**JAMES OGLETHORPE**

James Oglethorpe conceived of and implemented his plan to establish the colony of Georgia. It was through his initiatives in England in 1732 that the British government authorized the establishment of its first new colony in North America in more than five decades. Later that year he led the expedition of colonists that landed in Savannah early in 1733. Oglethorpe spent most of the next decade in Georgia, where he directed the economic and political development of the new colony, defended it militarily, and continued to generate support and recruit settlers in England and other parts of Europe.

**Childhood**

James Edward Oglethorpe was born on December 22, 1696, in London, England; he was the tenth and last child of Eleanor and Theophilus Oglethorpe. Though frequently in London, the Oglethorpes maintained a large family estate in a small town near London. His father owned other property in the neighboring town and the rent from these gave the Oglethorpes a comfortable life.

Both Theophilus and Eleanor had long been interested in politics, and in 1698 voters of Haslemere elected Theophilus to the House of Commons. All three of his sons—including Oglethorpe—would later hold this seat

Little is known about Oglethorpe's boyhood, but in 1714 he was admitted to Corpus Christi College at Oxford University. The excitement of Europe's war against the advancing Turks led him to drop out of school to enroll in a military academy in France. He subsequently traveled to Austria, where he became an aide to Prince Eugene of Savoy. After a victorious campaign against the Turks, Oglethorpe returned to England, where he reentered Corpus Christi. Although he never graduated, the college did award him a special M.A. in 1731.

In 1722 he successfully ran for Parliament, occupying a seat in the House of Commons previously held by his father and two older brothers. Here Oglethorpe devoted his energies to Britain's national and international interests.

**Prison Reform**

In 1729 James Oglethorpe's life was to change. The previous year, one of his friends, Robert Castell, was jailed in London's Fleet Prison because of his debts. At the time, inmates were forced to pay prison staff fees for decent room and board. Unable to pay, Castell was thrown into a cell with a prisoner who had smallpox. Castell's death from the disease led Oglethorpe to launch a national campaign to reform England's prisons. Named chairman of a parliamentary committee to investigate the jails, Oglethorpe saw firsthand the horrible conditions, abuses, and extortion prisoners faced. He also was alarmed that so many British citizens faced jail for no other reason than indebtedness.

As a result of the investigation a number of steps were taken to reform London's prisons. Oglethorpe's efforts to expose and correct prison abuses gained him national attention, and he became widely regarded as one of Britain's most active humanitarians.

Prison reform did not, however, solve the plight of the large number of poor people in England. Oglethorpe and several colleagues from the jails committee began exploring the possibility of creating a new colony in America. They believed that if given a chance, England's "worthy poor" could be transformed into farmers, merchants, and artisans. But strict rules would be needed to prevent the class divisions that plagued English society. Thus, all the settlers would work their own land, with slavery and large landholdings specifically prohibited.

**Georgia's Founding**

Although charity had been the initial motivation for the Georgia movement, by 1732 military and economic considerations were the principal factors. As a result of Oglethorpe's persuasive arguments, King George II in 1732 granted a charter for creating Georgia and named Oglethorpe as one of twenty-one Trustees to govern the new colony.

As the Trustees began interviewing potential colonists, they looked for carpenters, tailors, bakers, farmers, merchants, and others with the skills necessary for the colony's success. By this time any ideas of Georgia's being a haven for debtors in English prisons had long vanished—and not one formerly jailed debtor was among the first colonists selected.

Georgia's founders thought that the colony's climate would be suitable to the production of valuable silk, wine, and other Mediterranean-type commodities. The Trustees imagined the colony as a place where settlers could achieve a comfortable living rather than an enormous personal fortune, which was associated with plantation life in other parts of British America.

In November 1732 a total of 114 men, women, and children gathered at Gravesend on the River Thames to set sail for the new colony of Georgia. Oglethorpe understood that Georgia's charter prohibited him from holding office, owning land, or receiving a salary in the new colony, yet he gave up the comforts of home to accompany the first boatload of Georgia settlers.

After several delays they boarded *The Anne* for a two-month journey across the Atlantic. Following a brief visit in Charleston, the colonists proceeded to Port Royal, South Carolina's southernmost outpost. While they rested, Oglethorpe and a band went ahead to look for a place to settle. Some seventeen miles inland from the mouth of the Savannah River, they found Yamacraw Bluff overlooking the south bank of the river. Oglethorpe immediately struck up a friendship with the Yamacraw chief, Tomochichi, thus beginning a long and close relationship between the two.

On February 12, 1733, Oglethorpe returned to Yamacraw Bluff with the Georgia colonists. With the help of militia and African American slaves from

South Carolina, the pine forest was quickly cleared, and Oglethorpe laid out a plan for the new town of Savannah. His distinctive pattern of streets, ten-house "tythings," and public squares soon became a reality.

Identical clapboard houses built on identical lots, plus restrictions on how much land could be owned and an outright prohibition on slavery, were testimony to the Trustees' desire to produce a classless society—one in which each head of household worked his own land. This egalitarian ideal was not fully realized, however, in that women were not allowed to own land in the new colony. The Trustees based this policy on the assumption that each plot of land requried a male worker (and armed defender).

