

The story of Seven Oaks Community

Excerpts from speech by
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This history booklet is a complimentary gift from South Carolina National Bank in commemoration of the heritage of the Seven Oaks Community and the official opening of South Carolina National's Seven Oaks-Irmo office. We hope you will enjoy reading it and sharing its contents with others.

In relating the history of Seven Oaks I have searched for facts but I can not give you a totally factual record of this house and its owners. The lack of recorded history is due in part to the fact that Lexington County records were burned by Sherman's army. I know, however, that the home place known as Seven Oaks stands on land which was owned in the 19th century by the Leaphart family. I do not know that the house was built by a Leaphart but I do know it was the "home place" of Michael and Susan Leaphart and is so referred to in Michael's will dated 1872. I believe it is the home where Michael and Susan brought up their children.

What sort of home was it and what sort of family was this? This was a fine upcountry home. It was built of heart lumber and even the termites are no match for these timbers. This timber was doubtless cut from trees which were already old when the first white settlers came into this community.

Michael Leaphart was born in 1795, his wife Susan in 1805. I believe that here in this house their children were born and it was here that some of their children died. Across the St. Andrews Road and a short distance to the west in the St. Andrews Cemetery are to be found the graves of Michael and Susan and the graves of several of their children and grandchildren. There is one grave over there of a child a little less than seven years old and a grave of a son who died at twenty-five years of age so we know that the people who lived here knew great sorrow. But four of their children grew up and surely this house knew days of happiness and laughter when these three sons and one daughter were growing up. It's quite possible the house sometimes thought that these boys would accomplish what the termites had failed to do as they ran through and around the house as healthy boys are apt to do.

This was a house that had music in it and that was most unusual in those days. The Leapharts owned a fine piano, a rare and valuable possession. It was such a wonderful possession that it is the only item of personal property mentioned in Michael's will. He left one fine piano to his daughter Caroline. So in its early days this house had young people and music and laughter.

It was also a religious home. Many newcomers in this community have seen the need for additional churches and have set about organizing new congregations to fill that need. I believe that as young people Michael and Susan saw the need for a church and they and their neighbors got together in much the same way as you have done and the St. Andrews Lutheran Church was organized in 1835. Why was it named St. Andrews? I don't know but I do know that the first Swiss and German colonists to come into the Saxe Gotha township, which is now Lexington County, came over on a ship named the St. Andrew. Maybe I'm wrong but I like to think of an old grandmother seated before the fire in a rough pioneer cottage and telling her grandchildren about that land she had left so long ago, about that tremendous ocean which her grandchildren would probably never see and about that ship and all that happened on that long and perilous voyage across the sea. Surely in those stories the name St. Andrew came up over and over again and perhaps when it was time to name their church the name St. Andrew came to the minds of these men as an echo from the past.

In 1872 Michael Leaphart made his will. His beloved wife died in March 1876 and Michael died two months later. In his will he not only left his daughter, Caroline, a fine piano; he also left her the "home place", the fifty acre tract on which the house and its out buildings were located and her share of the rest of his land. But now Caroline Leaphart was Mrs. Henry Thompson Earle and she lived in a lovely three story brick home in Columbia, a home much larger and finer than this old home place.

I do not know whether Caroline ever lived in this house after her father's death but her son, Dr. Fort Sumter Earle, lived here. The place was rented from time to time. Mr. Jack Corley told me that when his father came into this community in 1898 he rented the present Seven Oaks house and one hundred acres of Earle land and was given Mrs. Earle's promise to sell him the land when all the heirs came of age. She kept her promise and twenty-four years later Mr. Corley bought the land. I believe that for about fifty years after Michael Leaphart's death the home place was lived in sometimes by tenants and sometimes by Dr. Sumter Earle who is said by some to have made the first alterations on the house.

In 1926 or 1927 Frank Lever, former congressman, bought this old place. He and Mrs. Lever found eight massive oaks but one was dying. They had that one removed, leaving seven, and Mrs. Lever named the home place Seven Oaks. Today one of these trees is still standing. It is approximately seventeen feet in circumference and Dr. Batson of the University of South Carolina says it is quite possible that this tree is two hundred fifty years old.

