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JAMES HOLMES'S FLORIDA PLANTATION,
1804

by LEWIS LEARY

Congressman James Mott ¹ was worried about his nephew. It was years since young James Holmes had left his family in Monmouth, New Jersey, to seek his fortune in Georgia. Finally, in January 1804, the congressman wrote Peter Freneau, ² also a Monmouth man, who had settled in the south, and had lived in Charleston since the close of the Revolution, and was now editing the influential *City Gazette* of that city. Perhaps he could send word of the young man. Freneau replied immediately: ³

I have conversed with several persons from Georgia but they could not give me any information concerning Mr. Holmes. To the best of my recollection it is now three years since I saw him in this city. I then asked him what he was doing, and where he lived. He seemed not disposed to say much. All I could learn from him was that he had been unfortunate in a connection he had formed with some persons in business, who had acted dishonestly, and left him some debts to pay, that he was not able to pay them, that, if not prevented, he would return, and live with the Creek nation. As he was not detained here I am led to believe that he returned there. While he was here I

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1. James Mott, b. Monmouth Co., N. J., Jan. 18, 1739; Major, Continental Army, 1776, member N. J. General Assembly 1776-79; State Treasurer, 1799-1803; elected as Democrat to 7th and 8th Congresses; d. Oct. 18, 1823.
 2. Peter Freneau, brother of Philip Freneau, the "Poet of the American Revolution," b. Monmouth Co., N. J., April 5, 1757; settled in Charleston, 1782; became editor of *The City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, 1794; d. Nov. 9, 1813.
 3. Each of the three letters quoted below is from the MS. *Cherry Hill Papers*, owned by Miss Edith Johnson, of Matawan, N. J.

made repeated requests to come to my house, but I could never get him there. He appeared to me to be very low spirited and uncommunicative. This is all I can tell you at present. I have written to a friend in Georgia; if he gives any information I will take the earliest conveyance of letting you know.

Early that summer James Holmes turned up again in Charleston. Peter Freneau let him know his uncle's inquiry, advised him to write immediately. The young man proceeded to do so at once. He had a new plan, and he needed help. On July 30 he wrote to his uncle:

Your letter dated Jan'y last I received a few weeks since. I have been in the Bahama Islands in order to negotiate a Letter of Credit in my favour to the amt of several thousand pounds to be invested in negroes to possession a piece of Land I have in East Florida. . . . The Tract of Land alluded to is a very valuable one, and unless I can get a few negroes to settle it, it will revert to the Government in about two or three months at the outside.

Three months passed and James Holmes received no word from his uncle. Meanwhile the young man remained in Charleston. He wrote again and again. Still he received no answer. Finally he, too, called on Peter Freneau for assistance. "He has requested me," the editor wrote to Congressman Mott, "to write to you and endeavor to learn whether it is your intention to afford him any assistance." Young Holmes was apparently desperate. Always before when Freneau had asked him "what was his situation, and what were his prospects, he waived . . . giving a direct answer." Now he swallowed his pride and asked for help.

He needed money badly. Peter Freneau wrote to James Mott on September 30, 1804:

He states his situation to be, that he has become a Spanish subject, that he has located a tract of land in East Florida on St. Mary's River, that it is very valuable and very fit for the cultivation of Cotton, Indigo and Rice, that one condition of the grant is that he shall form a settlement on it within the time therein mentioned (and which is nearly expired) otherwise his grant becomes void, that he possesses no means by which he can procure negroes to make this settlement and wishes to know whether he can look to you for assistance to procure any. Six he says will be sufficient to save his land, but ten will be necessary to put him in a situation to bring crops and make it an object worth his attention. These negroes will cost from 300 to 350 Dollars each. I cannot pretend to say whether his plan is a good one or not, though from some inquiries I have made I am assured that the place he has located is a very beautiful one, situated on navigable water and if he had hands to work it would be very valuable. As all his hopes of success seem to be placed on you perhaps it would be well to let him know immediately what he has to expect for he is doing nothing here and he must be on expense which I fear he is but illy provided to meet.

Thereafter nothing is heard of James Holmes or of the outcome of his early venture in Florida real estate.