

## Founder of Coker College

# Major James Lide Coker

Versatile in various fields, his spirit lives today in the institution which he fostered

By Mabel Montgomery

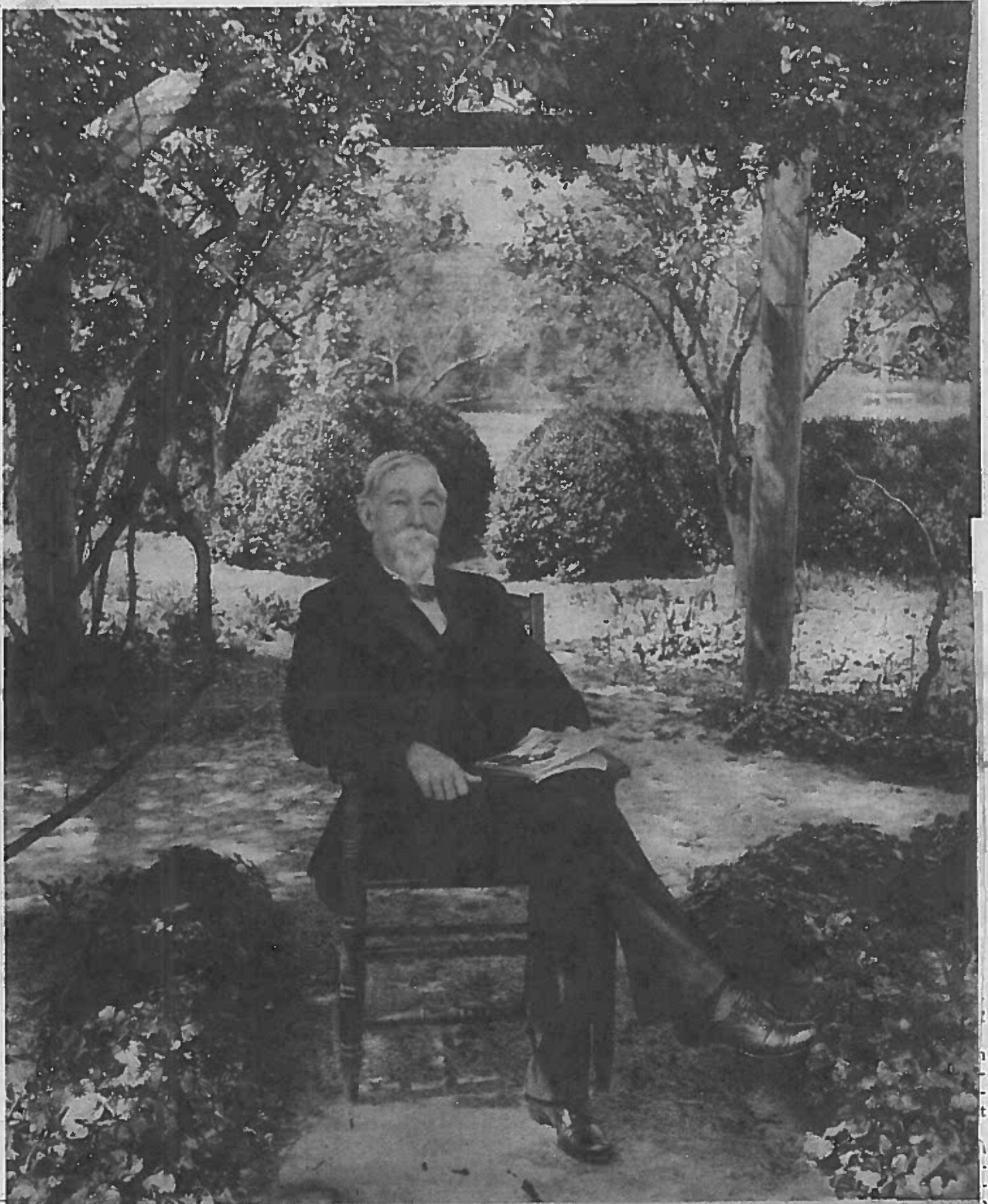
**I**N MARCH, 1857, a tall, fine-looking young South Carolinian entered Harvard university. He was James Lide Coker, born at Society Hill, who had previously attended the South Carolina Military Academy, and who announced to the president of Harvard that he had come to study agriculture. There being no such course, the president is said to have called together three members of his faculty and instructed them to organize a course in agriculture for the earnest young man. Surely no student could have had more distinguished teachers for the three faculty members were: Asa Gray, noted botanist; Agassiz, great naturalist; and Horsford, chemist.

