Anna Maria Calhoun Clemson

February 13, 1817—September 22, 1875

Anna Maria Calhoun Clemson, the wife of Thomas Green Clemson, seamlessly shifted between diplomat’s spouse, plantation mistress, mother and confidant. Intellectually gifted, Anna accomplished much in her short life of 58 years. Anna embodied the true role of an alma mater, the nurturing mother, as a co-founder of the institution that bears her married name. The motto of the Clemson University Women’s Alumni Council campaign is, “Her Land, His Plan,” reminding all that the Clemsons had a collective vision of what would be built at Fort Hill following their deaths.

Childhood

Anna Maria Calhoun, the fourth child and third daughter born to the Hon. John C. Calhoun and Floride Bonneau Colhoun Calhoun, was the only one of the statesman’s two daughters who lived to adulthood to marry. Her husband, Thomas Clemson, was the Calhouns’ only son-in-law, and Anna outlived all of her nine siblings.

Over a period of 18 years, John C. and Floride Calhoun had 10 children, three of whom died in infancy. Their children were as follows:
Andrew Pickens Calhoun (1811–1865);
Floride Pure Calhoun (1814–1815);
Jane Calhoun (1816–1816);
Anna Maria Calhoun (1817–1875);
Elizabeth Calhoun (1819–1820);
Patrick Calhoun (1821–1858);
John Caldwell Calhoun, Jr. (1823–1850);
Martha Cornelia Calhoun (1824–1857);
James Edward Calhoun (1826–1861); and
William Lowndes Calhoun (1829–1858).[1]

Education: 1831-1832

Anna was born in the Abbeville District at the Calhoun’s Bath Plantation, and her early schooling was in Pendleton and later at a female academy in Edgefield. She was well educated and finished her studies at the South Carolina Female Collegiate Institute, a women’s academy at Barhamville in Columbia, South Carolina.[2] At this women’s college founded by Dr. Elias Marks and his wife Jane Barham Marks, the course of study was rigorous. Marks, along with his second wife, Julia Pierpoint, created a four-year curriculum contemporary to those at male academies of the era. Two of Anna’s fellow classmates were Ann Pamela Cunningham, the founder of the Mount Vernon Ladies Society, and Georgian Martha Bullock, the mother of future President Theodore Roosevelt.

Her Father’s Daughter, and Eyes and Ears at Fort Hill

In many ways, Anna Maria Calhoun was much like her father. While John C. Calhoun overindulged his eldest son, Andrew, he struggled to aid the other four boys in finishing their college education. Calhoun doted on his handicapped daughter Martha Cornelia by taking her to numerous doctors, but it was his relationship with Anna that perhaps proved to be his most rewarding. In one letter to his daughter Anna, Calhoun wrote:

My dear Anna, Were it not for your letters, there are a thousand incidents that are daily occurring, where every incident even the smallest, is interesting to me, of which I should remain ignorant. Your Mother and Brother write me on grave subject of business, or what relates to the welfare of the family; but you fill up the interval with those little, but to me interesting details, which is so agreeable to an absent father to know. Were it not for you, I would not have heard a word about the Humming bird, their familiarity, the vines, their blooms, the freshness of the spring, the green yard, the children’s garden, and finally Patrick’s mechanical genius & his bateaux, every item of which excited agreeable associations, but accompanied with the painful recollection of my long absence, from those so dear to me. [3]
Early on, Calhoun realized that Anna was intellectually gifted. Not only did he discuss current events with her, but he also encouraged Anna’s study of, though not participation in, politics. On March 10, 1832, he wrote to Anna:

I am not one of those, who think your sex ought to have nothing to do with politicks. They have as much interest in the good condition of their country, as the other sex, tho’ it would be unbecoming them to take an active part in political struggles.[4]

