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Stories That Can Teach: Lessons from Drayton Hall

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By:

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[Drayton Hall](#) [Link: /drayton-hall] is an 18th-century plantation site near Charleston, South Carolina. Since 1974, it has been owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and is managed by the Drayton Hall Preservation Trust (DHPT). Rather than “restore” it to an earlier time, the National Trust decided to “preserve” the site as they received it and to interpret both continuity and change over time.

For 26 years, I served as the executive director of Drayton Hall. In the spring of 2022, I published a book about my experience called [Drayton Hall Stories: A Place and Its People](#) [Link: <https://forum.savingplaces.org/blogs/priya-chhaya/2022/02/09/drayton-hall-stories-a-qa-with-george-mcdaniel/>]. It is comprised of a series of interviews that reveal the evolution of stewardship, interpretation, and community engagement at Drayton Hall, interviews that can teach us about the importance of telling the full American Story and the role historic sites can play in enhancing cross-racial understanding and dialogue.

As Lonnie Bunch, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, says in the book, “At Drayton Hall, you have created a ripple of remembering that is helping to change how and what America remembers. This site continues to pioneer in helping plantations tell a fuller, more complex, and ultimately more satisfying history. Drayton Hall demonstrates how illuminating the dark corners of the past makes us all better. There is nothing more powerful than a people, a community, and a nation steeped in history. There are few things as noble as honoring all our ancestors, by remembering the known and the unknown, the Black and the white, the slave and the free.”

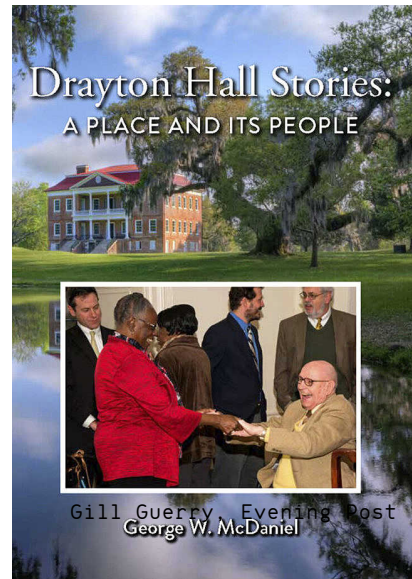
To get a sense of the evolution of Drayton Hall as a historic site, I have pulled excerpts from the various interviews in the book. From early views to reflections on what is to come, these individuals see the importance and value of a site like Drayton Hall for the future.

Early Views

What were your first impressions of Drayton Hall, and how have they evolved?

Joe McGill, founder of the [Slave Dwelling Project](#) [Link: /a-simple-act-of-sleeping-grounds-the-slave-dwelling-project] and the history and culture coordinator for Magnolia Plantation and Gardens adjacent to Drayton Hall:

“Magnificent architecture, but devoid of the stories of those whose labor had enabled it to exist. My experience there was one of my inspirations to start the [Slave Dwelling Project](#) [Link: <https://slavedwellingproject.org/>]. Recently, Drayton Hall has sought to be more inclusive through its work with descendants, its programs, its research and interpretation of African American history, and even exhibiting the branding iron used to mark the enslaved. The needle has moved to the positive.”



Cover of Drayton Stories with an image from the 2015 Descendants Program.

When you first came to Drayton Hall, what were your impressions?

Bernard Powers, professor emeritus of history at the College of Charleston and the first Director of its Center for the Study of Slavery:

"Years ago I toured the main house and was told about the white inhabitants with just a bit about the African American experience. I left, thinking most of the people who lived here were Black, but there's hardly anything said about them. I didn't leave with hostility but thought that work needs to be done.

As Drayton Hall changed, I worked with the site, and my feelings have evolved. I've met Black and white descendants, given talks, consulted, and written reports. Now when I walk the grounds, I have a sense of reverence I did not feel the first time I went."

The Present

What are your thoughts about Drayton Hall's preservation philosophy?

Carter C. Hudgins, current president and CEO of the [Drayton Hall Preservation Trust](https://www.draytonhall.org/) [Link: <https://www.draytonhall.org/>]:

“If the site had practiced restoration, things like graffiti in the house, or evidence of where candles burned some of the house’s historic fabric would have vanished, but they are evidence of how people lived and worked in the house over time. However, sites change, and now we need to take a more aggressive approach with the landscape and question whether we’re preserving historical resources or preserving neglect.”

What words of encouragement and caution would you like to give to those responsible for a historic landscape?

Shelia Wertimer, landscape architect:

“Be patient. Let the landscape speak to you. Walk the landscape. Immerse yourself in it. A lot of times, in an effort to improve something, we end up creating clutter. It’s important not to rush to a solution but to work on something quietly and consistently over time, which eventually yields results.”

Since sites like Drayton Hall have become more involved in conservation of their environs, why is that important?