"But we cannot help you unless we have soils of your native county," the trio are reputed to have told him. Whereupon James Lide Coker replied calmly, "I have samples of the soils with me." With the meticulous thoroughness that has made the Cokers famous in many lines, he had brought with him in his small trunk, samples of the soil of Darlington county. Later he wrote of that period, "I entered the scientific school at Harvard university, remaining a year, and studying chemistry and botany with a view to preparing myself for the occupation of farming."

Returning home, he proceeded to work with fertilizer and its effects on soils and seed. He set up experimental plots very similar to those maintained today by the Pedigreed Seed company founded by his son, David R. Coker. Moreover, in a journal he kept careful records of these experimental plots, again showing his meticulous thoroughness.

ENDOWED with a fine brain, a delightful personality, an excellent education and the quality of leadership, James Lide Coker may have dreamed dreams as young men do, planning many interesting future activities that he might undertake. Perhaps the reason he later encouraged and assisted his sons (James L., Jr., David R., Charles and William) in their pioneering undertakings, agricultural, industrial and scientific, was that he himself might have done these things if war had not intervened.

When the South seceded, James Lide Coker promptly organized a company and volunteered his services. As captain in the Confederate Army, he proved a brave and resourceful officer, promoted to major—a title he was to bear with pride the remainder of his



In the sunset of life, Major Coker's mind was as clear and his interests as keen as ever. A lover of birds, he spent much time in his garden listening to them. His last trip outdoors was to inspect a bluebird's nest in his son David's yard

days—after being severely wounded in the thigh at Lookout Mountain in October, 1863. Carried by his men from the battlefield in a blanket, his life was at first despaired. His mother, Mrs. Hannah Lide Coker, promptly joined him and remained with him throughout his long illness. After the battle of Missionary Ridge, Major Coker and his mother were left in a small cottage in the Federal lines. Only twenty-six years of age, his stalwart figure prone and helpless, when his suffering became almost unbearable, Major Coker would repeat Bible verses aloud and sing hymns lustily. After weary months he was at last exchanged

and allowed to start the circuitous journey home by train and boat, going via Louisville, Baltimore and Richmond. At points where the transportation changed, the stretcher on which he lay had to be lifted by bystanders whom his mother could secure. In July, 1864, nine months after he had been wounded, Major Coker and his mother reached home. What a happy family reunion that was! For the first time he saw his eldest son, the late J. L. Coker, who had been born during his absence.

On crutches permanently from the fractured hip, the Major did not waste time in vain repining. Gallantly he

set about a new start in life. Owning extensive farm land from which crops, food and stock had been stripped by Sherman's men (one diseased horse was left and a cow saved by being hidden in the swamp), he faced the readjustment from slave ownership to sharecropping and resumed farming. His courage under adversity, his vigor and his leadership were soon evident. Evident also was the value of his education in soil chemistry at Harvard, for he applied his scientific knowledge to farming. He made cotton and corn; he made money as well. A powerful man physically and intellectually, he also possessed mental and physical en-



# South Carolina's

# SECESSION ANNIVERSARY

By WILLIAM C. LAKE

DECEMBER 20 of this year is the eighty-ninth anniversary of South Carolina's Ordinance of Secession. On this date in 1860 the state dissolved the union between the State of South Carolina and other states united with her under the compact entitled "The Constitution of the United States of America."

By this act of the people, South Carolina again became a free and independent state. This was the same status she had in 1776, when on March 26, of that year, South Carolina became the first independent government set up in the United States, with John Rutledge as president.

South Carolina's withdrawal from the Union began the movement which led to the organization of the Southern Confederacy—the Confederate States of America.

The seeds of secession sown in the early 1850's had fallen in fertile soil. During the administration of Governor William H. Gist, secession meetings were held in many parts of the state. The governor sent his kinsman, General "States Rights" Gist, to confer with the governors of the other Southern states. The people were growing sick and tired of their treatment at the hands of the North.