Marriage and Early Family Life: 1838-1842

Starting in late 1834, Anna began serving as her father’s copyist, living at times in Washington, D.C., with him. During the summer of 1838, Anna was with her father in Washington for the congressional session, while, at the same time, Thomas Green Clemson was visiting for financial business. After their meeting, the 31-year-old bachelor from Philadelphia became infatuated with 21-year-old Anna, writing her often after her return to Fort Hill. In a letter dated August 19, 1838, Clemson wrote, “Six long weeks have passed since we parted. Up to the present moment I have not received the shadow of one word’s information from yourself. . . I have hoped and hoped again, and still hoped and hoped beyond the end of hope.”[5]

On November 13, 1838, Calhoun may have been saddened as he gave his favorite child away in marriage to Clemson in the parlor at Fort Hill. On August 2, 1838, Anna herself had expressed anxiety to her maid of honor, when she wrote, “You who know my idolatry, for my father, can sympathize with my feeling.”[6]

In a letter to Mary Bates, a former tutor, Anna’s brother Andrew, perhaps with some jealousy, wrote about the wedding, “Observe my Father, he is not as affable as usual, he is abstracted tonight, he feels that in giving up Anna, he is losing his favorite, his pride, his confidant. The glory of the house is departing with sister Anna.”[7]

Children

After a short stay in Philadelphia, the Clemsons moved into the Fort Hill Plantation. The first three of their children were born there — an infant daughter who died in 1839, John Calhoun Clemson (1841-1871), and Floride Elizabeth Clemson Lee (1842-1871). The Clemson’s last child, Cornelia Clemson, was born a decade later in Maryland (1855-1858).

On August 13, 1839, Anna Clemson gave birth to a daughter, in the midst of a fever epidemic. She and her child succumbed to a fever which took the baby’s life three weeks after she was born. Several neighbors and African-
American slaves also died in the same epidemic. On September 19, 1839, Anna confided in a letter to her childhood friend, Maria Simpkins:

Oh! Maria I am now more reconciled to the blows but indeed it was hard to bear at first... She was a lovely babe and noticed (every one said) more than was usual in one so young; indeed it seemed as if disease had given her an unnatural precocity for the poor little creature was sick from the first. [8]

The name and burial location of their first daughter are unknown. The infant may have been buried at Fort Hill near a child of Andrew Pickens Calhoun, who had died two years earlier in 1837. Although no records exist, another purported location of the child’s burial was at the Old Stone Church in Pendleton.[9]

On July 17, 1841, Anna gave birth to a son named John Calhoun Clemson. To distinguish the boy from the other Johns in the family, they called him by his middle name Calhoun. Two African-American slaves, mother and daughter, Daphne and Susan, aided the Clemsons in caring for the children. Daphne (spelled Daphney in some documents) traveled with the infant Calhoun Clemson to visit his father at the Dahlonega mine. The Calhouns would later give Daphne’s teenage daughter, Susan, to Anna and Thomas Clemson as a full-time baby-sitter. Susan retained the last name Clemson, and she slept adjacent to the Clemson’s bedroom with a string tied to her wrist so that she could be awakened by Anna whenever needed to care for the family.[10]

On December 29, 1842, Anna gave birth to a daughter whom they named Floride Elizabeth for her two grandmothers. Floride would grow up to be Anna’s confidant as she battled loneliness, financial woes and depression.[11]

During this period, Thomas Clemson took on the role of manager of Fort Hill for his father-in-law, and Anna aided her mother with the day-to-day operations.

