

# Drayton Hall Stories: A Q&A with George McDaniel

By Priya Chhaya posted 02-09-2022 13:23

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For 26 years George W. McDaniel served as the executive director of Drayton Hall, a National Trust Historic Site located in Charleston, South Carolina. Drayton Hall is an 18th-century unrestored plantation house established by John Drayton, a white man whose wealth came from more than 100 plantations worked primarily by enslaved labor.

Over his two and half decades at Drayton Hall, McDaniel led a transformation of the site's interpretation, emphasizing how history and place can, as he says, enhance "understanding, empathy, and community." In the spring of 2022, McDaniel will publish *Drayton Hall Stories: A Place and Its People*, a book that focuses on the site's recent history, compiling interviews from a variety of individuals from descendants to tourism leaders. To translate ideas into action, the book also provides a how-to guide for using oral history about a historic place to build community and racial reconciliation.

In anticipation of this book's release, I asked McDaniel a few questions about the power of place in telling the full American story.

# Drayton Hall Stories: A PLACE AND ITS PEOPLE



George W. McDaniel

To pre-order *Drayton Hall Stories*, visit [Evening Post Books](#).

**In the preface to *Drayton Hall Stories*, you describe the importance of approaching the work of historic sites not just as a documentation of the past, but also as lessons for the future. Why is that so important to this work?**

It is my belief that people aspire to experience an environment that connects past, present, and future. The best historic sites make humans of the past real, so visitors can see what past generations made, how they did so, and why. If done right, they make us think—they challenge us, connect us, and give us both information and inspiration.

Informed by the past and the lessons learned, historic sites can spark conversation. They prompt us to ask, “What kind of future do we want? Will it provide a presence of the past? If so, what kind of past? Increasingly so today, we ask: Whose past?” That is why I ask about the future of sites in my interviews.

**The book includes oral histories and testimonies by many people involved with the historic site. Tell me why oral history is so important to your work as a historian and preservationist.**

There are many reasons for why oral history is important. However, it is but one source of evidence and to the extent possible, should be combined with others. Such sources may not always agree but in the hands of a good historian, they make for a more complete and intriguing picture of the past.

Much of our history has been dependent upon written sources and other forms of physical evidence. While we do the best we can with that evidence, we do know it cannot provide answers to many questions, so in today’s time, let’s take those questions and ask them of living people. In *Drayton Hall Stories*, I asked the Draytons how they saw and felt about the place when they owned it. I asked different family members about how they felt about its sale and its preservation today. What were the behind-the-scenes strategies involved in its purchase? What did Black descendants of those enslaved by the Draytons think of the place? Have their views changed over time? What are their hopes?



Descendants at the 2015 Drayton Hall Descendants Program. Front row, l-r: Annie Brown Meyers, Charles H. Drayton, Charlie Drayton, Shelby Nelson, Catherine Brown Braxton. Back row: Rebecca Brown Campbell, Frank B. Drayton Jr., George W. McDaniel. Not pictured: Charles (Chad) H. Drayton Jr. | Photo: Charleston Snapped Photography

Thanks to oral history, we can also ask how board members, donors, staff, historians, architects, preservationists, and tourism leaders perceive the place. We can record answers to questions such as: Why serve on the board of a plantation or work as its site interpreter? What were the choices in terms of research, interpretation, or preservation of the site, and why were those decisions made? What were the surprises? Why care

about historic preservation? *Drayton Hall Stories* gives readers an opportunity to hear answers.

Like a good painting, good interviews often paint both panoramas and details. Since I did not go back more than a century, I focused on oral history of the recent past and on firsthand experiences, sometimes in detail. As a result, this book sketches both panoramas and details and, I hope, helps the reader hear of different experiences, all of the same place. Doesn't that tell a good story and make a history worthy of preservation?