On November 12, 1860, the general assembly of South Carolina ordered an election of delegates to a convention to assemble in Columbia on December 17.

Thus the delegates from the several election districts met on this date in the First Baptist church in Columbia.

Dr. Joseph Le Conte wrote in his diary that it was the "gravest, ablest and most dignified body of men" that he had ever seen brought together.

D. F. Jamison of Barnwell was elected president, and B. F. Arthur of Union, clerk. When called to the chair, Mr. Jamison addressed the convention. In conclusion he said:

"In the outset of this movement I can offer you no better motto than George Jacques Danton's at the commencement of the French Revolution: 'To dare! and again to dare! and without end to dare.'"

At 10:00 o'clock that night the convention adjourned to meet next afternoon in Charleston because of an epidemic of smallpox in Columbia.

The following committee was appointed to draft the Ordinance: John A. Inglis of Chesterfield, R. B. Rhett of St. Phillips and St. Michael's, James Chestnut, Jr. of Kershaw, James L. Orr of Anderson, Maxcy Gregg of Richland, B. F. Dunkin of Winyah, and W. F. Hutson of Prince William.

This committee followed a model, classical in the purity and clarity of it, prepared by Chancellor F. H. Wardlaw of Edgefield.

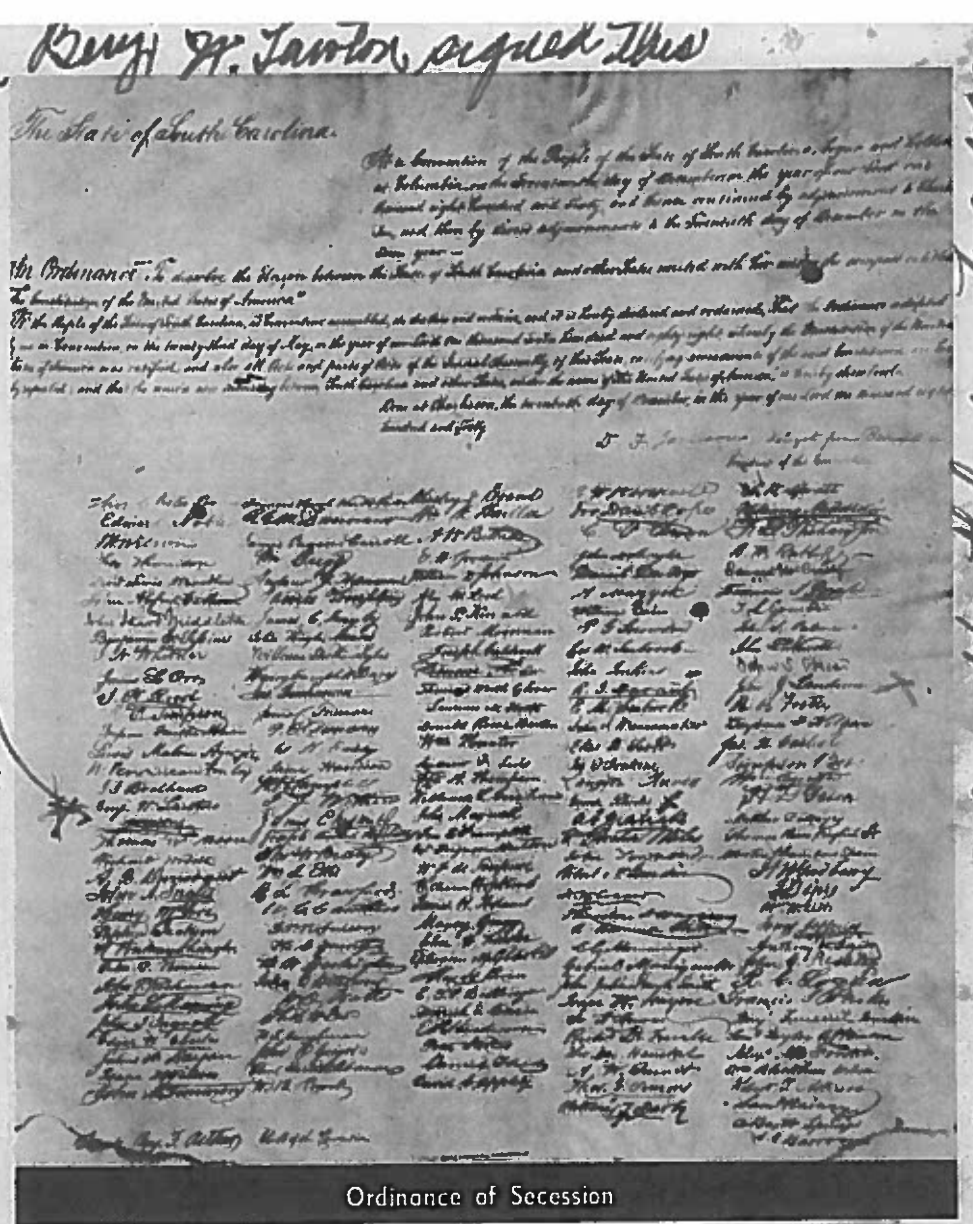
No speeches were made when the Ordinance was read. President Jamison called for a vote. There were 159 yeas, and no nays, unanimous. At 1:15 p. m. the announcement was made of the passing of the Ordinance.

