



Floride Bonneau Calhoun Calhoun

Feb. 15, 1792-July 25, 1866

Floride Bonneau Calhoun Calhoun, a prominent woman in the early republic, was married to career politician John C. Calhoun. From the beginning, this marriage entailed many duties in Washington, including being hostess to the Marquis De Lafayette while her husband was President James Monroe's secretary of war and countless other responsibilities as second lady of the United States, during the administrations of President John Quincy Adams and of President Andrew Jackson. In 1825, she became Fort Hill's plantation mistress, whose responsibilities included managing the plantation's 70 to 80 African-American slaves. After Calhoun's death in 1850, Floride served as the Calhoun family matriarch until her death in 1866, a year after the American Civil War ended.

Childhood

On February 15, 1792, Floride Bonneau Calhoun was born on Rice Hope Plantation in Berkeley County, South Carolina, the Lowcountry plantation of her parents John Ewing Calhoun Sr. and Floride Bonneau Calhoun. Calhoun, an early U.S. senator and slave owner, purchased land in the Pendleton

District, where he had constructed the Colhoun plantation known as Keowee Heights or Twelve Mile Plantation.

Prior to his political career, Colhoun was a Revolutionary War soldier. When he enlisted in military service, Colhoun corrected the spelling of his last name, replacing the "a" in Calhoun with an "o," adopting the Scottish spelling. He served as aide-de-camp to brother-in-law General Andrew Pickens, who had married Colhoun's younger sister, Rebecca Floride Calhoun. Colhoun died as a sitting U.S. senator in 1802, leaving his widow with substantial wealth. Until her death in 1836, his widow served as a major benefactor for her son-in-law, John C. Calhoun, supporting his efforts to reclaim the U.S. Senate seat lost by her husband's premature death.

Floride, the only daughter, was a young child at her father's death, so her brothers, John Ewing Colhoun Jr. of Keowee Heights and James Edward Calhoun of Millwood, played a significant role in her life as well as the lives of John C. Calhoun and later of Thomas G. Clemson. John Ewing Colhoun Jr.'s children, especially Martha Cornelia (Cuddy) Colhoun, the author of several piano pieces known as the "Keowee Waltzes," and William Ransom Calhoun, a West Point graduate, were frequent guests at Fort Hill.

Mrs. Colhoun's extended family members were slaveholders, and her father, Samuel Bonneau, was a prosperous South Carolina Huguenot who owned vast plantations in the Lowcountry and had large slave holdings. The Bonneau family's plantations were the source of much wealth for the Colhoun family.

Prior to her marriage in 1811, little is known about Floride's social life. John C. Calhoun, as a student at Yale and later law school in Connecticut, would often spend school breaks with the Colhoun clan in Newport, Rhode Island, where Floride played the organ at Trinity Episcopal Church. Floride's mother supported the courtship between her daughter and older cousin John C. Calhoun. Although Floride was only in her mid-teens, in many ways, Mrs. Colhoun brokered the arranged marriage, which was common among young plantation mistresses of the time.

On September 28, 1810, Calhoun wrote in a letter to his bride-to-be:

I rejoice, my dearest Floride, that the period is fast approaching when it will be no longer necessary to address you through the cold medium of a letter. At furthest it cannot be much longer than a month before I shall behold the dearest object of my hopes and desires. I am anxious to see you and my impatience daily increases. May heaven grant you a safe return. What pleasure I have experienced in your company, what delight in the exchange of sentiment.

What transport in the testimonies of mutual love. In a short time this with the permission of heaven will be renewed, and I shall be happy. To be united in mutual virtuous love is the first and best bliss that God has permitted to our natures. My dearest one, may our love strengthen with each returning day, may it ripen and mellow with our years, and may it end in immortal joys ... time and absence made no impress on my love for you; it glows with no less ardor than at the moment of parting, which must be a happy omen of its permanent nature. When ere personal charms attract, the impression may be violent but cannot be lasting, and it requires the perpetual presence of the object to keep it alive; but when the beauty of mind, the soft and sweet disposition, the amiable and lovable character embellished with innocence and cheerfulness are united to ... personal beauty, it bids defiance to time. Such my dear Floride are the arms by which you have conquered, and it is by these the durability of your sovereignty is established over your subject whom you hold in will servitude. Adieu my love; my heart's delight, I am your true lover.[\[1\]](#)

Marriage

On January 8, 1811, Floride married her first-cousin-once-removed, John C. Calhoun. After the wedding, Mrs. Colhoun continued to oversee much of her daughter Floride Calhoun's life. From her purchase of the Cold Spring house adjacent to Fort Hill, to her purchase of the Oakley estate in Georgetown in the name of her youngest son, James Edward Colhoun, Mrs. Colhoun functioned as an influential benefactor of the Calhouns.