**Cane Brake – Edgefield District: 1842-1844**

The Clemson family later purchased the Cane Brake plantation (near Saluda, S.C.). Anna’s position as the plantation mistress was a new, yet familiar, role. The Clemsons faced many challenges while living at Cane Brake, including bad roads to Edgefield, poor mail service and scarcity of plantation supplies. On February 11, 1844, Anna wrote to her father about her hardships on the plantation declaring, “I am sure I have done more hard and dirty work in that time than all the rest of my life put together.” [12]
Clemson purchased 37 slaves, which made Anna, as plantation mistress, responsible for their well-being, much like her mother Floride was for the slaves at Fort Hill. William Clemson, a recently purchased African-American enslaved carpenter, was in charge of the construction of the Clemsons’ new home. Due to the difficulty in receiving needed lumber, the process of building Cane Brake took longer than expected. On January 28, 1844, Anna wrote Maria Calhoun, and claimed, “But patience, patience, and all will I hope be finished one of these days.” [13]

In 1844, Calhoun became secretary of state under President John Tyler, following the death of Able Upshur, who was killed in an explosion aboard the USS Princeton. Also killed in the explosion was the U.S. chargé d'affaires Virgil Maxcy. Calhoun had an opportunity to submit candidates for ambassadorships, including his son-in-law Thomas Clemson. Clemson was offered and happily accepted a diplomatic post as charge d’affaires to Belgium.

**Belgium- Court of Leopold I: 1844-1852**

Although Anna appreciated her father’s intersession as secretary of state on behalf of Thomas, she was very forthright in her true opinions, expressing some reluctance to travel to Belgium with two small children.[14]

In a letter written on June 1, 1844, Anna informed her father:

> I suppose you want to know what I think & feel about this weighty matter. In the first place were I a few years younger or my children a few years older I should enjoy the idea of visiting Europe much. ... Moving about has not for me the pleasures it had & my children are at the most troublesome age. If they were old enough to be amused or profited by the trip I might enjoy their pleasure. Then I am so completely out of [the] habit of society that the idea of returning to [its] ceremonies & etiquettes especially in a position that in however small a degree renders them incumbent on me is rather irksome... [15]

In spite of Anna’s concerns, the Clemsons moved to Belgium, leaving the Cane Brake plantation under relative Francis Pickens’ management. During their six-year stay in Europe, the formal portraits of Anna and of her two children that are now displayed in Fort Hill were painted. Anna appears in her court dress, and her children are pictured with family pets, a cockatoo for Floride and a whippet for John Calhoun. Anna, like her mother, was welcomed into the pomp and circumstance of society life, and she was a gracious hostess to the court of King Leopold I. While in Belgium, she received a Spanish lace scarf from the Queen of Spain.
The Clemson family, however, did not travel alone to Belgium; Basil, an enslaved African-American male, accompanied them, and Basil attracted much attention in Europe. On January 24, 1846, Anna wrote to her father:

I wish mother could have six months trial of the meanness, debased condition, and utter want of truth, and honesty, among the servants of this country, she would be sick of white servants for life. I don’t know what I should do without Basil who tho’ careless, and negro like, is faithful, and honest, and really a treasure to me. [16]

Anna, like other proslavery advocates of her time, defended slavery in her personal correspondence. Even when comparing African-American slaves as better than the paid white servants in Europe, Anna, as a product of the slave-owning South, still used derogatory language to describe Basil, who she considered a “treasure.” Later in her January 24, 1846 letter, Anna referenced that although Europeans expressed negative views of slavery, her personal belief was that the European wageworkers had harder lives than the enslaved African-Americans in the South:

They talk of slavery. I never saw in all my life at the south, the amount of suffering and misery that one sees here in one month, and so I tell all who mention the subject to me. . . ‘make your working classes in Europe, as happy as our slaves, and then come back to me, and we will talk about the abolition of slavery.[17]

Anna and other plantation women of the time were well aware of anti-slavery sentiment, and by comparing their treatment of enslaved people with the “misery and suffering” of wage workers, they could address their detractors. Ironically, slave owners borrowed this language from wage earners in the North, who used the concept of slavery to critique their low wages and terrible treatment. Slave owners appropriated the ideas to use in a defense of human bondage. Anna’s ability to call on the trope shows her entrenchment in the society that provided her material wealth and social status.

