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The South Caroliniana Library renovation is proceeding slowly and carefully while staff members continue to serve patrons online and in the Thomas Cooper Library’s Graniteville Room. The venerable old building has been stripped down to its bare bones, exposing original brickwork, heart pine flooring, and massive oak beams.

Work is currently underway to improve the building’s environmental controls and install fire suppression features which will better protect the collection and provide a more comfortable space for visitors.

Areas of the buildings are being repurposed for museum-quality exhibits, new meeting spaces, and a treasures vault. The Reading Room renovations will emphasize its historical significance while updating its technology to better serve researchers.

The total renovation of the building was begun in 2018, under the leadership of University Libraries Dean Thomas McNally and with the support of President Harris Pastides. After the needed $10 million was secured, the entire staff of the Library collaborated with Liollio Architecture to create a plan that includes new exhibit space for public education and technology to meet the needs of the collection and of researchers far into the future. The project is expected to be completed in 2022, when the South Caroliniana Library will again become one of the showplaces on the campus.

The Library building, which was constructed in 1840 for the South Carolina College (now the University of South Carolina), was the first freestanding college library building in the United States. An expansion and renovation of the building, adding the east and west wings, was done in 1927. Other changes have been made throughout the years, including the addition of fireproof stairwells for safety, the installation of central air conditioning in the 1970s, and cosmetic alterations in 1985.
I try to do regular walk-throughs of the Caroliniana and today was one of those days. While I was there, our architect asked me if I would like to have an 1840 nail. He told me they were handmade by blacksmiths. He said it might have been made by an enslaved person. I told him that not only would I like to have it, but I would cherish it.

The nail has a little heft to it. It is sort of bent. I asked if it was made that way. Everyone thought that was funny. They said it had been worked over pretty hard over the years.

The nail struck an emotional chord with me. I was transported back to my meeting with President Pastides when I told him that we had to save the Caroliniana and he gave me the “green light” to go ahead. Today, I know that every exhibit case, every piece of furniture, every inch of the vault, and every finish that the staff wanted can be purchased. It is a good day.

In the future, whenever I get lazy, I am going to look at this nail and be reminded of the blacksmith who worked to make it, of all the years the nail has held the building together, and of all the work it has taken and will still take to complete this renovation!

Tom McNally
The Reading Room viewed from the mezzanine
Exposed brickwork below a first-floor window

Entering the Reading Room looking south towards the Horseshoe

Scaffolding in the Reading Room braces the ceiling to allow reinforcement of the joists.

Exposed ceiling and brickwork at the top of the west wing

An alcove viewed through scaffolding in the Reading Room
THE CHARLESTON RENAISSANCE

by Harlan Greene

(The following is the text of a presentation delivered on February 20, 2020, at the Ernest F. Hollings Special Collections Library. The event, which was sponsored by the Irvin Department of Rare Books and Special Collections and the South Caroliniana Library, celebrated the opening of two exhibitions, "The Charleston Renaissance" and "Elizabeth Boatwright Coker's Life and Legacy.

"The Charleston Renaissance" featured manuscripts as well as published and visual materials produced during the burst of literary and artistic activity that occurred in Charleston, S.C., during the 1920s and 1930s—known popularly today as the Charleston Renaissance.

On exhibit were books, plays, paintings, etchings, and manuscripts from major Charleston Renaissance figures including John Bennett, Dorothy and DuBose Heyward, Julia Peterkin, Alice Huger Ravenel Smith, Anna Heyward Taylor, and Elizabeth O'Neill Verner. In addition to materials drawn from the South Caroliniana Library’s manuscript, published, and visual holdings, the display highlighted a gift to the Irvin Department from former University of South Carolina English professor Dr. Robert Lee Oakman III of significant published materials produced during the Charleston Renaissance.)

Yes. That’s exactly what I’d like to do; but, with apologies, it’s not going to happen. For I haven’t thought of that dynamic opening sentence yet. But many of my betters have; so, I will parrot and quote them instead. With pure envy.

How about these?

“Call me Ishmael,” by Herman Melville in Moby Dick.

Or Dickens’ A Tale of Two Cities: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times....”

Or L.P. Hartley’s wonderful novel The Go Between: “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”

Since I can’t come up with that sort of thrilling beginning myself, I’ll ask you to keep them in mind. I promise to use them again, but at the end of my talk, if not at the beginning.

So, the start of my talk about the Charleston Renaissance will be much more prosaic. I’ll start with a definition of what we are talking about. To do that, really quickly, I thought I would give you what some might laughingly call the Wikipedia summary of the Charleston Renaissance. But thinking that gave me pause; it made me wonder what if there really is a Wikipedia entry on the Charleston Renaissance? Shoot, I thought, I had better check that out.

