

# The Chatham Historical Journal

Volume 13, Number 1

Chatham County, North Carolina

March 2000

## A Letter from Charles Manly

Raleigh, Feby. 27 '49

To

Walter F. Leak Esq.

Dear Sir,

Having entire confidence in you as a man of honor & a Gentleman I take the liberty of asking information which, I presume it is in your power to give, upon a subject strictly private & confidential.

I wish to know the character, standing & circumstances of Mr. Pleasant Powell of Richmond County. - What is his occupation, what his style & manner of living, has he children and how many, what is his property & of what does it consist, whether in debt &c: &c: -

Having made these inquiries it is due to you that I should make known my object & the cause.

I have understood that Mr. P. has made

an offer of marriage to my only sister a Widow residing in Pittsboro for whom I entertain the most affectionate regard; & as the gentleman is an entire stranger to me it is desirable that I should learn who he is, that I may give her the benefit of my advice. She knows nothing of my writing this letter. -

I know you will duly appreciate my motives & while I beg of you the favor to respond in the most frank, free, & candid manner, I assure you upon my honor that your reply shall in every sense be kept secret & confidential & that your letter shall be destroyed as soon as I read it, to avoid the possibility of falling into other hands. I hope you will treat this paper in the same way.

It will afford me pleasure to reciprocate at any time such act of favor, often rendered indispensable [sic] in our social intercourse; & which I solicit the favor of the earliest reply. I assure you of my kind & most respectful regard.

Chas. Manly

Raleigh Feby. 27 '49

To  
Walter F. Leak Esq.  
Dear Sir,

Having entire confidence in you as a man of honor & a Gentleman I take the liberty of asking information which, I presume it is in your power to give, upon a subject strictly private & confidential.

I wish to know the



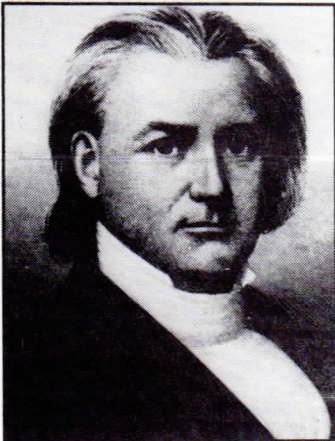
## Comments About the Letter

Jane Pyle

While conducting research for a history of the Leak family, Mary S. Andersen of Chapel Hill found a letter in family papers, and because it contained a reference to Pittsboro, she sent a transcript to her friend Mary Hayes Holmes, who in turn referred it to the Chatham County Historical Association. Ms. Andersen generously donated the letter to the Association in 1999.

The four characters in the mini-drama presented by this letter are associated one way or another with Chatham County, and brief summaries of their lives follow. The requested reply from Mr. Leak, if it was forthcoming, has not survived, to our knowledge. Did he respond immediately and favorably? Did his response make any difference to the decision to remarry? The marriage of Mrs. Thompson and Mr. Powell took place in May of 1849, a scant three months after Mr. Manly's letter was written.

### Charles Manly<sup>1</sup>



Charles Manly

Eldest son of Basil Manly, Charles Manly was born at the family home of Oakmont, northwest of Pittsboro. After graduation from the University of North Carolina in 1814, Manly moved to Raleigh to tutor the children of Raleigh lawyer John Haywood to earn money to read law with Robert Williams. After admission to the bar in 1816, Manly established a

law practice in Pittsboro and was appointed county attorney, traveling from his home in Raleigh frequently and staying with his sister Louisa Thompson at her home on Hillsboro Street. He built and maintained a law office in Pittsboro until 1848, entertaining local members of the bar at "Fort Snug."

Reading clerk and then chief clerk of the North Carolina House of Commons from 1824 to 1847 except for one short period, Manly's only elected office was to the governorship of North Carolina, from 1848 to 1850, when he was the last Whig governor. As governor he was noted for support of education, his interest in internal improvements, and efforts to get North Carolinian colonial documents from London. Among his other accomplishments, Manly was a director of the State Bank. He also served on a commission to sell Cherokee lands.

Manly was reputed to be a gregarious, fun-loving man, leading local players in dramatic productions in an improvised theater in the Masonic lodge. Kemp Battle, in his history of the University of North Carolina, wrote of Manly, a trustee for 40 years and secretary-treasurer from 1821 to 1868, "He had by nature a very bright mind, but was too unambitious to become great. His declamation was graceful and impressive; his manners agreeable and courteous. His mind abounded in humorous and instructive reminiscences, which he narrated most interestingly."