Esther Beaumont, long-time member and donor to Drayton Hall:

“You can’t just put a fence around a site. They require a worthy setting. To lose a site’s environmental setting diminishes it. In conserving their environs, sites might demonstrate the effects of and responses to climate change or how to improve the environment for the present and the future. For example, you now show how buying the land across the river is in keeping with site protection and environmental conservation, and that educates people.”

What changes have you seen in the research of family history, and why is that important?

Toni Carrier, director of the Center for Family History at the International African American Museum and former Wood Family Fellow at Drayton Hall:

“Family history was a sustaining force. For example, much has been known for a long time about the history of the Drayton family, and that knowledge gave them identity, a place in history. However, with African Americans, much of their history seemed a blank, but

through Drayton Hall's recent research, we've learned that family history was a sustaining force. For example, descendants active in the Civil Rights Movement grounded themselves in it and used it as a springboard to stand up for what was right."

What stories are historic sites telling today that resonate?

Anthony C. Wood, a national leader in historic preservation in New York City and member of Drayton Hall's board:

"The world of historic sites has changed. For example, the new Sites of Conscience commemorates awful tragedies while other sites today interpret modern architecture, industrial history, union history, and LGBTQ history. Many stories around the world need to be told, and there is no better way to tell them than at places where history actually happened."

Alison Rea, Drayton family descendant:

"I think sites like Drayton Hall can have more resonance today. People want to know their heritage regardless of how great or awful it might have been. Seeing this in person makes it easier to understand how the past informs the present and the need to do something to repair the damage."



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Exterior view of Drayton Hall and its broader environment.

The Future

How do you see Drayton Hall in the future?

Richard Marks, preservation contractor:

“I’d like to see Drayton Hall become a center for preservation education, where people learn the processes involved in creating a well-designed space and then utilize that knowledge in their career. We could teach builders, architects, and workers to document and retain historical materials without major alterations to them. They could learn first-hand about finishes, mortars, moldings, mantels, or staircases. We could teach how changes over time to Drayton Hall and other sites are similar to changes made to all buildings as are the threats to a building’s integrity.”

What changes do you foresee for historic sites like Drayton Hall and in tourism and community engagement?

Michelle McCollum, president of the South Carolina National Heritage Corridor, of which Drayton Hall is a part:

“A compelling story is not enough. You can’t simply protect your site, develop a good interpretation, and think people are going to come. You’ve got to get away from your site, engage your community and even your state, talk to business and political leaders, and pull people to you.”

How should historic sites change? What should they be sure to keep?

Thompson (Tom) Mayes, chief legal officer and general counsel at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and author of [Why Old Places Matter](#) [Link: /why-do-old-places-matter]:

“People think of historic preservation as about freezing things, but it’s actually about managing change and can even be an agent for change. So sites need to do a better job of educating. They also need to ensure they are telling the full story, and that may include slavery, in an honest and meaningful way. They need to keep the emotional experience people have when visiting a site, that sense of transcending time which is at the heart of why old places matter. It’s crucial for sites to continue to be involved with their full

community and vice versa. The more people get to experience a place, the more they will care about it and historic preservation.”



At the 2015 Descendants Program, l - r: Descendants Anne Drayton Nelson and Rebecca Campbell.

How can sites like Drayton Hall help bridge racial divides?

Catherine Braxton, whose enslaved ancestors came from Barbados in the 1670s with the Draytons; Rebecca Campbell, Catherine Braxton's sister; Charlie Drayton, a 7th-generation descendant and with his brother, the last family owner:

Braxton: I consider what we're doing to be part of the healing process. The history of slavery and the punishment of our ancestors who worked from sunrise to sunset leaves bitterness. I've heard people voice hatred, and hatred has got to stop. Let's heal. Let's sit and talk about this. We have to come together and put this bitterness behind us! It is now time to heal.

Drayton: Sites can help bridge the racial divide by having more meetings together and by having places like the African American cemetery become a genuine part of the visitor experience.

Campbell: Drayton Hall can help bridge the gap in America by using a place—say, the cemetery or even the entire site—and getting people together. Then they, white and Black, can sit down around a table and talk about the place and the racial problems we are facing. Wouldn't it be great for a site to extend itself and have retreats with other sites, so we can explain our feelings to each other? This could release tension and help move us into other areas as well.

Drayton: I couldn't agree more.

McDaniel's book Drayton Hall: A Place and Its People is available from [Evening Post Books](https://evepostbooks.com/product/drayton-hall-stories-a-place-and-its-people/) [Link: <https://evepostbooks.com/product/drayton-hall-stories-a-place-and-its-people/>] in Charleston with free shipping, and from Drayton Hall's museum shop. You can purchase it [via Amazon](#) [Link: <https://amzn.to/3oqYF7d>] or an independent retailer.

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George McDaniel is the former executive director of Drayton Hall.