Saints Agriculture Society.

With unrest in the South, Dr. Parker became a vocal supporter of States' Rights and as his forebears, who had signed such historic documents as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States; he signed the South Carolina Ordinance of Secession on 20 December 1860 in Institute Hall in Charleston. At the onset of the war, Parker's three oldest sons volunteered with the Confederacy, the eldest John was killed in Dumfries, Va., during the first year of fighting. Frank, the second son, served throughout the war as aide-de-camp to General Bragg, rose to the rank of major by the

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Continued end of the war. Arthur Middleton entered the Confederate service one month after his 16th birthday in September of 1861. The fourth son, James, was called to the colors with the second class of The Citadel. Dr. Parker served as Provost Marshal for Georgetown district during the war and was said to have ruled with a firm but fair hand. In the spring of 1865, the Parkers were staying at Greenwich, just outside Georgetown, but a mob of slaves incited by federal troops forced the family out and burned the house. Dr. Francis Simons Parker died in 1867.

His widow never remarried and in 1868 Mary Taylor signed a deed conveying Mansfield to her sons. The Parker boys operated Mansfield for several years at a profit but the years following the war were crowded with hardship and difficulty. Like most Georgetown rice plantations Mansfield fell victim to labor problems, hurricanes and the growth of the rice industry in Louisiana and Arkansas. As a last resort many of the planters financed their operations through the sale of turpentine and timber from the uplands. When these resources were exhausted little was left. By 1912 Mansfield was no

longer producing rice and at the death of their father, Arthur Middleton Parker, the heirs decided to sell Mansfield to Charles W. Tuttle of Auburn, N.Y., breaking the 156-year chain of ownership.

Mansfield became Tuttle's winter home and hunting retreat. In 1931 Tuttle sold Mansfield to Col. Robert L. Montgomery and his wife, Charlotte, of Ardrossan, Pa. They added a basement to the main house and converted the School House and old kitchen to guest houses. They also added the north guest house and brick fan-shaped patio. Montgomery also experimented with growing rice. After he ceased rice production, the fields basically became lakes and a haven for wildlife.

After Charlotte Montgomery's death in 1970, her heirs sold Mansfield to Wilbur S. Smith of Columbia, S.C., who kept Mansfield from developers. Smith acquired adjoining land and brought Mansfield to its present size of just over 900 acres. At his death, his daughter Sarah Smith Cahalan inherited the plantation and operated it as a Bed & Breakfast and provided tours.

Sarah (Sally) Smith sold Mansfield to John Rutledge Parker (Francis Simons Parker's great-great grandson) and Sallie Middleton Parker in 2004 returning Mansfield once again to the Parker family after an absence of 92 years. The Parkers have embarked on a restoration project of

the main and guest houses and have continued operating Mansfield as a B&B.

Rated as a top ten romantic getaway by Charleston Magazine, there are pages of favorable comments all over the World Wide Web from people all over the world. If one Googles "Mansfield Plantation, B&B comments," the least favorable remark is "fabulous!"

All too soon, the present day begins to reassert itself; obligations are beckoning. Sallie Parker emits a melodious laugh as she watches John bounce up and down on the bush hog in the distance.

As she walks us back to our car under the canopy of centuries-old live oaks, Sallie Parker smiles, "John does so love to work on the plantation. I'm so happy that he was able to reclaim his ancestral land. We are spending more and more time down here. I hope that we can become an integral part of the community."

When one leaves Mansfield, hack past the row of slave cabins down the avenue of oaks, one can't help but think that John Rutledge Parker is an example of a man who sets his sights on something and doesn't rest until he gets it through persistence and good humor. After all, he has won the hand of his fair lady and is now firmly ensconced in the land of his predecessors. One can only surmise that under his gentle touch both will flourish through the ages.