Within a few minutes the Charleston Mercury had an "extra" on the streets of Charleston. In Columbia the Carolinian also put out an "extra" telling of the convention's actions.

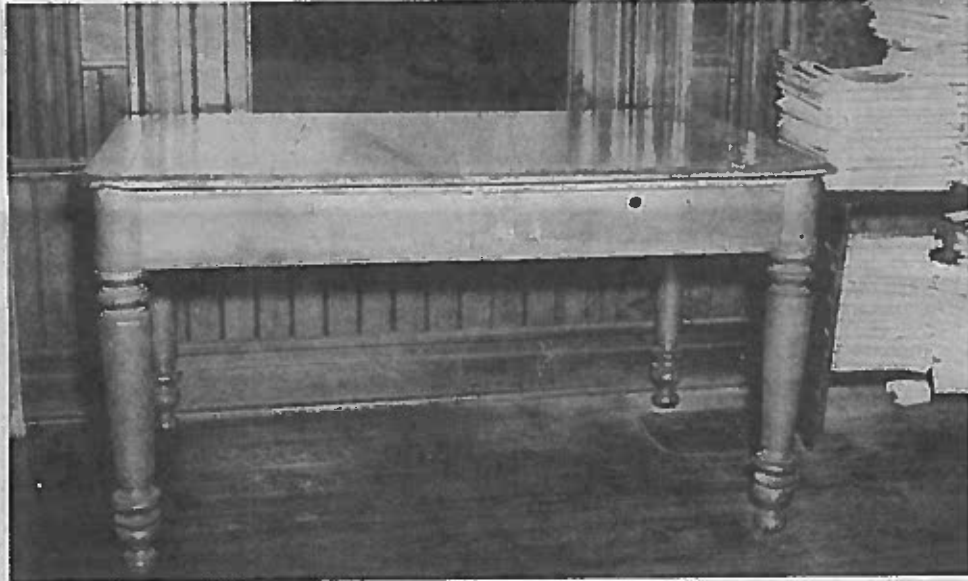
One by one the delegates signed their names to the Ordinance, alphabetically by election districts. Thus Thomas Chiles Perrin of Abbeville was the first signer and T. J. Barron of York was the last.

News of the passage of the Ordinance caused demonstrations in Columbia and Charleston and other cities in the state. Bon fires were lighted, cannons fired and bells rung.

