

STANDING AT THE CROSSROADS

Words by George McDaniel

One day in the mid-1990s, I drove from my home in Summerville to Bacon's Bridge over the Ashley River and spent several hours enjoying the tranquil beauty and deep sense of history the place conveys. From the Ashley River up to the Ashley River Road stretched 80 acres of forest with a mix of pines and hardwoods, interspersed with wetlands, which offered opportunities for bird-watching. History was nearby, for an early bridge near the site of the present one was built in the late 1600s, and during the Revolutionary War the area was considered a strategic location by both Patriot and British soldiers, including Gen. Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox." Just up from the bridge, the river had served as a popular swimming hole for generations of local youth. By the mouth of a creek on the river's west bank was a spot where people from all walks of life, including my sons and me, had fished for bream, bass, flounder, and striped bass since the river there was a productive mix of both fresh and salt water.

In the 90s, those 80 acres from the river to the road had been owned principally by Charleston Southern University. Friends of mine and I had asked the Dorchester County Council to purchase the land as a park, but had been rebuffed due to a lack

of money. Having grown up in Atlanta, I could see the future and was fearful because I had seen countless rural landscapes like this bulldozed and built over as development spread.

Several years later while reading the Summerville Journal Scene, I just happened to see an innocuous story explaining that the Dorchester County Council had turned down Charleston Southern's offer to sell that property to the county. I alerted my friends, and together we piled into two cars — Howard Bridgman, Heyward Hutson, George Neil, Sue Wehman, Lucy Anne Cathcart — and drove to St. George, the county seat, to ask the council to re-consider its decision. "Too late," we were told. Their earlier vote had been final. After the meeting, conversations were held, and perhaps arms twisted, and we were told that at the next meeting, there might be a chance. In those two weeks we mobilized the public. At the next county council meeting in Summerville, the room was filled with standing-room-only. Coy Johnston, a leading conservationist in the state, had worked his magic and secured funds from the SC Conservation Bank so that the Lowcountry Land Trust could buy the land.

Citizens stood in line to voice their support for a future park. I knew we had won when a fireman, still dressed in his station house blue uniform, stood before county council and said that they had to secure the property since he wanted to take his 4-year old daughter, whose hand he was holding, fishing in the river there, just as his father had taken him. To make the picture even more complete, the only thing needed was a puppy.

That was it. The county council voted to re-consider their decision, and the Conservation Bank bought the land, and ownership passed to the Lowcountry Land Trust, which conveyed it to the new Dorchester Trust Foundation. Today the foundation leases the land to the county as a passive park, the first park Dorchester County has ever operated.

Had concerned citizens not stepped up, had the Conservation Bank not provided funds, and had the Dorchester County Council not re-considered its decision, the future would have been different. Where now there is a passive park with nature trails enjoyed daily by scores of people along with their dogs, one would instead see acres of condos and pavement, for that is what was proposed after the county council's refusal to buy. That development would have sparked others like it nearby. Instead, that park purchase prompted Coy Johnston and me, both board members of the Dorchester Trust Foundation, to approach the Dorchester County Council in 2012 to purchase the 85 acre tract diagonally across the river from the park with about a mile of river frontage. That tract had been slated for a subdivision, complete with a restaurant overlooking the river at Bacon's Bridge. However, due to the recession and the landowner's bankruptcy, a mortgage bank owned the property, so the county was able to purchase it at the much reduced cost of \$1.45 million, with proceeds from the 2010 voter-approved \$5 million bond referendum for parks and conservation, a vote we had intensively campaigned for, based in part on the popularity of the first park.

