

By teaching history, Drayton Hall can take lead in racial reconciliation, author says

- **By Adam Parker aparker@postandcourier.com**



Drayton Hall's house follows the style of Italian architect Andrea Palladio. The historic site continued to be used by residents for decades following the Civil War. File/Gavin McIntyre/Staff

Rebecca Campbell, an African American woman turning 87 next month, is possessive of Drayton Hall. Her ancestors came with the Drayton family from Barbados to this Ashley River plantation, and they remained enslaved there until Campbell's grandfather, Willis Johnson, was born free just after the Civil War. Campbell visits often.

"My ancestors were there, they're interred there, and when I walked on that property the first time I was invited ... I felt the spirits of my ancestors," she said. "I told them (Drayton Hall's staff) I belong here. I know where my ancestors are."

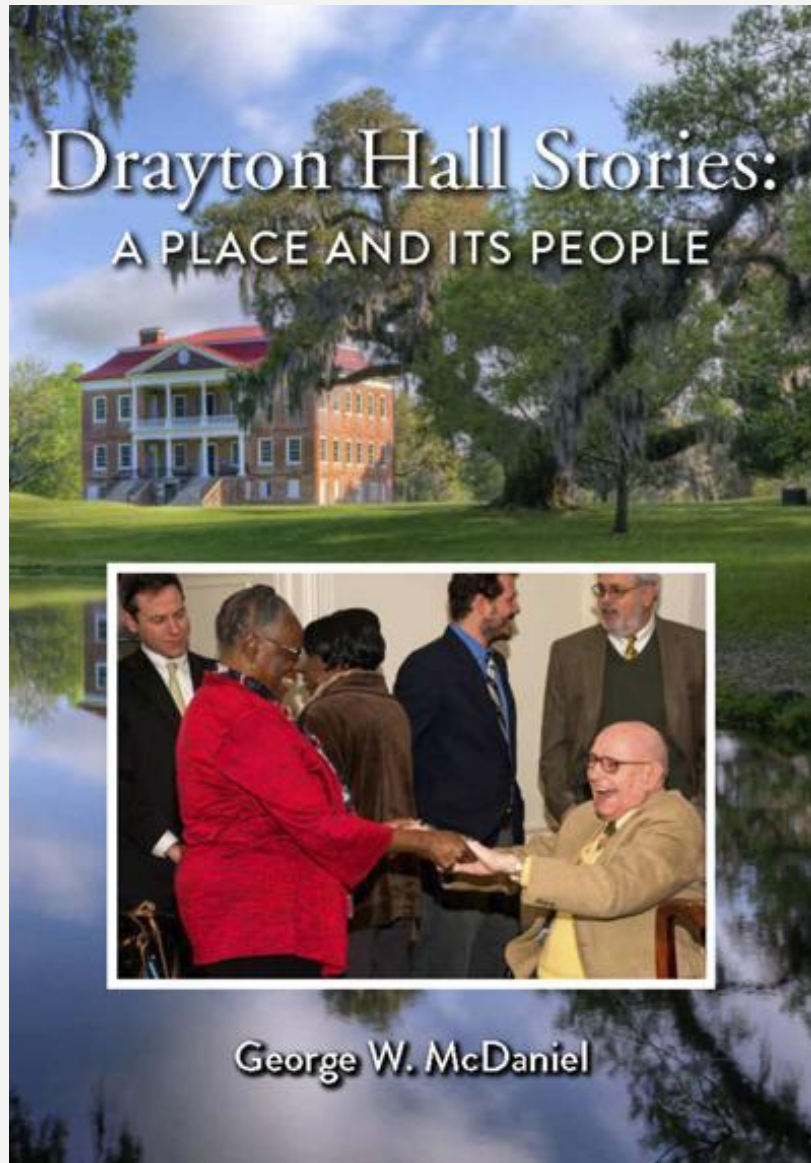


Rebecca Campbell is closely associated with Drayton Hall, the historic site along the Ashley River. Her ancestors were enslaved there. File/Andrew J. Whitaker/Staff
By Andrew Whitaker awhitaker@postandcourier.com

Enslaved people contributed to the making of America, she said. They helped establish South Carolina as a political force, ensuring that its powerful White aristocracy became wealthy and influential because of cotton and rice cultivation.

“We made them rich,” Campbell said. “The plantation is not to be forgotten. We should not be ashamed of our ancestors, who were so strong, who survived.”

Her sister Catherine Braxton is on Drayton Hall’s board of trustees. The family remains attached to the historic site and determined that young people learn about what happened there. Drayton Hall does a good job interpreting history, but it can do more to honor the legacy of Campbell’s ancestors, she said.



A new book forthcoming this month presents dozens of interviews with people who are in some way associated with the historic site. ["Drayton Hall Stories: A Place and its People"](#) is published by Evening Post Books, a sister company of The Post and Courier, and it features the voices of those who, in one way or another, were attached to the former rice plantation. It's based on an oral history project led by Drayton Hall's former director, George McDaniel, who had recorded more than 30 interviews before he retired in 2015, and who recorded more in the years since.

