

# A PLACE AND ITS PEOPLE:

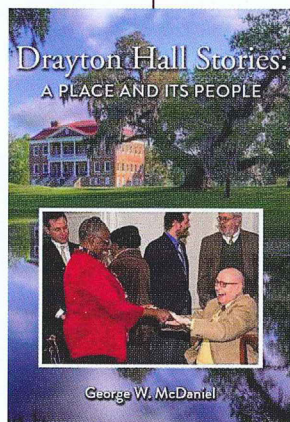
## THE PAST AND FUTURE OF HISTORIC SITES

View from the west portico.

By George McDaniel

As Executive Director of Drayton Hall, an eighteenth-century plantation near Charleston, South Carolina, for twenty-six years, George McDaniel conducted scores of oral history interviews, representing a wealth of perspectives about this one place. One result was *Drayton Hall Stories: A Place and Its People*, recently published by Evening Post Books and consisting of more than fifty interviews, each edited into a brief but insightful vignette, making this the first book of its kind in the nation. This article includes excerpts from those interviews as well as a few recent ones with history leaders with Drayton connections.

Featured are excerpts from interviews with the following: 1) Lonnie Bunch, former member of Drayton Hall's board, Founding Director of the National Museum of African History and Culture, and now Secretary of the Smithsonian



Institution; 2) Rebecca Campbell, a descendant of Drayton Hall, her ancestors having arrived, according to family tradition, from Barbados with the Draytons to Charleston in the 1670s; 3) Anthony C. Wood, Executive Director of the Ittleson Foundation in New York City and board member of the Drayton Hall Preservation Trust; 4) Joe McGill, now employed by Magnolia Plantation and Gardens next door to Drayton Hall and the founder of the Slave Dwelling Project; 5) historian Peter Wood, author of the pioneering book *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* and retired history professor from Duke University, who visited Drayton Hall on numerous occasions; and 6) Max van Balgooy, an author, consultant, and museum studies professor at the George Washington University, who has written about Drayton Hall.



Drayton Hall's iconic double portico on the west facade.

## **Drayton Hall Stories is about a historic site. Why are sites and history museums important?**

### **Lonnie Bunch:**

History museums are important because they should help people to remember not just what they want but what they need to remember. They're important because as American author James Baldwin wrote, "History does not principally refer to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us and that we are unconsciously controlled by it. History is literally present in all that we do."

You can tell a great deal about a people by what graces the walls of their history museums. We may learn even more by what a country chooses to forget. This desire to omit includes difficult moments, disappointments, and moments of evil, so museums and sites need to help fill that void and tell a more complete story. History museums can, and should, pierce the mists of forgetfulness with the sunshine of remembrance.

## **Why is local history important?**

### **Max van Balgooy:**

I would say that most history is local, but people find it hasn't been linked to a national story. For history to be meaningful, it needs to be relevant, and that means connecting regional or national history to that of their community, town, or whatever because that's what people are more familiar with.

## **Drayton Hall Stories primarily documents the recent past. Why document that period?**

### **MvB:**

Museums should document and interpret recent history because history is a story continuing into today. Good historical interpretation needs to connect past and present, and recent history is the bridge.

### **Joe McGill:**

Many historic sites focus on the founding period, examine the original family, and may include the life of the enslaved but stop their interpretation soon afterward. Too often interpretation of the founding period, due to the records, forces concentration on the white male narrative, but in more recent times, we have access to more numerous and diverse voices. They can tell us about life on the place before it became a site and of its preservation, stewardship, and programmatic development as a site. Sites should especially communicate with descendants, as you did in *Drayton Hall Stories*.

## **What is the pressure on historic sites not to document the recent past?**

### **Anthony C. Wood:**

People working at sites today are so immersed in the day-to-day that they don't realize they are making history by the decisions they make, or realize the need to reflect on the meaning of their work. We who are in the field today need to realize we are making history. In the advocacy field of preservation, for example, we try to keep buildings from being torn down or have towers built on top of them and don't think of documenting that process. While I understand that reality, I think we've got to take the time, for example, to sit that board or staff member who's been around for years in front of a recorder.