Mr. Lever was a candidate for governor while living at Seven Oaks but he had a high fever when the candidates made their first campaign appearance and he had to withdraw from the race.

He died of a heart attack in 1940. His body was brought to Seven Oaks and friends from far and near came to pay their respects. An old and weatherbeaten colored man walked twenty miles from the Spring Hill community to see his friend and benefactor for the last time. He reached here at the same time Senator Byrnes arrived from Washington and the two men stood side by side by the casket with tears streaming down their faces.

Part of the Seven Oaks land was sold in 1941 and the remainder in 1946. I had a wonderful time talking to Mr. Eugene Salmon who was the next owner. He told me that Seven Oaks stands on the highest ground anywhere hereabouts and he knows this from having studied a deodetic survey map. While owner of this property he had an old carriage house dismantled and used the old timbers and bricks to build the present pump house. In one of these old sills he found a cannon ball which was fired by Sherman's army. He says that the gun crew could see Seven Oaks because of its elevation and that is why they selected it as a target. He also told me that the land was owned by the Fridays before it was sold to the Leapharts. There is an old Friday burying ground on this land. Mr. Salmon also said that an old timer told him that the Fridays had a home where Seven Oaks now stands but that this home was burned. He thinks that the present Seven Oaks was built by the Leapharts in 1790. However, the 1790 census does not list anyone by the name of Leaphart as being the head of a household in this district in that year.

He was energetic enough to go under the house and he discovered that the floors are made of trees with only one side smoothed off. In time this beautiful wide flooring has been covered with ordinary pine flooring. He also says that underneath the wallboard in many rooms is the most beautiful pine paneling he has ever seen. This paneling runs horizontal rather than vertical but even so he said it was so beautiful he wanted to remove the wallboard but the expense of doing this and also the great number of nail holes deterred him.

The Salmons told me that the house used to be larger than it is now. This was proved when they investigated what is now an outside chimney and discovered that it had another opening which was the fireplace for another room which is no longer there.

As interesting as I found these remarks by Mr. Salmon I found even more interesting his and Mrs. Salmon's remarks about their ghosts and other happenings which they can not explain in any natural way. Mr. and Mrs. Salmon called their ghost Mr. Leaphart and he came in regularly. During the Salmon's ownership Mr. Leaphart was almost a member of the family. Odd noises and sounds as of something falling were positively commonplace. They got so used to them that they stopped going to see what had fallen and accepted them as Mr. Leaphart just pranking around again. Mrs. Salmon says that it was not in the least unusual for them to be sitting in the family room and for one door to open as by an invisible hand, for a rocking chair to start rocking and after a while the rocking would stop and in a second or two another door would open seemingly of

its own accord. This too became commonplace and when the door opened one or the other would look up and say, "Hello, Mr. Leaphart. How's the weather outside tonight?" or make some other welcoming remark and then, getting no reply, would continue with whatever they were doing.

And now the Jameses are the owners of Seven Oaks. Mr. and Mrs. James have five sons and one daughter so again the house rings with laughter and music.

Mrs. James tells me they also have a ghost. Mrs. James has been told that during the War, when the Leapharts heard that Sherman's army was coming, they buried a large chest of silver and jewelry. Somehow, so the legend goes, they were never able after the war to find the exact burying place and recover the treasure and it is thought that the ghost comes back to look for it. Frequently on summer nights they hear footsteps start at the bottom of the stairs and go right on up to the attic. The ghost always goes up and never comes down. For some reason the Jameses thought that the Nunamakers lived here during the War so they call their ghost Mr. Nunamaker. I have explained to Mrs. James that I am almost positive that the Leapharts lived here during that time and suggested that they try calling their ghost Mr. Leaphart. Perhaps this will please him so much that he will come down and sit and rock awhile.

So we see that the house which we call Seven Oaks has seen tremendous changes. It has seen the road in front of its door change from two deep ruts to the good road we know today and when the wind is right, this old house can hear the traffic purring along on the super highways I20 and I26. It has seen how the advances in medicine have almost eliminated infant mortality. It has seen the education offered its children change from an old field school with an itinerant teacher to the building and faculty of the Lexington County School System. And yet, Seven Oaks remains and lives. A reminder of the Past. A tribute to the Present.