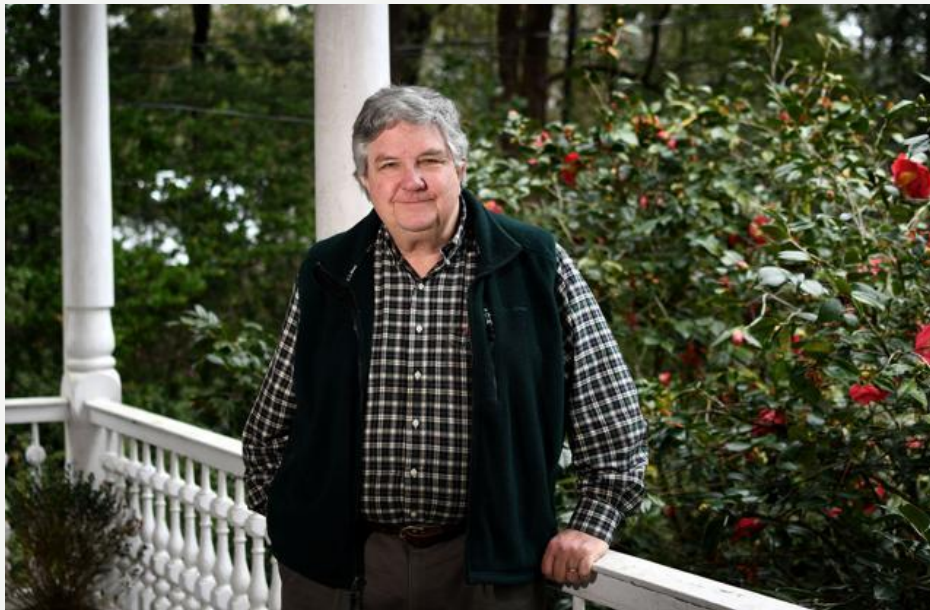
"George had done this wonderful series of oral histories," said Anthony C. Wood, chairman of Drayton Hall's board. "It's great to have that for the record, and for the future, but I felt they shouldn't just sit on the shelf until somebody needed them."

So Wood encouraged McDaniel to assemble them in book form. It's been a yearslong labor of love. The volume recalls the antebellum history of the site, but it focuses on the years since the Civil War, and especially the 20th century preservation effort.

"I was keen in my mind on capturing the contemporary history of the site," Wood said. "The story of preservation doesn't stop once somebody says, 'OK, this is a landmark.' That's when the challenges begin."

'A living museum'

In 1975, Charles Drayton III and his brother, Frank B. Drayton, who had inherited the property along the Ashley River from their aunt Charlotte, decided to sell Drayton Hall to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The brothers didn't want the site converted into a golf course or otherwise developed.



George McDaniel, former executive director of Drayton Hall, is the author of a new book featuring many interviews with people who are in some way connected to the historic site. File/Joy Bonala/Journal Scene

The National Trust owns the property, and the nonprofit Drayton Hall Preservation Trust manages it.

McDaniel, who earned two degrees in history, served as the executive director of Drayton Hall for more than 25 years. The Atlanta native brought to the Lowcountry lots of experience with oral history projects, and he loved to learn about the lives of those who lived or worked at the former plantation.

Over the years, he interviewed architects and engineers, preservationists, landscapers, board members, historians and the descendants of both the White and Black families who had lived there. He wanted to gain an understanding of Drayton Hall — and ultimately share that understanding with others — based on the experiences of real people, not on the artifacts dug from the earth or the documents left behind.

He wanted to capture for posterity many points of view concerning all that has happened on this land, good and bad.



Lauren Ketelhut, an interpreter at Drayton Hall, points to a fingerprint in a brick on the façade of the plantation house on Dec. 18, 2020. It was likely that of an enslaved child. File/Staff
By Lauren Petracca lpetracca@postandcourier.com

“You put all that together and you can see how the site operates,” McDaniel said. “It becomes a living museum, not just an archives.”

He was struck by the strong emotional attachment some African Americans have to Drayton Hall, and how, in the 21st century, Black and White descendants express genuine affection for one another.

It got him thinking: “Historical preservation is not so much about the past, but about the future,” he said. It prompts us to contemplate the kind of future we want. “It can give visitors a glimpse of the future we should be heading towards. ... That’s what this book is about — this striving towards a more perfect union.”

It also emphasizes a shared history, he said. One cannot properly appreciate fully the lived experience of Black people without knowing about what White people did, and vice versa.

“It’s so intertwined,” McDaniel said.

The past and present

Campbell said her attachment to Drayton Hall remains strong, especially when she visits the burial ground or walks the grounds. She is in contact with the same soil her ancestors knew — and in which they are buried.

That's why she insisted that the iron gate designed by the late artisan-blacksmith Philip Simmons was arched and open. "I want my ancestors to be able to fly in and fly out, and nobody can stop them anymore," she said.

That gate is a symbol of how the past and present connect, and of what McDaniel is trying to accomplish with this new volume.

"I think historic sites and plantations in the South have a remarkable opportunity, because they are inherently biracial," he said. "Drayton Hall wouldn't exist without the Draytons or the African Americans who worked there. So these sites have an opportunity to lead the way in cross-racial understanding."

To do so, they must include recent history, too.

"Too often, interpretation stops at 1865," McDaniel said. "Slavery is important. But African Americans continued to live on these properties for a century."

Book info

For more information about "Drayton Hall Stories: A Place and Its People," and to order copies of the book, go to evepostbooks.com.

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Adam Parker has covered many beats and topics for The Post and Courier, including race and history, religion, and the arts. He is the author of *Outside Agitator: The Civil Rights Struggle of Cleveland Sellers Jr.*, published by Hub City Press.

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