Floride's wedding portrait captured the beautiful 18-year-old bride, Floride, fashionably dressed in her high-waisted Napoleonic era Empire gown. This portrait hangs above the dining room mantel at Fort Hill plantation house. One delicate lace sleeve is all that remains of Floride's wedding dress, preserved in storage.

Shortly after her marriage, Floride was thrust into political life as the wife of a U.S. congressman representing a nation on the brink of the War of 1812. In addition, she faced the challenge of setting up a new home near Abbeville, S.C., the Bath Plantation her husband had purchased so that he could establish himself as a planter.

Children

Before the age of 25, Floride had given birth to four children: Andrew Pickens (1811-1865), Floride Pure (1814-1815), Jane (1816-1816) and Anna Maria (1817-1875). The first two daughters, Floride Pure and Jane, died as infants,

and there are no records of their burial locations. The Calhouns would lose a third daughter, Elizabeth, who lived over six months from September 7, 1819 to March 22, 1820. She was buried in the Congressional Cemetery, Washington, D.C.[2]

On October 15, 1811, Andrew Pickens Calhoun, their first child and son, was born. He was named for Revolutionary War hero General Andrew Pickens, his maternal uncle by marriage. Andrew attended Yale University and South Carolina College. Andrew married twice: He first married his cousin Eugenia Chappell, daughter of John Joel Chappell and Sophia Maria Green Chappell; after Eugenia's death, Andrew married Margaret Green. He died in 1865, leaving behind Margaret and his children residing at Fort Hill during the conclusion of the Civil War.

On February 13, 1817, Anna Maria Calhoun was born, and she was arguably the brightest of the children. Anna's marriage to Thomas Green Clemson cemented Clemson's connection to the Calhoun family. The mother of four children, Anna died at the age of 58, and she is buried at St. Paul's Episcopal Church Cemetery in Pendleton.

A second son, Patrick Calhoun, was born on February 9, 1821, and he was named for Calhoun's father. Patrick entered West Point in 1837, graduating in 1841. Patrick was stationed in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and he never married. In 1858, Patrick died, and he was first buried in the Old Stone Churchyard and later reinterred at St. Paul's in Pendleton.

On May 17, 1823, Calhoun's third son and his namesake, John Caldwell Calhoun Jr., was born. He studied at the University of Virginia, receiving a medical degree from the Philadelphia medical school, possibly the Pennsylvania Medical College, in July of 1848. As his proud father wrote to Anna, "He passed, I learned, a highly satisfactory examination. About a third of the class failed to pass." [3] Dr. John married Anzie Adams, who died during childbirth, and later he married Kate Kirby Putnam. In 1850, the same year as his father's death, Dr. John died.

The Calhouns' fourth daughter, Martha Cornelia, was born on April 22, 1824. Cornelia suffered from a spinal injury, and she had difficulty hearing, using a silver trumpet as a hearing aid. Cornelia, a talented seamstress, was educated by tutors and never married. Cornelia was Mrs. Calhoun's constant companion until Cornelia's death in 1857.

James Edward Calhoun, named for a maternal uncle, was born on April 4, 1826. James attended the University of Virginia and Erskine College before completing his studies at the South Carolina College. James studied and read

law, and he later became an attorney. James moved to California, where he passed away in 1861; he was buried in the Lone Mountain Cemetery in San Francisco.[\[4\]](#)

On August 13, 1829, the Calhouns' last child, William Lowndes Calhoun, was born at Fort Hill. He was named for fellow politician and Congressman William Lowndes, who had died in 1822. Willie attended Erskine College and, following the example of his brothers, completed his studies at the South Carolina College. He married Margaret Cloud, who passed away from an unknown cause, and later married his widowed sister-in-law, Kate Kirby Putnam. Like his brother Patrick, William was buried in the Old Stone Churchyard after his death in 1858, but his remains were later reinterred in St. Paul's Episcopal Churchyard in Pendleton.