Historian Ernest Lander, concluded, “Here was a classic argument that wage slavery in Europe was than chattel slavery in the South.”[18]

Although separated by the Atlantic Ocean, Anna and her father maintained their close relationship by constantly writing to one another about their ideas and concerns. On May 22, 1849, as the Clemson family prepared to return on a subsequent voyage to Belgium, Anna wrote,

I feel very sad as the time approaches again to leave my country and friends, and undertake such a long and dangerous voyage. I have not even
the pleasure of anticipation to sustain me. I know all I am to see and expect, and how little there is in that all, to recompense me for my separation from my family. [19]

After returning to Belgium, Anna became more concerned for her father’s health, appealing to him to retire and recuperate after he contracted tuberculosis, which was exacerbated by pneumonia. On February 18, 1850, Anna wrote her father:

You have spent a long life in the service of your country, and it is now time to take care of yourself for our sakes. You can even be as much service to your country, by influencing the movement of your friends from Fort Hill, as you can in Washington. Go home then, my dearest father, and live quietly, and generously, and be a good deal in the open air without fatiguing yourself. Oh! If I could only be near to nurse you, read to you, and write for you, and anticipate every wish. [20]

Anna’s appeal probably reached her father during his final days. On March 31, 1850, Calhoun passed away, while Anna was in Belgium. To her brother Patrick, on June 24, 1850, Anna confided:

Our noble father can never be restored to us. We shall never look upon his like again. In all history I find no man who combined so much talent, heart, philosophy, and simplicity... He never in the course of his long and useful life, failed in the performance of every duty. Knowing how he prized his well-earned reputation, ... His life and death are bright and encouraging examples to everyone, for they prove that a firm adherence to truth and principle.[21]

Maryland and The Home: 1853-1864

After the Clemsons returned to the United States, they sold Cane Brake Plantation, moving to Maryland. During the years preceding the Civil War, Anna managed The Home, a modest farm of approximately 100 acres near Bladensburg, Maryland. The household at The Home included no slaves but did include Belgian tutor Leopold Reis; a Belgian servant, Mimi; a white tenant family, the Neides; and a young African-American boy, Andy Calhoun. As employees turned over, a German lady, Augusta, worked as a housekeeper, and Babette, hired as a cook, was later replaced by Lisette Daub and her family. In addition, Anna and Thomas built a separate mother-in-law cottage for Floride and Cornelia Calhoun to use when they visited.

From a historical standpoint, of all the household occupants, the place of Andy Calhoun is perhaps the most interesting. In 1848, John and Floride Calhoun
purchased his mother Nelly as the cook for $1,000. On November 12, 1845, Floride wrote to James Edward Calhoun of Nelly, “I trust her with the keys, as she has been accustomed to it all her life.” Tragically, in 1856, while living at MiCasa, Nelly died in childbirth. Eventually, Andy was relocated to Maryland and placed in the care of Anna. As historian Ernest Lander wrote, “Just as Nelly had been treated rather special, so was her child after her death.”

On October 3, 1855, Anna gave birth to her fourth child, a daughter named Cornelia after her maternal aunt, Martha Cornelia, and called Nina. Clemson especially doted on Nina. When she died of scarlet fever in late 1858, Anna wrote,

Oh Nina oh my angel where are you? Why are you taken? When shall I see you again? Never---never. When we lose a friend of mature years we look forward to meet them in another world of unmixed delight, for let our separation be long or short—we resume our intercourse as we should on the earth after a long absence but when a mother loses her child it is lost forever. She may here after meet its pure spirit and enjoy a happiness of which we can here have no conception in so doing but her child she never meets again.

A death mask was made of Nina, from which American sculpture Hiram Powers made a marble bust of the three-year-old. Nina was buried at their residence, the Home, and several years later her body was relocated to the Rock Creek Cemetery in Washington, D.C. During Thomas Clemson’s lifetime, the bust appeared in stereopticon slides of the interior of Fort Hill from the 1880’s. Today, the bust remains on exhibit in the parlor at Fort Hill.

