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McDaniel's book woven together like a sweetgrass basket

Drayton Hall Stories: A Place and Its People

By George McDaniel

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By Charles W. Waring III

An ancient Indian trading path ran largely parallel to the Ashley River; it was how goods from the northwest went to and from White Point, that gleaming mound of oyster shells so named by the Kiawah. This very trail is where the settlers established the King's Highway that became Highway 61; this historic stretch of road has knitted together various families for thousands of years, though the last 350 are better known to us. Largely English settlers, their indentured servants and enslaved persons shaped these woodlands and swamps into thriving plantations.

Drayton Hall was founded in 1738; its Palladian gem was completed in the early 1750s and, in spite of many threats, has survived — as have many of the families associated with the property. Author George McDaniel served as executive director of the property for 26 years and is exactly the right person to pull together a multitude of perspectives that make up his highly anticipated volume from Evening Post Books entitled *Drayton Hall Stories: A Place and Its People*.

More than 50 interviews are broken into three categories of family, friends and professionals. Binyah and cumyah are mixed throughout, helping explain how new arrivals have become part of the community and learned to appreciate the magnificence of Drayton Hall the home, the views, the outbuildings, the woodlands and the sacred burial grounds. Others have had a challenging time being on the property; their perspectives are also included. The interviews have a way of cross-pollinating the record or filling in our understanding about particular figures and preservation issues.

The book is heavily weighted to academic issues that might seem repetitious, especially in the section about the professionals, but these details are important for the book's long-term relevance that it remains a go-to source for teachers and students who want a deep dive into the crown jewel of Palladian architecture in the United States. Moreover, as much as the volume answers a whole lot of questions, it reminds us of what we have yet to discover, especially in terms of finding out who actually built the structure. On the horticultural front, one learns from Sheila Wertimer that some species long ago planted by Charles Drayton are no longer in existence. This is a great topic for another Lowcountry plant book; I trust someone nudges botanist Richard Porcher.

The book travels far beyond academics and is largely a story of families and their perspectives. The many Draytons interviewed have their treasured memories and speak warmly about



PHOTO BY TONY SWEET, USED WITH PERMISSION.

“Across the Pond,” the cover photo of *Drayton Hall Stories*.

those black families who were and remain associated with the property; both lines of families speak about being closely related to those who lived at neighboring plantations, and this line of inquiry could continue with the inclusion of many other families along the Ashley. Many locals are kin to a number of the Ashley River families, including the Draytons, and that is fairly common among the binyah/we people tribe; we need books to explain — with all the good, bad and ugly — how we really lived and behaved and not the “moonlight and magnolias” version.

The author chose his interviewees well, and strong ladies supply much fuel to the friends section; two of the strongest cups of coffee include the hugely generous benefactor Sally Reahard and the determined preservationist Frances Edmunds. “Miss Sally” Reahard is a character who comes alive as much more than a lady of inherited wealth. We find that Frances Edmunds, a familiar local institution to many, was a critical player in preserving Drayton Hall and the Ashley River Historic District.

Readers will learn about how and why others decided to make donations and how they were connected to Drayton Hall. The viewshed across the river from the main house was once in jeopardy, and the book explains how citizens benefit from those who stepped up to protect this critical vista. The place's actual impact on citizens may best be ascertained through the interviewee's own words; hang on to your reading chair because this volume is an emotional roller coaster.

At a 2015 symposium at Rutgers University, George spoke with two of the descendants of the enslaved persons from Drayton Hall:

George: What are the key messages you'd like for this audience to

leave with?

Catherine Braxton: Slavery happened. Let us come to the table. We have got to heal and move on.

Rebecca Campbell: I want to leave two words with you: "love" and "forgiveness."

This theme of moving forward and forgiveness runs deeply through many discussions throughout the book. Perhaps the aura of Drayton Hall nudges interviewees to bring their A-games. In particular, Jenny Sanford McKay remarked, "The educational experience you get when you visit Drayton Hall is an honest celebration of the whole of its history, good and bad. Isn't that what we strive for: integrity and wholeness?"

As for "integrity and wholeness," the author explains the importance of the cemetery for the black families, and he gets into great detail about how Charlie Drayton and other family members were completely supportive of improving that part of the property and giving it the respect it is due. As George McDaniel writes, "Dating at least to 1800, it is the oldest documented African American cemetery still in use in the nation." Bernard Powers, professor emeritus of history at the College of Charleston, reflected upon the importance of the African American sacred space: "When you see descendants of the enslaved being appreciated in that way and having their profile raised, and when you know that attention is being given to them in the interpretation of the site, you can't help but want to invest more and to do more and to send people there."