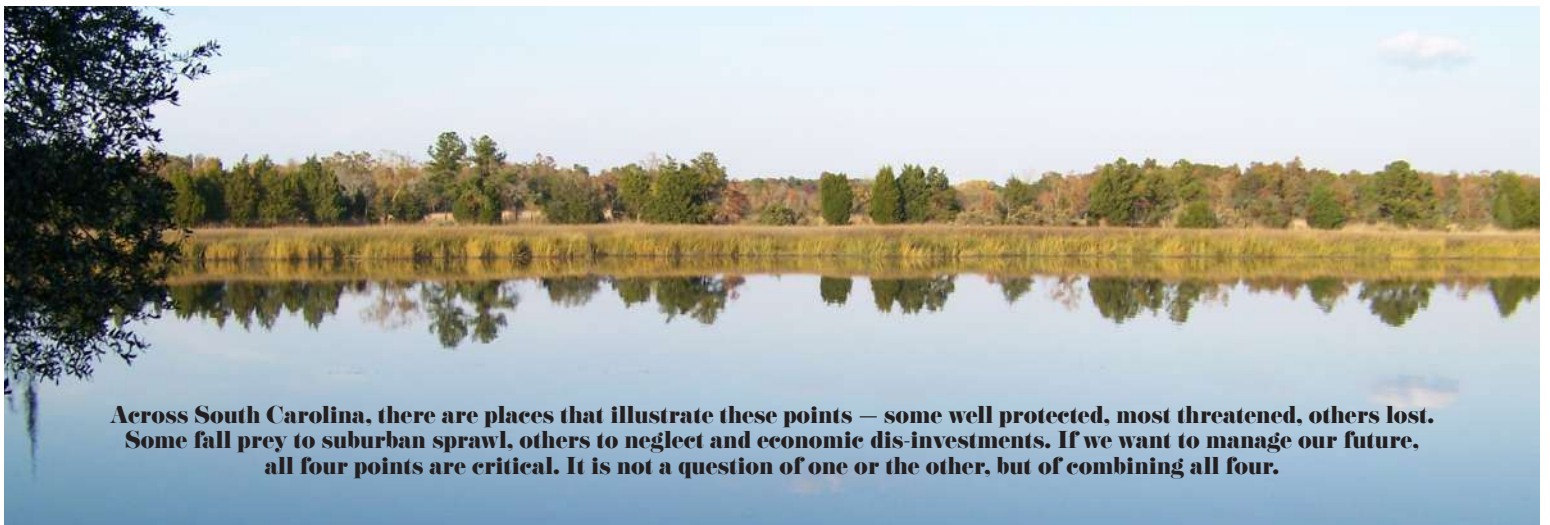
That first property of 70 acres has now become the Richard Rosebrock Park, named after a respected, conservation-minded county council member, while the second is named the Ashley River Park. Once the public came to enjoy them, these parks helped create a change in public thinking and set in motion new ideas for the future. They include vegetative buffers of 100 feet along the riverbanks, a masterplan for a passive Ashley River Park with an accent on conservation and appreciation of nature, and a boat landing for kayaks and canoe already in place at Bacon's Bridge at the entrance to Ashley River Park. Equally important is that the Dorchester County Council designated this area located between the Ashley River Road and the Ashley River as a special district for which a new set of ordinances would be developed. To guide their development, the county hired nationally respected planners, Urban Design Associates, to produce both a master plan and design standards for buildings and landscapes that we hope will convey a sense of this unique place, and blend livability and good business for the future. I tell this story to make four key points:

1. Historic preservation is not so much about the past as it is about the future. What kind of future do we want?

2. Places don't preserve places. People do. People have to step up and make it happen. Preservation is not a given.

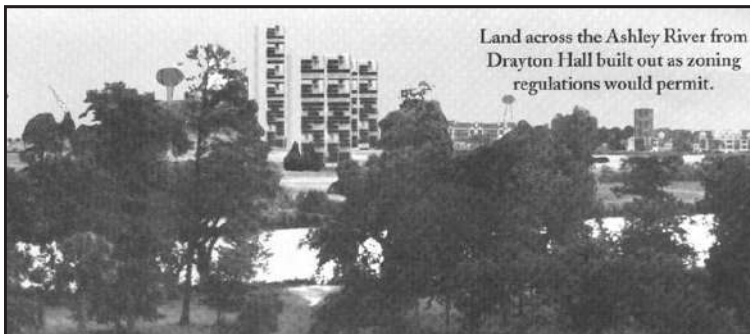
3. The preservation of our environs is often more about what we don't see than what we do see. At Rosebrock Park and the Ashley River Park, it looks as if nothing has happened, but as you now know, it has.

4. Be persistent, proactive, and positive. Though at times less appealing — and believe me, I know — such attitudes are more effective than the alternatives.



Across South Carolina, there are places that illustrate these points — some well protected, most threatened, others lost. Some fall prey to suburban sprawl, others to neglect and economic dis-investments. If we want to manage our future, all four points are critical. It is not a question of one or the other, but of combining all four.