By the end of the decade, Anna’s priority was her children’s education. In the fall of 1859, Calhoun entered the freshman class of Virginia Military Institute (VMI); however, illness precluded his completion of his education. Calhoun may have had an opportunity to take a class from a young VMI Professor Thomas Jackson, who would later be nicknamed Stonewall.

Anna sent Floride to Philadelphia to study at the Barton’s finishing school operated by her Aunt Elizabeth Clemson Barton and Uncle George Washington Barton. During her time there, Floride studied a variety of subjects, taking a great interest in art, even borrowing her father’s brushes to use during her education.

**Civil War and Reconstruction: 1865-1872**

At the onset of the Civil War in 1861, both Thomas and Calhoun Clemson left Maryland for Pendleton. While Calhoun enlisted in the Confederate Army in
1861, Thomas spent two years advocating for the Confederacy to create an agricultural college before he enlisted in 1863. Young Calhoun was captured on September 9, 1863 in Bolivar, Mississippi.[24]

Calhoun’s imprisonment tested Anna’s courage and motherly devotion. Immediately, Anna began a tireless campaign for permission to visit her son, and, once achieved, she embarked alone through enemy territory to visit her son.[25] For 18 months, Calhoun Clemson was imprisoned at the federal prison on Johnson Island in Lake Erie, Ohio; the prison was three miles from present day Sandusky, Ohio, located on the Sandusky Bay.

During the visit, in a letter dated April 21, 1864, Anna wrote to her daughter Floride, describing both Calhoun and the conditions in prison:

“C. is very well, save a sore leg, which however is not at all bad . . . . He is very handsome, and much improved every way- seemed delighted, and astonished. I have a great deal to tell you, but I am so weary, and over excited I can’t write. . . Your devoted and very happy mother”[26]

By early 1865, Anna and her daughter Floride received permission to leave Maryland for Pendleton, S.C., to stay with her mother Floride Calhoun.

Following the war’s conclusion, the Clemson family was reunited in Pendleton at MiCasa, the home of Anna’s mother. On August 1, 1869, Anna’s daughter Floride married Gideon Lee at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Pendleton. In a letter to her brother James Edward Calhoun on June 8, 1869, Anna expressed anxiety about her daughter’s approaching marriage, writing

“I feel very sad at parting . . . for I shall have very little inclination to go north to visit her, and shall have to depend on her coming here. We live together like sisters, and companions, and I shall miss her greatly.”[27]

Floride and Gideon settled in Carmel, New York, and, less than a year later, the Clemsons’ granddaughter, Floride Isabella was born on May 15, 1870. Marie Calhoun, a former slave and childhood companion of Floride, had accompanied Floride Clemson Lee to Carmel. Employed as a lady’s maid and seamstress, she later assisted in caring for Isabella. Tragedy struck on July 23, 1871, when Floride Clemson Lee died from a lingering illness at the family’s home, Leeside, in Carmel, New York. Marie was the surrogate mother for Floride Isabella until Gideon Lee’s second marriage to Ella Lorton, Floride’s childhood friend from Pendleton. Young Isabella lost her surrogate mother, Marie, who was sent to work for a family in New Orleans because of her fluency in French.
Eighteen days later, on August 10, 1871, tragedy again struck the Clemson family with the death of their last child when Calhoun’s passenger train collided with a lumber freight train in Oconee County. Calhoun, whose heart was punctured by a broken rib, was the only fatality, and Thomas was inconsolable; for years, he blamed the train conductor and engineer. In 1884, he wrote J. D. Smith, “my son was murdered by placing incompetent men in positions of responsibility.”[28]