Manly died in 1871 and is buried in City Cemetery, Raleigh.

### Louisa Sophia Manly Thompson Powell<sup>2</sup>

Fifth child and first daughter of Capt. Basil Manly, Louisa was born in 1807. At the age of 22 she married Thomas Thompson, a well-respected merchant of Pittsboro. Little is known of Thompson. He is not listed in the US census for 1820, and the earliest deed in his name is a deed of trust dated 1826. In 1827 he bought land adjacent to the town commons on the road to Redfields ford north of Pittsboro (today's two lots



Louisa Sophia Manly  
Thompson-Powell

(from *The Manly Family*.  
Used by permission)

at the northeast corner of Thompson and Hillsboro Streets). This purchase was made with William Huntington of Hillsborough, with whom he was in business, and from whom he acquired full title in 1830. About the same time Thompson purchased four town lots, which were sold two years later by Thompson and William Bowen, who were in business together. A deed recorded in 1835 identifies a Thompson storehouse on part of town lot 30. Town lots were 105' by 210', and lot 30 occupied most of what is today the east side of Hillsboro south of Salisbury Street.

In 1831 Thompson was appointed clerk and master of the court of equity, and several deeds are executed by him in this capacity. Thomas and Louisa Thompson named their first child for her elder brother Charles, the second child for her father Basil, and the third child for her mother Elizabeth. Thomas Thompson died in 1834 while returning from a shopping trip to New York.

From all reports, the widowed Louisa lived quietly with her mother and three children in Pittsboro. How



often she might have traveled to Raleigh we do not know; however, she was present at a garden party in honor of Henry Clay in 1844, during his campaign for U.S. president. The story is told that Louisa was standing near Clay, who picked a blossom from a cape jessamine bush and handed it to her. Louisa took the flower home to Pittsboro and rooted it in her garden, and later she carried the bush with her to Powellton.

After a widowhood of fifteen years, Louisa married Pleasant M. Powell in May 1849 and a daughter was born to the couple in 1851. Powell died in 1860, and Louisa remained in Richmond County until her death in 1888.

Louisa is reputed to have been a woman of superior intellect, much loved and admired by all her family and friends. An unnamed editor is quoted in *The Manly Family* as saying, “[The three distinguished sons of Capt. Basil Manly] had a sister with a wonderful mind, and if she had had the same environments would have eclipsed them all.”<sup>4</sup>

### Walter F. Leak<sup>3</sup>

Walter Francis Leak was born in 1799 and was a student at the University of North Carolina 1815-1816. He was a member of the North Carolina House of Commons in 1831-32 and a state senator 1832-33 and was a trustee of the University of North Carolina for 22 years. In both positions, he would have been acquainted with Charles Manly.

A lifelong resident of Richmond County, residing in Rockingham, Leak, together with his brother and others, organized the Richmond Manufacturing Company, which was chartered in 1833. It produced a coarse cotton yarn used in home weaving. The factory was destroyed by Sherman’s army during the Civil War, but was rebuilt as the Great Falls Manufacturing Company in 1869.

An unpublished family history says that Leak was “known for his quick wit and equally quick, almost impulsive decision-making.” An attorney, he was a delegate to the Secession Convention of 1861, a colonel in the Civil War, and a candidate for the Democratic nomination for governor. Leak died in 1879.

### Pleasant M. Powell<sup>4</sup>

Col. Powell, who received his honorary title after his

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election to the Governor’s Council in 1858, was a man of ability and influence, active in agriculture and politics. Born in 1805, he inherited Powellton Plantation from his father in 1842. Powell married Nancy Morgan in 1823 and with her had nine children, the youngest born in 1847. Nancy Powell died in 1848, and, as noted above, he remarried in 1849.

An unsigned document in family papers says of Powell: “He led a private life, though often being solicited by his friends for public office. He was selected as one of Governor Ellis’ Council without his knowledge, which he reluctantly accepted, preferring the quiet of his own home. He was a strictly pious man and was quite independent as to worldly goods.”

