

VOL. 77, #1, 2022

# History News

The MAGAZINE of the AMERICAN ASSOCIATION for STATE and LOCAL HISTORY

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# Book Review

## Drayton Hall Stories: A Place and Its People

By George McDaniel

(Charleston: Evening Post Books, 2022),  
336 pp.

Reviewed by Kenneth C. Turino

**D**rayton Hall in Charleston, South Carolina, is an icon among historic houses, known for its incredibly well-preserved eighteenth-century Georgian architecture and for the bold decision not to restore and furnish the house to a particular period in time. *Drayton Hall Stories: A Place and Its People* tells the story of the house and site and so much more. George W. McDaniel brings together interviews with Drayton Hall family, descendants of enslaved families, employees (former and current), and professionals in the fields of history, preservation, and tourism. McDaniel conducted the majority of these interviews and used transcriptions of a public presentation by Black and white descendants and remarks by Lonnie Bunch, former Director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture who is now Secretary of the Smithsonian, for the dedication of Drayton Hall's African American cemetery. These interviews and programs took place between 1994 and 2021. Ultimately, *Drayton Hall Stories* is about place, memory, interpretation, and preservation told through sometimes poignant, always enlightening stories. This book was a labor of love by McDaniel, a nationally known museum professional, teacher, and author. For over twenty-five years, he served as Executive Director of Drayton Hall, a historic site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. McDaniel successfully shows how this project could be a model for those who seek "to bring different communities together to explore history."

The book begins with a brief overview of the history of Drayton Hall, setting the stage for everything to follow. Included are a variety of maps that help readers understand the historic site and surrounding region. The photographs of each person interviewed literally put a face

to them. Links are given for additional photographs and resources that can be accessed online.

The book is organized into three sections. The first, "Families," explores what the site means to both the family of the original owners of the plantation and descendants of the enslaved. Drayton Hall is a leader in bringing descendant families together to create community and this comes out clearly in the interviews in this section. Over the years, a strong relationship developed between members of all descendants. Throughout the book McDaniel discusses not only the distant past and its effect on families but also the recent history. He does not shy away from asking questions about the impact of slavery and segregation. What becomes apparent is that historic sites like Drayton Hall can play a part in bringing people together, as the book says, "around a sense of place." That theme is echoed in the subsequent sections.

The "Friends" section focuses on the preservation of the structures and the landscape. Among the interviewees were those instrumental in the initial preservation of Drayton Hall. If not for this, it probably would have become a golf course clubhouse. The reminiscences about the major donors show the dedication and passion they held for the site. This included support for an education center and the vision to purchase land across the river from Drayton Hall, saving it from commercial development and preserving the viewshed.

The final section, "Professionals," includes interviews with prominent historians and museum and preservation practitioners. Here the author discusses some of the most important questions facing the field, eliciting answers from a wide variety of perspectives. The questions posed encompass issues of preservation



philosophy, regional conservation, and interpretation. The responses, pertinent to anyone in these fields, will give the reader much to consider. McDaniel asks: Why are historic sites important and what do they mean to the public? Can plantation sites be used to bridge racial divides? How

do you attract and engage a more diverse audience? How do you teach issues like slavery to elementary school children? How can historic sites contribute to the future?

Hoping to "inspire us to act," McDaniel ends the book with thirteen questions to consider when attempting to show how a historic site can build community. As an initial guide, this is useful but it left me wanting more and that is not bad!

The book is so packed with information and ideas that each of the sections could become a separate book. Some of the questions and answers get repetitive, which could be improved with a little editing. That said, the overall cumulative effect is impressive. *Drayton Hall Stories: A Place and Its People* will be of use to and provide much food for thought for anyone who cares about historic sites, what they mean to people, and how they can be used to build community. Those already interested in Drayton Hall, Charleston, or the region's history will find this book illuminating. I plan to use it in the course I teach on historic houses and I can see other public history, museum studies, and preservation courses making great use of this publication.



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