

Edgeworth, Richard ^[1]



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by Edgar E. MacDonald, 1986

1764–19 Aug. 1796

Richard Edgeworth, mechanical engineer and planter, was born in Oxfordshire, England, at Black Bourton, the ancestral estate of his Hungerford grandmother. He was the oldest son of Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744–1817) and Anna Maria Elers. His father, whose living was derived from a family estate in Edgeworthstown, Ireland, was interested in science and mechanical inventions. An admirer of the educational theories of [Rousseau](#) ^[2], Edgeworth gave his son Richard a practical rather than a classical education, one designed to make him independent and self-sufficient. In 1771 he took him to France, where the seven-year-old boy met the French philosopher. In Lyons the elder Edgeworth became involved in the engineering feat of diverting the Rhone River. Richard soon spoke French better than his English tutor, and Edgeworth became aware that his son's education was making him alarmingly independent. While in France, Richard was placed in a Jesuit school; later, in 1776, he was sent to the Charter House in London. While not a remarkable student, Richard shared his father's interests in mechanics. In 1778, at the age of thirteen, he was awarded a silver medal for "Early Mechanic Genius" by the Society for the Encouragement of Arts and Manufactures. Finally, father and son decided that a naval career might best suit Richard's temperament, and he joined the [British Navy](#) ^[3], with the encouragement of his cousin Edward Pakenham, Lord Longford, who was later killed at the Battle of New Orleans.

By 1781 Edgeworth was a midshipman on the *Monmouth*, which had seen service in the [American Revolution](#) ^[4]. While aboard the *Monmouth* he participated in battles against the French off the Coromandel Coast of India, at Madras, and off Ceylon, the ship suffering heavy damages and loss of life. On 10 Feb. 1783 Edgeworth, not yet nineteen, jumped ship at Goa, thereby forfeiting his naval career as well as exhausting his father's patience. He was "lost" to his family for several years.

Edgeworth appeared in the Pee Dee area on the North Carolina-South Carolina border, having come down from Virginia, in 1786 or 1787. He became a tutor in the home of Claudius Pegues, a planter, and some time later in the homes of several gentlemen in Georgetown, S.C. In May 1788 he was married in [Richmond County](#) ^[5] by John Speed, J.P., to Elizabeth Knight, daughter of a hatter. By her he had three sons, Nathaniel Lovell (1789), Achilles Sneyd (1791), and Richard (1795). Edgeworth purchased land in [Anson County](#) ^[6] on the Pee Dee River, where he projected establishing a town. Having effected a reconciliation with his father, he returned to visit his family in England in 1792 and 1795. He stayed some time at a property named Ashton Bower, near Clifton, rented by two maiden stepaunts, the Misses Mary and Charlotte Sneyd. Furnished with monies and credit from his father, he bought more land in Anson and named his plantation Ashton. In projecting a town on the Pee Dee, he doubtless had his father's work at Lyons in mind. If he could make the river navigable from Georgetown, S.C., to Anson County, a town at the head of navigation should prosper. He would name the town Sneydsboro after his two step-aunts who listened so sympathetically to his plans. But Edgeworth returned from his last trip to England a very ill man, and, owing to a flood of the Pee Dee and an epidemic of equine distemper, he suffered financial reverses. He was forced to sell Ashton to pay his debts. On 7 Mar. 1796 he sold it to William Johnson with the understanding that, if a town were established on the property, it should be named Sneydsboro. Five months later Edgeworth died in Anson; his place of burial is unknown. His will, written 23 Nov. 1792 and proved in the January Anson court 16 Jan. 1797, was subject to much misinterpretation by his descendants. The property he left his two youngest sons had been sold to pay his debts. The European property left to his oldest son was not the Edgeworthstown estate still in the possession of his father but three small properties left to him by his grandfather. Richard Lovell Edgeworth and his daughter Maria, soon to become celebrated as an author of educational treatises and popular novels, endeavored to aid the widow of Richard and his three young sons. Owing to the difficulties of communication and the legalities of disposing of the three small Irish properties, years elapsed before any substantial assistance could be made. Nathaniel Edgeworth migrated to Alabama and left descendants there and in Mississippi; Achilles moved to Fort Valley, Ga., and left descendants there and in Texas; Richard, the youngest, lived in Chesterfield County, S.C., and left descendants there, as well as in North Carolina and Virginia.

On 3 Apr. 1902 an almost wholly fictitious account of the life of Richard Edgeworth and his family appeared in the [Wadesboro Messenger and Intelligencer](#) ^[7]. Unfortunately this article became the basis of fabrications by other journalists so that the early history of Sneydsboro, the town that came into being after Edgeworth's death, is largely apocryphal. These fictions appeared most recently in *A History of Anson County* (1977). The correspondence of Maria Edgeworth with [Rachel Mordecai Lazarus](#) ^[8] perhaps gave currency to the myth that Maria and her father had established schools in North Carolina. The Mordecai School in Warrenton incorporated the educational principles advocated by the Edgeworths, and later a school in Greensboro was named the Edgeworth Female Seminary, but Richard Edgeworth was the only member of that family to come to these shores.

References:

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