

THE EPONYMOUS MR. PRINCE, PART TWO

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Other interesting facts about Oliver Prince include:

- Prince strongly believed that railroads were essential to developing Georgia's economy, and in 1831 he presided over the state's first Railroad Convention, which met in Eatonton to devise plans for bringing the railroad to Georgia. He was one of the first stockholders and directors of the Georgia Railroad Company.

- On Aug. 2, 1832 Prince published in the Georgia Journal a light-hearted letter he had written in Athens about a University of Georgia graduation ceremony he had recently attended.

- Prince was a trustee of the University of Georgia and after his death a memorial service for him and his wife was held in the University Chapel.

- A number of Prince's letters and papers are preserved in the Special Collections Division of the University of Georgia Main Library.

- Prince's son, Oliver H. Prince, Jr., died in 1875 and is buried in Oconee Hill Cemetery. His daughter Virginia died in 1905 and is buried in Rose Hill Cemetery in Macon.

- The house Prince built in Washington, Georgia in 1810 and where he lived with his wife for five years still stands at Liberty and Pope Streets. Privately owned and now known as Poplar Grove, the magnificent white columned house is billed in Wilkes county tourist promotional literature as "the only full developed Beaux-arts classical revival structure in town."

- Apart from Prince Avenue here in Athens, the only other places in Georgia named after Prince are in Macon, where there is both a Prince Street and a tiny municipal park, little more than a grassy street median at the corner of Poplar and Third Streets, which was designated Prince Park many years ago. Unfortunately, the metal marker bearing Prince's name has been removed from the park, and today even the Macon parks and recreation department is unaware of the fact that the park is named after Prince.

On Tuesday, May 23, 1837, shortly before beginning the ill-fated journey to the North, Oliver Prince wrote a letter to his son, Oliver H. Prince, Jr., who was at school in Gwinnett county. To that letter Mary Prince added a postscript containing a sentence which, Ms. Nirenstein notes, was "very premonitory": "My son, if I never see you more, remember my last words would be 'remember your Creator in the days of your youth'"

Two days later, Oliver and Mary Prince set out for the North. The purpose of the trip was to visit Boston to arrange for the publication of the second edition of the *Digest*; but while up North the Princes would also take the opportunity to visit relatives and friends in New York state. Accompanied as far as Virginia by Gov. George Gilmer and his wife, the Princes traveled from Athens to Wilkes county, then to Augusta and Charleston, then by steamboat to Norfolk, then to Baltimore and Philadelphia, then by steamboat to New York City, then by another steamboat to Providence, and then by railroad to Boston, where they arrived June 9.

During the next several months Oliver Prince spent a great deal of his time in Boston working on publication of the *Digest*, and the rest of the time with Mary in Watervliet and Troy, New York where Mary Prince was staying with relatives. Both Princes missed their children back in

Georgia terribly, and both, especially Mary Prince, grew homesick for Athens. One of the New York cousins with whom the Princes stayed later wrote: “[Mary Prince] was impatient to get home, and every day seemed to her an age until [her husband’s] return [from Boston] and their departure from the north She was continually in hopes that something would transpire to hasten his return and could scarcely be persuaded when by his own letters he assured it would not be sooner than he had anticipated. The constant state of expectation and consequent disappointment seemed to play upon her spirits and health, and her feeling excited my heartfelt sympathy. They remained but a day or two after Mr. Prince’s return So great was their impatience to get on that they could not be persuaded to remain a day, but took leave the morning of the day following [his] arrival On the day of their departure [from New York City] ... [I] went over the Atlantic Hotel to see them for the last time. They seemed in good health and spirits, and impatient to depart I was so much grieved at parting that I could scarcely speak a word. Cousin O[liver] took my hand, begged me to look at him once more, and said in a most affectionate manner, ‘Good bye, my dear’”

On Saturday, October 7, 1837, the Princes boarded a steam packet ship, the S.S. Home, bound for Charleston. The Home had been in service for less than a year, and this was to be its third sea voyage. A vessel of 537 tons, 220 feet long and with a beam of 22 feet, the Home was propelled by two paddle-wheels mounted amidships; in addition, like most steamboats of the time, the Home was equipped with masts, sails, and rigging. According to Eric Hause’s magazine article, “The Wreck of the Home,” the ship had been “originally constructed for river trade, [but then] converted into a passenger liner The ship’s interior was paneled in deep mahogany and cherry wood with breathtaking skylights, saloons, and luxurious passenger quarters [The] Home [was] the most plush vessel of its type.” Although \$115,000 had been spent converting the Home for ocean voyages, it was equipped with only three lifeboats and two life preservers.

When the Home cast off its moorings from the New York wharf around 4 p.m. that Saturday afternoon, with about 90 passengers and 40 crew on board, there was only a slight wind and the weather was beautiful. No one aboard could even have imagined that this ship was heading straight into the path of Racer’s Storm, “one of the most famous and destructive hurricanes of the century,” according to David Ludlam’s *Early American Hurricanes* (1963). This cataclysmic storm, Ludlam says, “has lived long in memory, partly from its apt name, but more so as a result of its extreme duration and the immensity of its path of destruction covering more than two thousand miles.” Racer’s Storm, the first recorded hurricane to rake both the Gulf coast and the Atlantic coast, was first encountered in the central Caribbean on September 28 by the English war ship H. M. S. Racer, for whom the hurricane was named.