The author also helped shepherd the late Charlie Drayton and other family members to build a Drayton family cemetery near the river that would be situated in a manner for cremated remains only. George's tenure at Drayton Hall — and his book documents this — guided the process of reconciliation through real deeds of goodwill, especially in conserving one old burial ground and building another.

George writes, "We chose a quiet corner of the property overlooking the river and devised a low-profile circular design of symbolic materials with plants low to the ground, requiring little maintenance. When the contractor was building the vault for the cremains, I asked him to leave voids in the mortar between the cinder blocks to allow a small amount of groundwater to enter and mix with the cremains. Upon receding, the water would carry the ashes into the marsh, the Ashley River, Charleston Harbor and the ocean beyond."

In one of the more impactful sections of the family section of the book, Charlie and Rebecca Bowens spoke about the different ways that Drayton Hall has influenced their lives. The exchanges capture a raw sweetness that speaks to the heart of sincere reconciliation — a difficult task in



PHOTO BY CHARLESTON SNAPPED PHOTOGRAPH

Catherine Braxton and Charlie Drayton grasp hands.

a hyperpoliticized world; readers will make up their own minds.

Nonetheless, this book is a journey through the depth of emotions of ties to place and people; it is an inclusive Southern story that truly honors all participants and is anything but dull. Helen Hill summed up the matter of discovery succinctly: "History is not static. When a man mailed you a picture of the Drayton Hall watercolor — the earliest painting of the house showing two flanker buildings — it was a view not seen before and shows we're always learning. That's magic."

Moreover, many interviewees explain how the place was preserved, who did it and why. Charles Duell of nearby Middleton Place said, "The greatest satisfaction is the feeling that our stewardship has made what we had a little better than if we hadn't been there. That's the pleasure of those of us who have worked to save Drayton Hall and Middleton Place. I believe a sense of history and a sense of place are essential to the human psyche."

Professionals rightfully have a tremendous influence in the book, and when George asked Richard "Moby" Marks about what he would say as a tour guide, Marks responded:

Unless you'd been to Villa Cornaro in Italy or seen Andrea Palladio's designs, you would have wondered how one could come up with this design. It was the first in this country. Since there were few published copies of Palladio's designs and since most weren't out until probably the 1730s, Drayton Hall was on the cutting edge of the discovery and the reinterpretation of Italian Renaissance architecture. It has a unique place in the history of this country.

Many of the key professionals who have been a part of restoration projects at Drayton Hall are often known quantities in the community because of their success with a large number of high-profile projects. Hence, they have great credibility with readers. Renowned engineer Craig Bennett

commented:

It's clear that Drayton Hall was designed by someone who had studied books on both architecture and construction and that it was built by craftsmen skilled in their trades. I strongly suspect that the architect didn't design every aspect of the structure but relied on craftsmen who understood how to build.

Bennett also reminded us of this important fact: "We don't know anything about these people: whether Drayton Hall was built by tradesmen who were in Charleston or came from overseas or whether it was all done by local labor, by freed men or by slaves."

In addition, responding to how his experiences at Drayton Hall have affected his work as an architect, preservation architect Glenn Keyes explained, "Attention to detail is something I try to incorporate into my practice because thinking through the details is what makes the difference between a good project and a great project."

Drayton Hall is consistently dramatic to all in one way, shape or form, and approaching the property from a pelican's perspective — as noticed by interviewee Toni Carrier upon first flying into Charleston — demonstrates the clear differences between the past and present, the spacious and crowded and the classical and terribly ordinary. Taken as a whole, the book will correct misperceptions and bring readers into unfamiliar territory; it is not one to treat lightly, as it reflects a microcosm of the last 350 years of Lowcountry history.

As we read accounts from many interviewees about history being overshadowed by STEM programs, we realize that the importance of teaching real history is most compelling, but many citizens have been unable to reach that conclusion. Many African American visitors to Drayton Hall have had a difficult time with merely looking at the main house; such was the case with the late Liz Alston. She explained in her interview that she eventually changed her mind on that point and profoundly remarked to George, "I feel that even though plantations were a bitter part of American history, we can't bury our heads in the sand. They help us understand how we got here. Much of the bitterness comes from the fact that we were not taught our history."

To have any potential to be a community of sustained mutual respect and peace, citizens need to read and absorb this living history and then go visit the site filled with a greater awe for all it has to offer. Credit George McDaniel for being a part of the healing process of a nation divided, and naturally, the Lowcountry again leads in this effort by the sheer force of the sincerity, professionalism and theme of Christian redemption that weaves all the book's pieces together like an authentic sweetgrass basket.