## **Need the expenses of oral history be a block?**

### **ACW:**

I don't want to say expenses are an excuse because I know almost every historic site is under-capitalized, but oral history is so much less expensive today. You do interviews in person, by phone, or by Zoom, send them off, get them transcribed in no time, and edit them into final form. It used to cost a fortune. Not now.

## **What does Drayton Hall Stories mean to you?**

### **Rebecca Campbell:**

It means power. That I have the right to speak for my generation. I am an African American and am proud of who I am. I feel free to speak out for what has happened to us. Your book shows that.

### **MvB:**

Your book's overriding strength is that it provides this diversity of perspectives on the same place. That's typically missing. Most history books are written from the perspective of one person, though they may include the voices of other people. By including such a variety of voices, your book provides a richer and deeper understanding of why historic places matter.



Rebecca Campbell and Charles Drayton.

Your book is a great model for what to do, but in conducting oral history, most people are not going to have your experience. If they can do just 10 percent of what you did, it'll put them in a much better place than where they were before. My top advice is this: get out there and do it. Begin by interviewing a few. While talking to strangers is one of the most difficult things people do, your book offers a brief but helpful guide to oral history, and your related website provides resources.

**In *Drayton Hall Stories*, you reflect on how Drayton Hall was a slavery-based plantation, yet today as a historic site, it needs visitors to support its tours and public programs. Many people want nothing to do with such a site. What feelings did you express?**

**RC:**

I have a bond with the plantation due to the fact that my ancestors were there. They were enslaved. They left Africa in chains, survived the Atlantic Ocean, came to Barbados, and then, with the help of God, got to Charleston and then to Drayton Hall. We cannot forget them. The cemetery is there. We feel the spirits of our ancestors. We feel their love. We have a connection to Drayton Hall that we will never give up because its soil was touched by our ancestors. They have not been taken away from us spiritually. We are still connected. African Americans—indeed all people—should visit plantations or participate in programs there to educate their children and future generations. Our ancestors' blood is still within us.

**Peter Wood:**

"If you build it, they will come." Once uncertain visitors see that a particular site does not make them feel irrelevant or unwelcome, word spreads quickly through the grapevine. Two keys are having enough African American docents and making sure that all docents

feel well-trained in their positions and well-supported by their administration. When tour leaders are comfortable and confident, anxious newcomers of all sorts will feel free to speak up.

It can be exciting to hear what they can bring to the conversation. I recall watching an excellent docent at Drayton Hall explain African Americans' winnowing rice with a fanner basket. The onlookers included a family of recent immigrants. Afterward, the mother explained to her children and the rest of the group, with obvious pride, that she had done the same thing as a child back in Southeast Asia.

**What roles might history museums and sites like Drayton Hall play amidst these fractious times?**

**ACW:**

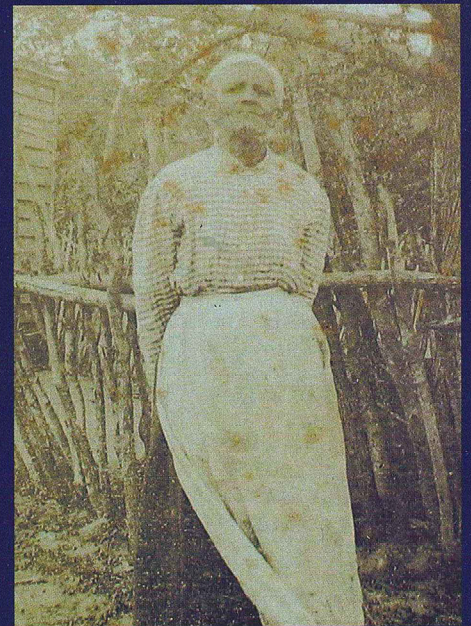
History museums and sites create a safe space with gravitas. You become slightly detached from the swirl of what's going on at the moment and are in a kind of time machine. You're in a place where intellectual inquiry can take place. And museum staff are the perfect people to bring others together to have open conversations. To me, it's all about educating, and developing a sense of history is a good way of doing so.