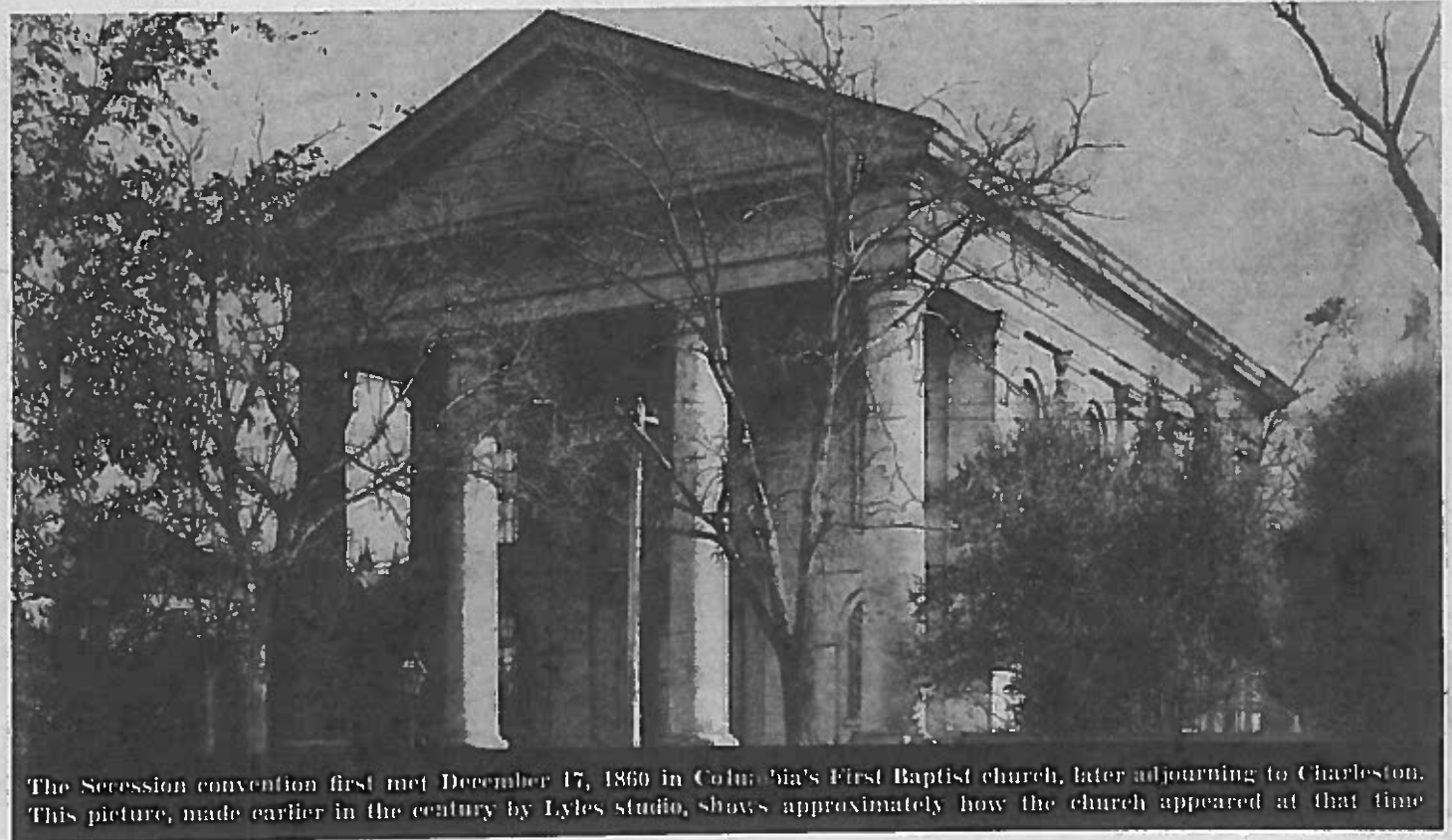
Not until 1868 was South Carolina "re-admitted" to the Union and Federal troops were not withdrawn until 1877.