**One of the things you have produced as part of your work on this book is a toolkit and guide for others doing similar work. What are some key things you want users to focus on as they review the material?**

We learn by reading and thinking, to be sure, but we also learn by experience. Haven't you been in meetings when someone talks oh-so-confidently about teaching in the classroom or saving a building, but from your veteran experience, you know that that person is just talking and has not done it? Experience is a teacher, not the only teacher, but a good one.

I hope my interviews will inspire readers to look afresh at their own site or historic place and ask a range of the people for their thoughts about it. It's an indirect but effective way of engaging people in historic preservation. However, I've learned that being human, we need more than inspiration. We need instruction or a structure to build on. That's why I provided a toolkit at the end of the book, which is supplemented by more resources [on my website](#).

Since we learn by doing, one of my goals is to get preservationists out of the office and to engage with a diverse group of people, some of whom they may not agree with, and to interview them with respect and civility. *Drayton Hall Stories* shows that it can be done, and the results can be educational in more ways than one. It's also an effective

method of historic preservation in today's world.



George McDaniel interviewing l-r: The Reverend Roosevelt Geddis and Charlie Drayton. | Photo: Drayton Hall Preservation Trust

## **How did Drayton Hall transform over your 26-year tenure at the historic site? What makes it an ideal case study for telling the full American story?**

If there is a will to do so, many historic sites across the nation offer the opportunity to tell the full American story. However, as preservationist Anthony C. Wood explained in the foreword of *Drayton Hall Stories*, most focus on their founding period to the neglect of their recent past. When I arrived, Drayton Hall was already a leader in changing that conventional practice, and with the support of the National Trust, we began to honestly interpret all the more how decisions of the 20th and 21st century shaped how the site appeared. People want the truth.

Since many sites, including Drayton Hall, have a centuries-long history, they do have the

capacity to tell a full American story. Recent technological advances help because no longer is site interpretation confined to a one-hour guided tour or to a written brochure or an exhibit label. We can interweave different histories according to race, gender, or age and move visitors through history in multiple ways, enabling the interpretation to go across time periods and to go deeper into one subject or another if one wishes.

Much of Drayton Hall's 18th- and 19th-century history has been written about, or if not, its evidence is safe in archives, historical buildings, or underground. But the recent past is a void. Since much of that evidence is in oral history and is ephemeral, it seemed responsible for Drayton Hall to preserve it too. Fortunately, we did because many of the people in the book, such as Charlie Drayton, Annie Meyers, Bob Barker, Gene Wilkins, and Steve Gates, have since passed on. Now their thoughts and those of others have been preserved in Drayton Hall's archives and will be available far into the future. By filling that void, my interviews and photographs in *Drayton Hall Stories* enable us to see the site within the entire sweep of the American story. In doing so, it serves as a model for other historic places.

**Much of the book documents the shifting relationship between Drayton Hall and all of its descendants. What are some key lessons learned as the site transformed its relationship to work in community not only with the descendants of the Draytons, but also of the men and women enslaved by this family?**

A good teacher does not teach just a few students but tries to reach them all. That teacher also knows that history belongs to no one group or race. In fact, in writing about the South, Pulitzer-Prize winning historian C. Vann Woodward observed that white and Black history were so intertwined that it was "futile" to try to separate them. So why should historic sites? Why should not sites lead the way in this kind of history education? To tell the history of a site accurately, which is an oft-cited goal, we are not forcing "diversity" or "inclusion" down someone's throat like an oh-but-it's-good-for-you health drink. We are simply presenting an honest history of the site.

One cannot understand Drayton Hall, the South, or America without coming to grips

with race and racism. Prejudice has been, and still is, ever present. That's not "breaking news." But if we do not like it and want to move past it, we have to deal with it, and one way of doing so is through education. Just as a good teacher does not teach a few but rather all the students, so too a site seeks to tell the story of all its people.

By featuring such a range of interviewees in terms of race, connection to the site, gender, sexual orientation, and age, I hope that *Drayton Hall Stories* conveys their shortcomings, to be sure, but also their goodness—in short, the humanity of us all.

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