**PW:**

To address these fractious times, more networks that weave together regional historic sites might be developed. Places that stress different periods and perspectives can learn from one another, share staff insights, and encourage family visitors to make coherent and extended trips that go beyond a one-day-one-place foray into the past. Done well, heritage areas can tie each place to a wider regional and national past. They can introduce longtime residents as well as visitors plus whites

**"History museums can, and should, pierce the mists of forgetfulness with the sunshine of remembrance."**

— LONNIE BUNCH



Diana Roberts (left) and Nancy Notes worked at Drayton Hall after the Civil War and may have been previously enslaved there.

as well as people of color to elements of deeply rooted local culture that were skipped over in school classrooms and ignored by chambers of commerce for too long.

Here's another idea of networking and tying historical sites and stories together. Increasingly, colleges and churches are organizing Black history tours to visit significant places and weave a coherent story. You might call it civil rights tourism. Local jurisdictions are realizing that visitors who come to see the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma or the Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery also spend money at nearby eateries and hotels.

Docents at many sites have a rich and detailed sense of their locality but not nearly as firm a grasp on what had transpired elsewhere. Imagine a ten-day bus tour that began at Sullivan's Island and Drayton Hall in Charleston but ended up at Alex Haley's boyhood home in Henning, Tennessee, or the Nicodemus National Historic Site in Kansas. If docents from various sites took such a trip, they could learn from one another and then offer much wider context to their next tour group when they arrived back home.

### **What are some preliminary steps by which history museums and sites that focus primarily on architecture and decorative arts may incorporate African American history or that of other minorities?**

**JM:**

If you concentrate on the architectural significance of a building, you can still identify elements that make for a better story. You could factor in all the embodied energy in the building, i.e., who built it—the sawyers, brick makers, carpenters, masons, joiners, plasterers, roofers. Tell their story.

Look for fingerprints in the bricks, for they may be a telltale sign of the presence of enslaved people. Look for hand-hewn cuts in the timbers and ask who made them. If you have stories about construction, tell them. Identify names of workers. If records tell of selling an enslaved person, put that in your narrative. Don't let that stuff continue to be hidden. It should be revealed, and that will take you beyond architectural history and into a broader social history of the place.

### **Why serve on the board of a historic, slavery-based plantation in the South?**

**RC:**

Why does my sister Catherine serve on the board of this plantation? Because she wishes to speak for our ancestors, us the living, and our race. She seeks to speak to what has happened in America to our people and discuss it openly.



View of the drawing room.

**ACW:**

Besides the personal connection of my brother, what attracted me to Drayton Hall's board is its international quality. If it didn't have a storyline of being a plantation, with the brutality and all of that, you'd still want it to save it, because of what its architecture tells us about the culture of that moment.

Just as people aren't one dimensional, historic sites aren't either, so I'm comfortable serving on the board of a site with a mixed past. Whether we like what our research says or not, we tell what we learn. As a board member, you've got to make sure the story you're telling is historically accurate, for I could never participate in a sugarcoated version. I expect a full and honest story of what happened here. Drayton Hall is like a site of conscience.

**JM:**

Be sure the board wants you to serve. What got Montpelier in trouble was their insincerity. If a board is going to put the offer out about dissenters joining in the governing of the place, then so be it. As a new board member, you need to go full force and not be afraid. When you learn their opinions differ from yours, don't renege; but know that having, for example, Black folks in a governing capacity helps the organization. You can serve as a filter and more.