Ordinance of Secession



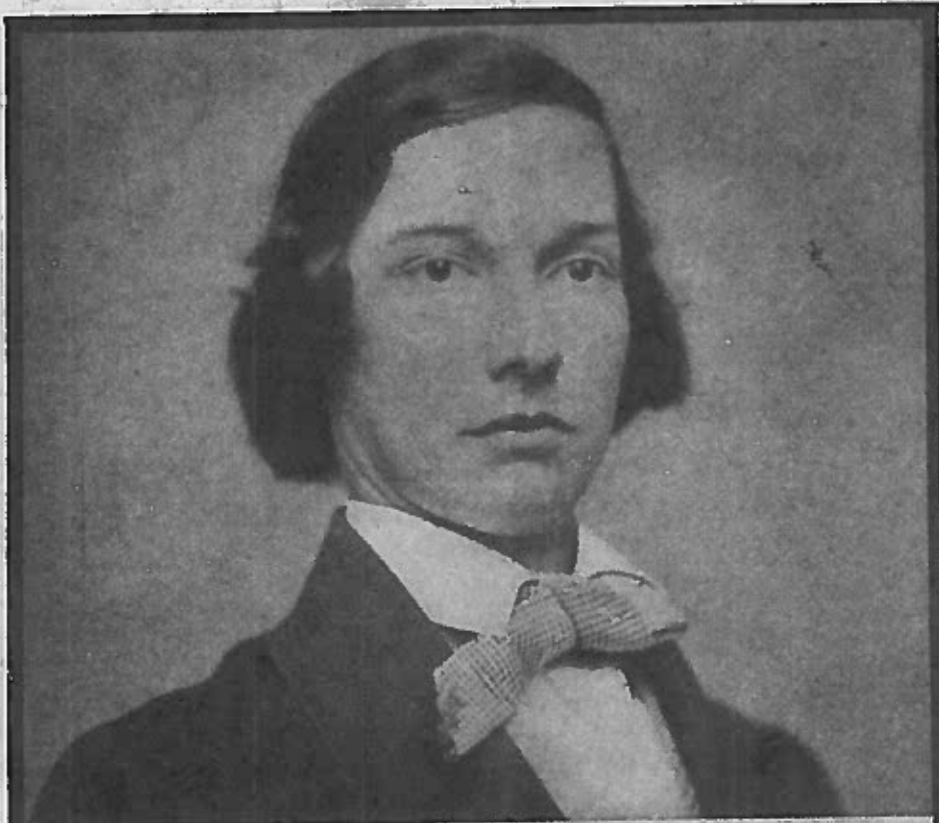
The table on which the Ordinance of Secession was signed is pictured above. It was loaned to the Union Carnegie Free library by the late Benjamin F. Arthur, Jr. Photo at right shows Benjamin F. Arthur of Union, secretary of the Secession convention



The Secession convention first met December 17, 1860 in Columbia's First Baptist church, later adjourning to Charleston. This picture, made earlier in the century by Lyles studio, shows approximately how the church appeared at that time

and they may say it with the signature too





Major Coker as he appeared after his agricultural studies at Harvard in 1857



This photo was made when Major Coker was a very successful businessman

ergy which enabled him to achieve his objectives.

Though not interested in politics, he consented to serve in the South Carolina Legislature in 1864, 1865 and 1866. He and the great Dr. James A. Carlisle were members at the same time. Together they championed a public school measure for the education of all the children of the state.

THROUGH sagacity in many forms of business, the Major amassed a fortune. However, he is remembered more for his high ideals of citizenship than for his wealth. Never content to limit his interest to agriculture and business, though he succeeded outstandingly in both, his passion was for service.

His great contribution was the establishment of Coker college in 1908. The early Baptists who settled near Society Hill were always strong believers in education, therefore the Major inherited this interest, becoming one of the founders of Welsh Neck high school, at Hartsville, which opened in 1894. When the State took over operation of high schools, the Major's foresight saw the need of a girl's college to succeed Welsh Neck academy. Accordingly, he gave of his means and ability to start Coker college. Today

Coker college has more than 300 students from 15 states. During its history, more than \$1,250,000 has been given Coker college by Major Coker and his descendants. His grandson, James L. Coker, III, is chairman of the board of trustees. Major Coker made many investments that brought good dividends but the investment in Coker college brought him the greatest dividend of happiness and of usefulness to womanhood.

PHILANTHROPIST, business leader, scientific agriculturist, Christian gentleman, Major Coker was an exceedingly versatile man. A lover of nature, few happenings in the natural world escaped his keen observation. It was fitting that, before his death in June, 1918, his last trip outdoors was to cross the street to inspect a bluebird's nest in his son David's yard.