Moving northwest, Racer’s Storm had by October 3 sliced through Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula and was rushing through the Gulf of Mexico toward Brownsville Texas, near the mouth of the Rio Grande. As the monstrous storm approached the coast, Ludlam says, “the dynamics of recurvature slowed the storm’s progress and turned it gradually into the north and then the northeast.” The terrible hurricane then roared through the trend of the shoreline of the Gulf, pulverizing Galveston on October 4, New Orleans on October 6, and Mobile on October 7 (the day the Home left New York wharf). The storm then headed northeast, smashing into parts of Alabama and Florida, central Georgia, and central South Carolina, and on October 8 entered the

Atlantic Ocean somewhere between Charleston and Wilmington. On October 9 the hurricane crossed North Carolina's Outer Banks at the very time the Home was navigating the waters off the North Carolina coast. It was around noon on Sunday, October 8, when the ship was east of Chesapeake Bay, that those on the Home saw the first ominous indications of a storm, and by afternoon the seas were heavy and the winds increasing steadily. The ship struggled through the violent weather and seas, and by 3 p.m. that Sunday had sprung a leak. Soon both crew and passengers were bailing water and manning the ship's hand pumps. Despite these efforts, the ship began to fill with water, and soon three huge waves crashed over the ship, punching holes in several windows. By now the ship was in the Graveyard of the Atlantic, as the ocean off the coast of North Carolina has been known for 200 years. Its masts unsteady and its sails useless or torn, its hull waterlogged, and its steam engines weakened by the rolling of the vessel and the rising water in the boiler rooms, the Home was now definitely doomed. Around 8 p.m. on Monday the furnace fires went out, and the Home's captain decided his only option was to try to beach the ship on the shore. He headed the ship toward the beach on Ocracoke Island, part of North Carolina's Outer Banks.

At 10 p.m., about 100 yards from shore, the Home struck a reef and grounded parallel to the shoreline, exposing the ship to the full force of the huge waves which thunderously swept over it, one after another. With each wave, part of the ship was swept away. Many of the female passengers lined themselves up on the side of the ship nearest the shore, but with each crushing wave some of them were carried off into the raging surf. The captain, who survived, later wrote that as the passengers were washed off the ship "their shrieks and cries ... were appalling and heart-rending beyond description."

Gov. George Gilmer later wrote about what he had been able to discover about the final hours of Oliver and Mary Prince on the Home: "Mr. Prince took command of the hands at the pump, where his self-possession and strong strokes showed that he worked for a nobler purpose than fear for his own life. When exhausted by his efforts, he joined his wife, to devote himself to her safety. The self-sacrificing nature of Mrs. Prince would not yield to the temptation of clinging to her husband, when his exertions might be necessary to the safety of others on board. She urged him to return to his efforts at the pump. Immediately afterwards she attempted to obey the advice of the Captain, to remove from one part of the vessel to another less exposed to the danger.

"As she stepped out of the cabin into an open space, a wave passed over and through the vessel, and carried her into the ocean.... Mr. Prince, resuming his labors at the pump, was spared the pangs of knowing the fate of his wife. To a young man who lived to report the story, Mr. Prince said: 'Remember me to my child, Virginia.' If there was aught else the uproar of the ocean prevented its being heard. No account was ever given of the last struggle for life by those who worked at the pump. In a great heave of the ocean, the vessel parted asunder and went to the bottom."

The wreck of the Home was, according to Eric Hause, "the most deadly sea disaster on American shores at the time," and newspapers printed numerous accounts of the tragedy and its aftermath. "The dreadful catastrophe which befell the ship, Mr. and Mrs. Prince, and almost all the passengers," Gov. Gilmer wrote, "made such an impression upon the whole country that the

event is still freshly remembered by every one, whenever the bursting of boilers, the burning of steamers, and the wreck of vessels are mentioned.” The Home’s captain even wrote an instant best-selling book about the catastrophe. Around 90 people died, most of them women and children. The bodies of many of the victims, including the Princes, were never recovered.

Many obituaries for the Princes were published. The most notable obituary was published in a Georgia newspaper two weeks after the shipwreck. Concerning Oliver Prince it said: “Mr. Prince for more than twenty-five years was a practitioner of law in this state, and though not an eloquent speaker, was at all times interesting and convincing. Truth was his polar star, and to arrive at that, he regarded not the ruggedness of the way. He was well versed in the hidden mysteries of this intricate science He was safe in counsel, and scrupulously honest in all matters of trust and confidence. As a writer, he was spirited, perspicuous, and witty....”

Years later the three children of the Princes erected a cenotaph for their parents in Rose Hill Cemetery in Macon. The cenotaph is still there, although it has fallen over and now lies flat on the earth, face up. Paraphrasing from the Bible (2 Samuel 1: 23), the following inscription has been carved into the upper half of the marble slab: “OLIVER HILLHOUSE PRINCE and MARY R. PRINCE, who perished in the wreck of the steamship ‘Home.’ ‘They were lovely and pleasant in their lives and in their death they were not divided.’” Near the bottom is inscribed: “This tablet is erected to perpetuate the beloved memory of our parents by their bereaved and sorrowing children.”

In an Athens newspaper article intended to resuscitate the memory of Oliver Prince and published many years ago, John A. Cobb wrote: “There are too many instances in our history of achievements of men, of whose memories we should feel proud, [who] are allowed to pass into oblivion”

The present article on the eponymous Mr. Prince has been written with the same purpose as Cobb’s old article: “to revive with the living the memories of the dead ... that the dead may not, amid the exigencies of busy life, be entirely forgotten.” The present author will have succeeded, therefore, if, the next time you drive down Prince Avenue, you remember something about the almost totally forgotten Oliver Hillhouse Prince--you recollect, for example, that, incredibly, the street you are on was named for the Athenian who was plagiarized by Thomas Hardy!