### **Should historical organizations and sites be advocates for their environs?**

**ACW:**

Absolutely. We provide a perspective often missing in decision-making by helping people understand how we got here today and how we might make better decisions in the future. Our environs affect interpretation. If visitors just stumble on a historic site shoehorned between modern buildings on all sides, the site may still be important, but its power is dimin-

ished. To be effective, you need to engage your community and ally with groups willing to go to those council hearings and beat their drums.

Part of museum or preservation training has to be the instilling in students of an obligation to go beyond the site's property line and preserve its environs. Such an inclusive view is not ingrained into museum staff the way it needs to be.

**PW:**

Historic plantation sites have a big role to play when it comes to the challenge of climate disruption. Our country's environmental awareness has been changing as slowly as its race consciousness, but in both instances the positive shift is undeniable. Once country estates, they are often surrounded now by mile after mile of suburban sprawl, whether in the Carolinas or the Chesapeake or the Gulf South. They survive because they have been protected by preservationists and conservationists such as yourself, and now we all stand ready to reap the benefits.

It will take ongoing resolve from below to achieve the world of fact-based history and science I'm imagining. Public pressure must underscore the idea that Black Lives Matter not just in the present, but in reframing our collective past as well. Also, citizen determination (especially from the youngest generation) is making clear that any sustainable future for our

species depends on a much more intelligent and less rapacious relationship to the natural world. But there will need to be changes from the top down as well. So why not think big?

**What do you see as the future of history museums and sites?**

**RC:**

People of color are looking to have our contributions better known to us, to the United States of America, and to the world. We need to get connected. We have the International African American Museum that's coming to Charleston, and the one in Washington. We thank God for the blessing. These museums have power, meaning, and distinction.

**ACW:**

History museums and sites have a bright future. The reason I am saying that is because more and more people are hungering for authentic experiences. There's a power knowing you're walking on the same floors, touching the same walls, or walking the same grounds that somebody walked 200 or 150 years ago. Since history helps ground you, historic sites are where that ground actually is.

**PW:**

I find the phrase "too little, too late" ringing in my ears. I feel that positive shifts have been molasses-slow, and even

**"Since history helps ground you, historic sites are where that ground actually is."**

**— ANTHONY C. WOOD**



Lorraine White, Catherine Braxton, Charles Drayton, and Rebecca Campbell in front of Drayton Hall at an evening program.

DRAYTON HALL

those gains now seem endangered. When the country's 250th birthday arrives, will white supremacy still be ascendant? Will many still endorse a blame-the-victim version of American history that downplays the legalized ownership of other human beings as chattel property? I wish I knew what the decade of the 2020s has in store for us, after such a wrenching start. But let's imagine that our culture takes a road that leads toward a less self-ish and more egalitarian future—based on sound science, broad history, and just law. If so, the Drayton Halls of the world will need to play their part.

A less cramped and more relevant version of the regional and national past becomes important for whatever lies ahead. Let's think specifically about two issues: deep-seated racial injustice and the overarching threat of human-created climate disruption. Any hopeful march forward will involve swift steps in addressing both these massive challenges. I'm convinced that Drayton Hall and similar sites can develop meaningful, positive roles in relation to these two pressing concerns.

With imaginative responses, they can both secure their own futures and aid the wider public good. It's a daunting task, so not all will adapt and survive. The hundreds of sites, with their varied budgets, audiences, and perspectives, will need to do some drastic re-thinking. But a few are well along in the process already.

**LB:**

Plantations and other historic places in the nation, let's hope, will tell a fuller, more complex, and ultimately more satisfying history. By illuminating the dark corners of the past, they can make 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 of our ancestors, by remembering the known and the unknown, the Black and the white, the slave and the free. We need to remember them because when we do, I know that our ancestors are smiling.



**George McDaniel is President of McDaniel Consulting LLC and former Executive Director of**

**Drayton Hall. He holds a PhD from Duke University and is a frequent speaker and presenter in the public history field. Contact George at gmcdaniel4444@gmail.com.**

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