Floride Calhoun would outlive all of her children except Anna Calhoun Clemson.

Mrs. Secretary of War 1817-1825

When James Monroe appointed Calhoun as his secretary of war in 1817, the South Carolina statesman moved his family to Washington, setting up residence at the Calhoun family home called Oakley in the Georgetown section of the city. Floride, then in her mid-twenties, seemed to have been quickly accepted into Washington society, enjoying a life of socializing and entertaining.

From July 1824 to September 1825, Calhoun was the official host of General Marquis De Lafayette on his gallant return to the United States. At this time, Calhoun lived at Oakley and at a house he owned at 6th and E Streets, N.W., so General Lafayette was entertained at both residences. Due to the expense of maintaining Oakley, Calhoun rented and later sold it in 1829 to Brooke Mackall.[\[5\]](#)

Second Lady of the United States -1825-1832 and Petticoat Wars 1829-1831

In 1825, Floride Calhoun was in the spotlight of Washington society as the wife of the vice president, a role she held until December 1832. A portrait hanging over the bed in the master bedroom of the Fort Hill plantation house depicts Floride, dressed in classical attire, at the height of her national prominence. She was involved in an explosive social incident in 1829 referred to as the "Peggy Eaton Affair." Floride refused to repay a social visit or to accept socially Peggy O'Neal Timberlake Eaton, the wife of Jackson's incoming

Secretary of War John Eaton, on the grounds that the recently married widow was a woman of questionable morals.

Reflecting her social status, Floride enlisted other powerful and influential wives to shun Peggy. In his support of his wife, Calhoun effectively reinforced the social lines drawn by elite women to protect their own status. President Jackson supported the wife of Eaton, his friend from Tennessee. This incident fueled the rift smoldering between Calhoun and Jackson.

Floride probably imagined herself becoming first lady someday, but events caused a change in the direction of her husband's career. John C. Calhoun resigned from the vice presidency in 1832, the beginning of his advocacy of states' rights in the U.S. Senate. He was elected to the U.S. Senate later that same year.

In 1831, a year before her husband's voluntary resignation, Floride retired to Fort Hill. Whether she ever missed being a Washington hostess is unknown. Soon, she hired a new white housekeeper, Margaret Hunter Rion, from the Pendleton Hotel. Margaret Rion's son, James H. Rion, was later an attorney for Thomas Clemson, writing the first versions of his will. On his deathbed, Rion claimed he was the lost dauphin, son of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. Following Margaret Rion's departure, Floride hired Martha Jane Pike as her housekeeper who served her for many years.

Plantation Mistress 1831-1854

After 1831, Floride seldom visited Washington; instead, she focused on her role as a plantation mistress, managing a 1,100-acre Fort Hill plantation and the African-American slaves. She did not approve of her husband's financial generosity to some of their children for exploits she considered bad risks, but as a woman she had no control over the family's finances.

By the time she reached her fifties, Floride was a strong, self-assured, yet tired woman, as reflected in a portrait that hangs in the dining room of the Fort Hill Plantation house. The Calhoun family home at Fort Hill had grown from a small four-room cottage into an impressive 14-room upcountry plantation house, finally large enough for the family of the vice president of the United States.

Oral tradition held that Floride added a room to the house each time her husband was away in Washington. On April 21, 1838, Calhoun wrote his brother-in-law, James Edward Colhoun, requesting James intercede on his behalf to halt Floride from constructing additions to Fort Hill in his absence:

She writes me that she is desirous to commence an addition to our House . . . on her return to Pendleton I think it would not be advisable on my accounts, till after my return . . . I have long since learned by sad experience what it is to build in my absence. It would cost me twice as much and the work then will not be half as well done . . . It could be built at comparatively small expense and have it well done under my own eye, I wish you to add your weight to mine to reconcile her to the course I suggest. I have written her fully on the subject.[\[6\]](#)

Floride's expensive taste in furnishings is reflected in the china and silver in the dining room, and in the massive Piedmont wardrobe made for her by cabinetmaker William Knauff of Pendleton, a German woodworker she encouraged to relocate from Charleston to the Piedmont. This wardrobe is reportedly based on an armoire belonging to Dolly Madison. Floride imported wallpapers from France and England to make Fort Hill more fashionable, giving the farmhouse the appearance of a mansion.