Leadership in the New Colony

Oglethorpe worked tirelessly on behalf of the colony during the initial months. Sometimes violating Trustee policy, Oglethorpe permitted Jews, and other persecuted religious minorities to settle in Georgia. On the matter of importing African slaves from any source, Oglethorpe never wavered in wholly opposing slavery in Georgia. With respect to Georgia's Indians, he had an enlightened policy, always respecting their customs, language, and needs. Land cessions were always agreed to by treaty according to proper Indian custom. Also, Oglethorpe actively sought to protect the Indians from unscrupulous white traders.

Oglethorpe had come to Georgia with no formal title other than Trustee. Although he could not hold office, Oglethorpe was clearly the leader of the colony, subject to instructions and rules promulgated by the Trustees back in London. In recognition of his role, he is almost universally regarded as Georgia's first governor.

Despite its charitable origins, Georgia was also designed to protect Britain's southern colonies. As the Spanish military presence in Florida grew, Oglethorpe's dream that Georgia would become an ideal agrarian society began to fade. The threat of invasion heightened, and Oglethorpe focused his efforts on the defense of Georgia.

**Military Leadership**

Oglethorpe returned to London on several occasions to lobby the Trustees and Parliament for funding to build forts in Georgia. During a visit in 1737

Oglethorpe convinced King George II to appoint him as a colonel in the army and give him a regiment of British soldiers to take back to Georgia. Interestingly, Oglethorpe was a civilian at this time, with only limited military experience (primarily as an aide to Prince Eugene). Nevertheless, he got what he wanted: rank in the regular army and a regiment. Oglethorpe also was given the title of "General and Commander in Chief of all and singular his Majesty's provinces of Carolina and Georgia." This has led to confusion as to whether Oglethorpe was now a colonel or a general. In terms of military rank in the British army, he was a colonel. During the pending hostilities with Spain, however, Oglethorpe also held a brevet (or temporary) field commission as general in order to command all allied forces (Carolina Rangers, Indian allies, etc.). Only in September 1743, however, was Oglethorpe actually promoted to the rank of General in the British army.

The Spanish invasion of Georgia came in July 1742. Ships bearing thousands of Spanish troops landed on the south end of St. Simons Island. Oglethorpe rallied his forces for battle. Oglethorpe's forces turned back a Spanish advance force. As they pursued the retreating Spaniards down the trail, Oglethorpe halted his force at the edge of a marsh. Here he positioned his men to await the counterattack by the main Spanish army.

Oglethorpe then took temporary leave of his force to return to Fort Frederica, when he came back to rejoin his men at the marsh, Spanish troops had already arrived but were turned back after a brief but fierce fight. Ironically,

Oglethorpe arrived just after the conclusion of what would become known as the Battle of Bloody Marsh. This loss helped persuade Spanish commanders to withdraw to Florida, never again to mount an offensive against Britain's colonies on the East Coast of America. As a result, Oglethorpe was a national hero in England.

**Later Life**

Oglethorpe returned to England in 1760 to live the life of a gentleman. He and Elizabeth divided their time between their country estate and their London town house. Though they never had children, by all accounts James and Elizabeth enjoyed an active social life entertaining friends and many of the literary and artistic figures of the day.

Oglethorpe eventually lived to see the colony that he founded become part of the United States of America. Though the historical record is silent as to how he felt about the American Revolution, it is known that on June 4, 1785, Oglethorpe met with John Adams, the first U.S. ambassador to Great Britain, and expressed "great esteem and regard for America."

After a brief illness Oglethorpe died on June 30, 1785—just six months shy of his eighty-ninth birthday. He was buried in a vault beneath the chancel floor of the Parish Church of All Saints, which stands immediately adjacent to Cranham Hall. Upon her death two years later, Elizabeth was interred in the same tomb.

Georgians still remember James Edward Oglethorpe in many ways. His name adorns Oglethorpe County, two towns (including Oglethorpe), Oglethorpe University, and numerous schools, streets, parks, and businesses. In paying tribute to Oglethorpe, however, Georgians can perhaps best honor his memory by remembering him as a man who wouldn't quit and who lived by the simple but profound philosophy that life is not about self, but about others.

**JAMES OGLETHORPE**

1. What did Oglethorpe's father do?

2. What did James Oglethorpe do in his earlier years?

3. How did war change his plans for life?

4.How did his experience in Parliament change his life?

5. What happened to people in England who could not their debts?

6. Why was Oglethorpe insistent upon establishing a colony in the New World?

7. Where was the land Oglethorpe received from the King?

8. Why were "military considerations important in the founding of Georgia?

9. What type of people did the Trustees look to bring to Georgia?

10.What two products were originally tried as profit-making products in Georgia?

11. What was unique about the way in which Savannah was designed?

12. What was his policy on slavery in Georgia?

13. Why was there confusion over Oglethorpe's rank?

14. What happened at the Battle of the Bloody Marsh?

15. How is he remembered in Georgia today?