Pleasant Miles Powell died of “dropsy” at age 55. It is said that a coffin was built around the chair he was sitting in when he died, and he was buried in an upright position. The gravestone in the Powell family cemetery is about three feet above others in the row.

### Robert James Powell<sup>5</sup>

Our story returns to Chatham County when Robert James Powell (1839 - 1893), son of Pleasant M. Powell, moved to Pittsboro, his step-mother’s home town. Powell married Mary Lea Garrett, granddaughter of Woodson Lea, in 1860. Garrett inherited land in Chatham County from her grandfather, whose name was passed from father to son in the Powell family. This Powell family continued to live in Pittsboro, where the widow of Woodson Lea Powell III still resides.



Capt. Robert James Powell  
(courtesy of Evelyn Powell)

### NOTES

1. Biographical data for Charles Manly are taken from: Doris Horton, unpublished, incomplete text of a lecture presented to the Chatham County Historical Association, 21 Nov 66; *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, edited by William S. Powell (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Kemp Battle, *History of the University of North Carolina*, Vol. 1 (Raleigh: 1907); Daniel L. Grant, *Alumni History of the University of North Carolina* (General Alumni Association of UNC, 1924); and *The Manly Family*, compiled by Louise Manly (Greenville, S.C.: 1930, reprinted by Charles G. Manly, 1999).
2. Louisa Sophia Manly’s life is detailed in *The Manly Family*. Deeds related to Thomas Thompson are filed in the office of the Chatham County Register of Deeds



(Book AA, p. 301; Book AB, p. 402 and 451; Book AC, p. 260 and 288).

3. Biographical data for Walter Francis Leak are taken from an unpublished family history by Mary S. Andersen, the *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, the *Alumni History of the University of North Carolina*, and files of the Richmond County Historical Collection.
4. Biographical information about Pleasant Powell is filed with the Richmond County Historical Collection and in Powell family papers in the possession of Evelyn (Mrs. W. L.) Powell, Pittsboro.
5. Cursory information about Robert James Powell is located in the Richmond County Historical Collection, in Powell family papers, and in the register of St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Pittsboro.

## Chatham County People in Military Service, World War I Additions and Corrections

*[Editor's Note: Following the publication of the last two issues of the Chatham Historical Journal, which listed men and women serving in World War I from Chatham County, several additions and corrections were received, as well as additional photographs. We are pleased to publish these and others as they are received.]*

George Henry Allred, 22, Siler City [incorrectly listed in "Local Board of Chatham County, List of Registrants Inducted Into Service," in the North Carolina Archives as African-American]

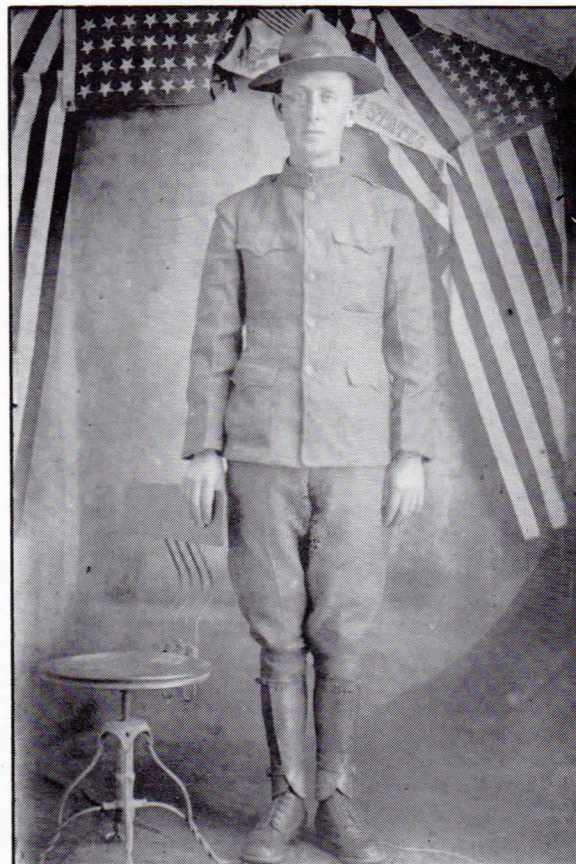
Archie Andrews

Earlie Mitchell, 21, Pittsboro

Roy A. Morris, 21, Bynum



John McMillan McIver, Jr.



J. Wiley White



Joe Thomas Burke