Sadly, Anna’s last two children were buried 17 days apart during the summer of 1871. By late September 1871, Anna wrote her will where everything she would inherit from the estates of her mother, her brother Patrick and her sister Cornelia would be inherited by her husband as long as he died with a will; otherwise, her granddaughter would inherit everything. Not until January 1872, did Anna and Thomas retire to Fort Hill, where they lived for the remainder of their lives.[29]

**Retirement to Fort Hill: 1872-1875**

The Clemsons called Fort Hill home together for only three short years. Anna’s health had declined rapidly following the death of her two adult children, and her heart problems worsened. On September 22, 1875, she died from a sudden heart attack. Three days later, Attorney James H. Rion, a Calhoun family friend and protégée, wrote of Anna to Clemson,

> I well remember how her father’s eyes would brighten up, when he would speak of ‘Anna.’ In reading over his letters it is very touching to see with what pride he wrote of her, when a mere child. She was by all properly regarded as the child who inherited more of her father’s great talents than any other of his children. ‘His children,’---they are now all gone! [30]

In the same letter, Rion concluded,

> You have lost a wife, who was in every sense of the word a companion for you, not only worthy of affection but of the highest esteem. Her good nature, high spirit, elegance of manners, extensive information and reading, fine intellect, and all the more valuable female accomplishments, fitted her to be a wife worthy of any man that has ever lived.[31]

Anna’s wish for her husband to preserve her parent’s home, Fort Hill, and to use the estate’s land, her land, for a state agricultural college would come to fruition.

On November 5, 1911, Richard Wright Simpson, Thomas Clemson’s attorney, described Anna as being:
"among women what her distinguished father was among men. Her love for her home and country was superb, and to this noble, generous and yet gentle woman, South Carolina is as much indebted for Clemson College as to the distinguished husband Thomas G. Clemson." [32]

Today, Clemson University occupies the former Fort Hill plantation, with the main house at the center of the campus, at the intersection of Fort Hill Street and Calhoun Drive. The contents of Fort Hill include various personal items of Anna Calhoun Clemson, including a life-sized portrait of Anna; however, as the historian Carol Bleser wrote:

With her dark eyes, black hair, and pale skin, she looks very much the part of a fragile Victorian beauty – soft, pampered, and richly attired. As the private records clearly reveal, Anna Maria was much more that the sweet faced young woman whose portrait hangs on the parlor wall at Fort Hill. [Indeed] Anna Maria inherited more of John C. Calhoun’s great intellectual talents that did any of his other children.[33]

Bibliography for Anna Maria Calhoun Clemson


Footnotes

[1] A.P. Calhoun attended Yale University, Patrick graduated from West Point, namesake John Caldwell Calhoun Jr. was trained as a physician in Philadelphia. The two youngest sons, James and Willy, attended the South Carolina College in Columbia. James read law, and Willy was a planter. Neither Patrick nor James ever married.

[2] See Russell 3-5 for more information on South Carolina Female Collegiate Institute and Anna’s education.


[9] Oral Interview with Jane Prince, ca. 1930, Littlejohn Papers, Clemson University, Special Collections.


See Russell chapter five for in-depth look into Anna’s views on life in Belgium, including many of her own words.


Lander, The Calhoun Family and Thomas Green Clemson, 156

Lander, The Calhoun Family and Thomas Green Clemson; Russell 25


See Russell 39-42 for more information on Anna’s mission to see her son in prison.

Lander, The Calhoun Family and Thomas Green Clemson, 217

Lander, The Calhoun Family and Thomas Green Clemson, 236.

Lander, The Calhoun Family and Thomas Green Clemson, 239.

Margaret Calhoun, widow of A. P. Calhoun was left packing. The smoldering feud lasted a generation.

Lander, The Calhoun Family and Thomas Green Clemson, 242; James H. Rion of Winnsboro is greatly overlooked.

Lander, The Calhoun Family and Thomas Green Clemson, 242; (Russell 118-119.)

R. W. Simpson to W. M. Riggs, November 5, 1911, Riggs Papers, Special Collections, Clemson University.