How they are combined may be illustrated by the campaign to buy the land across the Ashley River at Drayton Hall. When I became its executive director, one of my first major challenges was to raise money in 1994 to buy that land because it constituted our “viewshed” and had been zoned to permit 22 units per acre for apartments or condos with no ordinance requiring a vegetative buffer. While protection of viewsheds has since become critical to historic sites across the nation, such as Mount Vernon and Monticello, at that time, it was new. We had no money, nor would the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which owned Drayton Hall, give or loan us any. Fortunately, I was able to paint a verbal picture to Marion Kennedy from Cincinnati, who generously donated funds to secure the first parcel. But how to raise money for the second? Using an early version of “Photoshop,” we created a vision of what the view would like with apartments and parking lots. Our campaign was simple: the juxtaposition of the view with forests and the one with apartments, with the question, “The View across the River: Which Future Do You Want?” In less than a year, we raised the \$300,000 to buy the land with donations from almost every state in the nation and six countries overseas. That photo-shopped image now looks grainy and woefully out of date, but thanks to it, we turned the future in our direction.



Our challenges did not stop there. Numerous campaigns have been waged since. The most recent is for the future of Cooks Crossroads, the intersection of the Ashley River Road and Bacon’s Bridge Road. While the Ashley is beautiful, that intersection is unsightly, especially due to the recent four-laning of Bacon’s Bridge Road, which has made both the road and the intersection perilous for pedestrians and bicyclists. Too often, intersections on the outskirts of towns or even within them have been designed like this. Need they be? Can they convey a sense of place? Can they tell residents as well as passers-by that this place is distinctive and that people care about it?



Scenes across South Carolina, like this one along the Ashley River National Scenic Byway, will be forever altered if plans are not in place to protect them.



In this case, Cooks Crossroads has the potential to serve as a gateway to a wealth of historical and natural resources nearby. Their combination ranks among the highest in the nation: the Ashley River Road itself, a National Scenic Byway; the historic plantation district along its route, which includes Middleton Place, Magnolia Plantation and Gardens, and Drayton Hall; the well-loved Rosebrock Park; Bacon's Bridge and its Revolutionary War sites; the Ashley River, a State Scenic River; the new Ashley River Park with its meandering nature trails along the river; and the new kayak landing. Just down river is Colonial Dorchester State Park, dating to the 1690s, and to the east are the historic districts and downtown of Summerville. About a decade ago, a county plan bestowed the "gateway" designation to the intersection of Bacon's Bridge Road and Dorchester Road, which parallels the river on the east side. Today two of its corners are occupied by convenience stores, and the third by a strip center. If that became the future for Cooks Crossroads, there was no Plan B for a gateway.

Fortunately, concerned citizens together with support from the Dorchester Trust Foundation, which owns Rosebrock Park, and the SC Heritage Corridor and the Dorchester County government, led by its county council and its planning commission and staff, saw this place as an opportunity. They agreed to designate it as a special district and hired Urban Design Associates to produce a master plan. This firm had been recommended by Tom Moriarity, who decades earlier had founded the National Trust's Main Street Program. Fortuitously, this firm had also produced the master plan for the nearby development, Summers Corner, and had deep appreciation for the Lowcountry. They researched buildings throughout the region, interviewed landowners, business people, and preservationists, submitted drafts for discussion, and with this feedback have now submitted a master plan. It shows how both preservation and growth can be complementary. In the next few months, the master plan will go before the planning commission and county council. While it is too early to announce approval, with such widespread input and participation, it is believed the votes will be in favor.



The scenic viewshed of the Ashley River is now protected from development.



The scenic viewshed from Middleton Place Plantation

I hope these accounts offer lessons that can benefit all of us. Of course, the Ashley River region is different, but so too is each region in the state. When I first came to Summerville 30 years ago, my fellow preservationists and I went down in defeat to the forces of growth and the persuasive arguments of property rights zealots. But things change if you keep at it. We need to continue to look anew at our own communities and envision the future we wish it could have. We need to develop allies, nearby and even far away. Since new opportunities and new threats constantly arise, our campaigns in the Ashley River region are by no means over. Growth is coming like a tidal wave to the Lowcountry. However, our campaigns do reinforce the four key points cited earlier.

Why care? Each of us has to find our own answer. Offering help is Tom Mayes, a friend of mine and vice president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, who explains in his book, *Why Old Places Matter: How Historic Places Affect Our Identity and Well-Being*, "... if we broaden our understanding of the old places in our communities and our own lives, we may help people lead more fulfilling and richer lives. These places spur our memory, delight us with their beauty, help us understand others, give us a deep sense of belonging, and perhaps most fundamentally, remind us who we are." As you reflect on his words and on the old places around you, please remember: you too are standing at the crossroads. *Which way do you choose?* ♡