At Fort Hill, Floride Calhoun accomplished more than raising children and decorating her home, however. Her personal belongings on display in the master bedroom of the Fort Hill Plantation house show her handiwork and tools: a beaded pin cushion, a tortoise shell sewing box and a crochet tea table cover. In addition, she embroidered the christening dress worn by all of her children. The collection at Fort Hill includes personal items associated with the years Floride spent in Washington, and includes a wool handbag with silk lining, which Floride carried to Andrew Jackson's inauguration ceremony, as well as a foot warmer she used during long carriage trips.

Two of Floride's lifelong interests were music and religion. She was an accomplished pianist, and her small pianoforte is in the Fort Hill plantation house parlor. As a teenager, Floride proved herself to be a talented musician. In gratitude, the congregation of her church presented her with a prayer book and a silver baptismal bowl. Floride was a devout Episcopalian, and she was instrumental in raising the necessary funds for a pump organ which is still played in St. Paul's Episcopal Church of Pendleton.

During their 39-year marriage, her relationship with her husband was sometimes tense. In a letter to his son Andrew in the 1840s, John C. Calhoun summarized their relationship:

As to the suspicious and unfounded blame of your Mother, you must not only bear them, but forget them. With the many good qualities of her Mother, she inherits her suspicious and fault finding temper, which has been the cause of much vexation in the family. I have borne with her the

patience, because it was my duty to do so, & you must do the same for the same reason. It has been the only cross of my life. [7]

Unfortunately, no such appraisal of their married life exists in Floride's hand. She may have well felt similarly about her absentee husband, who left her to give birth to 10 children and manage the plantation during his extended absences. Floride also had a cool relationship with Andrew's wife Margaret, whom she would later have evicted from Fort Hill when the plantation went into foreclosure.

Pendleton Home MiCasa – Family Matriarch and Venerable Widow 1854-1866

In early April 1850, Floride received the tragic news that her husband of 39 years had died in Washington on March 31. Calhoun's attorney had not made arrangements for his funeral, and Calhoun had not taken the time to write a will. The statesman was buried in the graveyard across from St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Charleston following eulogies on the Citadel's parade ground, now at Marion Square.

Prior to his sudden death, Charleston friends had been accumulating a fund of nearly \$27,000 to send Calhoun to Europe for recuperation and to fund an eventual retirement gift. After Calhoun's death, they offered the funds to Floride to pay off the Fort Hill debts, without which she would have lost the plantation. The debts were high; some figures were over \$20,000. Thomas Clemson stated about the money raised, "No false delicacy should stand in the way of this tribute offered by his friends. He spent his life and neglected his private interests to protect and defend his state." [8] Anna at that time expressed fears that the slaves would have to be sold to pay off the debts, and that she found the idea "very painful." [9]

The chain of title for the Fort Hill plantation is complex. Calhoun rented the property from 1825-1836 from his mother-in-law for \$266 per year. Only at Mrs. Colhoun's death did Calhoun gain full control of the estate. After his death in 1850, ownership of the land reverted to his wife Floride Calhoun. Four years later, Floride Calhoun sold the plantation and 50 African-American slaves to her son Andrew before she moved to Pendleton, where she lived in a much smaller house she aptly named MiCasa. Accompanying her to Pendleton was a small group of African-American slaves from Fort Hill, including her cook Nelly, a butler named Jackson and a coachman named William. [10]

Tragedy continued to strike the Calhoun family. During the decade before the Civil War, five other children died of tuberculosis (John Jr., Cornelia, Patrick, Willy and James). Even though she mourned the loss of her four sons, the

death of Cornelia was especially painful. Cornelia, handicapped since childhood, had been her mother's constant companion.