His spirit lives on in the institution he founded and the heritage of good citizenship which he bequeathed his descendants and which is actively practiced by them today. As Archibald Rutledge has beautifully said in his poem, "The Cokers of Hartsville,"

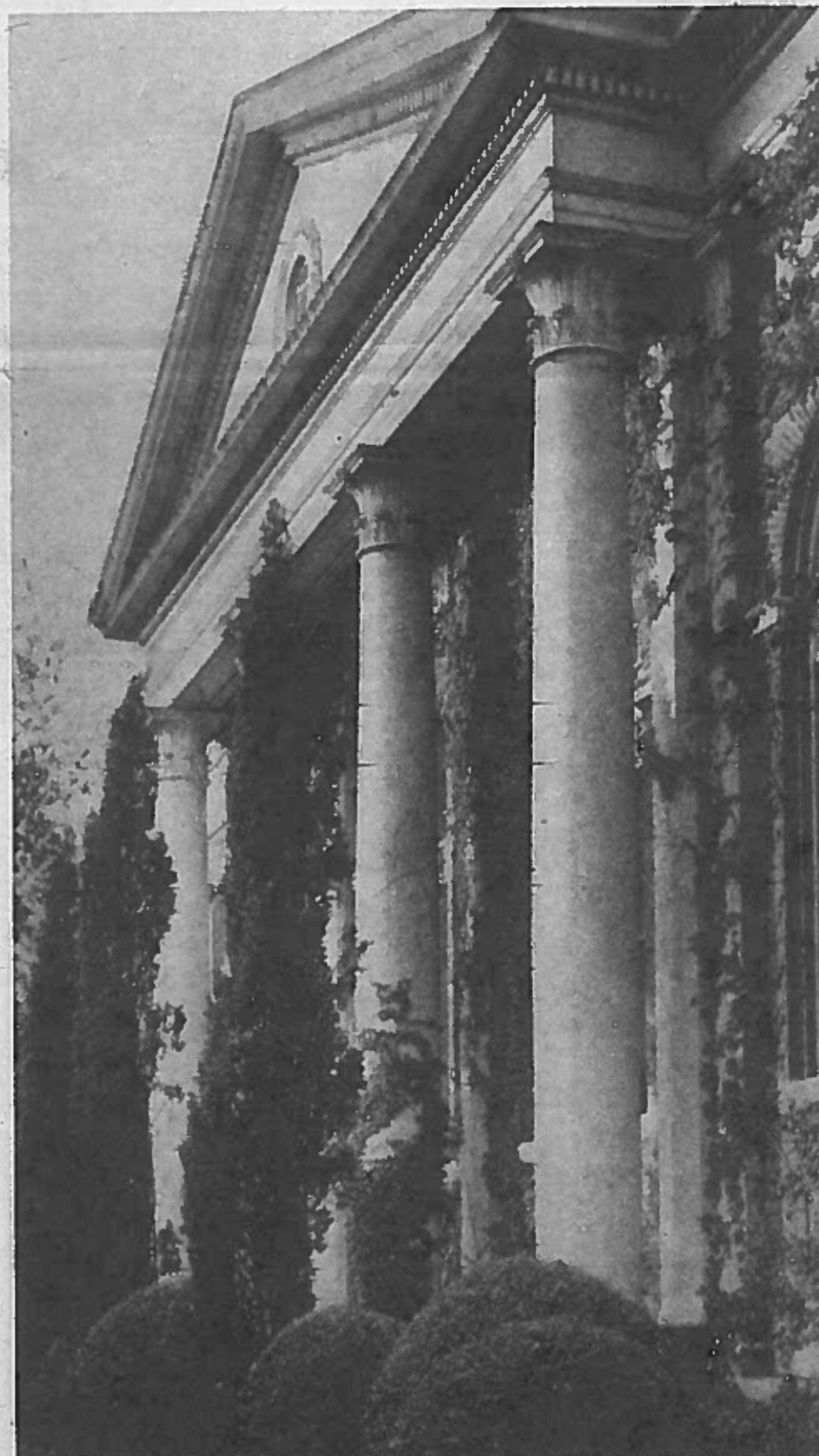
"So, when I think of heroes  
And their bequests, I find  
The Cokers of Hartsville  
Keep coming to my mind."



His powerful mental and physical energy reflected in his appearance



Major Coker, pictured with a granddaughter in his garden at Hartsville



The administration building at Coker college, Hartsville, is typical of the fine buildings and equipment which the college now owns. It was completed in 1910