On the eve of the Civil War, Pendleton was a hot bed of the secessionist movement. Floride Calhoun attended a barbeque where speakers spoke about secession. On November 23, 1860, she recalled the event to Anna, who was living in Maryland, in a letter; Mrs. Calhoun wrote, "All were urging the necessity of speedy action before Lincoln is inaugurated, and calling on the young and old to be ready at a moment's warning."[\[11\]](#)

Once the Civil War began, Floride Calhoun wrote to her daughter Anna again, sharing that provisions were still plentiful in Pendleton, and urging her daughter to come from Maryland to South Carolina. Anna and her daughter Floride finally came and spent the last year of the war with Floride in Pendleton. Mrs. Calhoun's MiCasa was the home that Confederate soldiers, Thomas Clemson and his son Calhoun Clemson, returned to following their paroles in 1865.

The year 1865 brought the end of the Civil War and the death of Andrew Calhoun; Mrs. Calhoun then regained control of Fort Hill. She willed Fort Hill to her only surviving child, Anna Maria Calhoun Clemson. Within a year of regaining control of Fort Hill, on July 25, 1866, 74-year-old Floride Bonneau Colhoun Calhoun died from an aggressive form of cancer at MiCasa. During Mrs. Calhoun's last months, her daughter Anna was her caregiver. She was buried next to her children in St. Paul's cemetery.

For the next 23 years, a burial plot next to Floride would remain vacant for John C. Calhoun. Thomas Clemson tried to have his father-in-law's body exhumed to be buried next to Floride, but his attempts were unsuccessful. In 1889, Floride Calhoun's younger brother, James Edward Calhoun, was finally buried next to his sister Floride Calhoun.

An evaluation of Floride Bonneau Colhoun Calhoun's life would do more than point out that she bore 10 children; it would reveal a self-sufficient woman who was comfortable as a Washington hostess and a capable plantation mistress at Fort Hill during her husband's long absences. Her shrewdness in rejecting Confederate currency as payment from her son Andrew on the Fort Hill estate ensured that it was not lost and recovered from foreclosure. As the plantation mistress, Floride Calhoun managed Fort Hill, from its additions, gardens and furnishings to the day-to-day management of the African-American slaves, meals and her children with very little leisure time.

Floride Calhoun was a strong-willed woman in a male dominated society on a larger than life stage. She was a formidable force to be reckoned with, as

Peggy O'Neal Timberlake Eaton had encountered. Her moral values, faith and fortitude made her the glue that kept the family together. Historian Margaret Coit, summarized the Calhoun marriage and relationship:

If at their moments of deepest loneliness, of greatest tragedy, they were physically and spiritually alone, there was still much that Calhoun and Floride did share. Together, they built a life, a home, a marriage. They were often unhappy. Yet they had their moments of happiness. Their marriage was real, not a Victorian ideal. Probably they were as happy as most couples.[\[12\]](#)

Floride Bonneau Calhoun Bibliography

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[1] Margaret L Coit, . *John C. Calhoun: American Portrait*. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1950), 63-64.

[2] Elizabeth tombstone at Find A Grave, Inc., *Find A Grave*, digital image (<http://www.findagrave.com>: accessed 5 October 2015), photograph, “gravestone for Elizabeth Calhoun, Memorial No. 37234908, Records of the Congressional Cemetery, Washington, D.C.,” . <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=37234908>

[3] Ernest McPherson Lander, *The Calhoun Family and Thomas Green Clemson: The Decline of a Southern Patriarchy*. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1983), 109.

[4] <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nmpelton/lone4.html>

[5] Coit, 152.

[6] Clyde N. Wilson, ed. *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1981), Vol. XIV, 1837-1839, 237.

[7] Ernest McPherson Lander, *The Calhoun Family and Thomas Green Clemson: The Decline of a Southern Patriarchy*. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1983), 119.

[8] Ernest McPherson Lander, *The Calhoun Family and Thomas Green Clemson: The Decline of a Southern Patriarchy*. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1983), 132.

[9] Ernest McPherson Lander, *The Calhoun Family and Thomas Green Clemson: The Decline of a Southern Patriarchy*. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1983), 132.

[10] Ernest McPherson Lander, *The Calhoun Family and Thomas Green Clemson: The Decline of a Southern Patriarchy*. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1983), 144.

[11] Ernest McPherson Lander, *The Calhoun Family and Thomas Green Clemson: The Decline of a Southern Patriarchy*. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1983), 200.

[12] Coit, 325.