I did, and to my chagrin I found one. I hope you didn’t do the same before you came this evening; and if you did, well, my feelings won’t be hurt if you leave early.

Now, naming my sources, here is some of the Wikipedia entry:

“The Charleston Renaissance is a period between World Wars I and II in which the city of Charleston,
South Carolina, experienced a boom in the arts as artists, writers, architects, and historical preservationists came together to improve and represent their city.

That’s not perfect, but it will do. The one most striking and exciting thing about that definition, in my mind, is the verb—specifically the use the present tense. It says the Renaissance is and not was. And thus, it suggests that we are still dealing with it today, which, to me, seems a reasonable argument. Just look around this room and take in that great exhibit beyond. It does appear that the Renaissance is remembered and deserves remembering. I hope I can convince you that the Renaissance lives. And is.

And speaking of the exhibit, I am going to try my best to tie my talk to it, so maybe you can think of this event as you would approach perusing a coffee table book, with the pictures out there in the exhibit, and me, in here, doing the captions.

The designers have done a wonderful job, so much so, that I am going to literally take my cues from the materials out there. Think of them, then, as, pun intended, exhibits in a case I am trying to prove.

But to do justice to that, and to our subject, let me first go back to the Wikipedia entry and tease it out a tad more, and talk about the movers and shakers of the Renaissance. It was an era, we are told, when artists, writers, architects, and preservationists came together to improve and represent their city. Do artists do that?

I suppose so, but why not be more dynamic and say that they changed the city, that they put it on the cultural map?

CHARLESTON BEFORE THE RENAISSANCE

Technically, for a renaissance, for a rebirth, you first need a death, as classical culture was eclipsed by the Dark Ages before rebirth in the enlightenment of the Italian Renaissance. Similarly, before World War I, Charleston snoozed. There was not much going on commercially or culturally. The city was a backwater, a mere echo of the time when it had been the fourth largest city in the country and when it had people bull-headed and arrogant enough to start a civil war.

There was a little stir when the Navy base was built on the outskirts of the city, and World War I did bring some bustle to the streets. By the late teens, it wasn’t just the cash register’s ring, or a sailor’s whistle in the wind. There was something else: a vibration of things to come. Where a few years before, when there were only one or two artists in town, suddenly there were a half a dozen important ones, getting regional, national, and international attention. They included Elizabeth O’Neill Verner, born in Charleston, whose work is so iconic, I think that when many Charlestonians close their eyes, they see Verner’s etchings and not reality. Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, perhaps the best, her very name a haiku of Charleston history and genealogy, created the most mystical and ethereal of watercolors, fetching hefty sums in New York galleries. Alfred Hutty, from Michigan, became a winter artist, and got international attention for his Charleston etchings. And there was Anna Heyward Taylor of Columbia, too, who threw in her lot with the Charlestonians, stunning us still with her amazing color block prints.

Before the Civil War, the city had had many artists, native and visiting. Charles Fraser, Thomas Sully, Samuel Morse, Remy Mignot, and many others had painted here.

Similarly, before the Civil War, a group of writers, like William Gilmore Simms, Paul Hamilton Hayne, Henry Timrod, and others, had met in Russell’s Bookstore and gained national attention as spokesmen of the South in the literary field. But after the war, it was pretty much silence. Yet around 1920, in the same era that visual arts suddenly made a quantum leap, the local literary scene exploded, too.

A few people in town founded the Poetry Society of South Carolina (although some, because of DuBose Heyward’s Charleston accent, thought they were joining a Poultry Society). It soon was offering one of the largest cash awards in the world for verse written in the English language, the ceremony broadcast live nationally one year. Its members received two Pulitzer Prizes; they were on best sellers lists and were picks of the critics.

In 1917, H.L. Menken had lambasted the South, calling it “The Sahara of the Bozart,” saying there was not a single art museum or symphony orchestra of value. You’d have to go to the vast interstellar reaches of space, he suggested, to find such a cultural vacuum as the area south of the Potomac.

But now, suddenly, the lights had started blinking on first in Charleston, S.C.
“SOMETHING IN THE WATER”

DuBose Heyward, who never finished high school, began writing in his thirties and produced six novels, two books of poetry, three Broadway plays, one movie script, and a short story before dying at age fifty-five. He was the first Charlestonian, and maybe the only one, elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His book *Porgy* revolutionized the way American literature looked at African Americans; his opera with Gershwin, *Porgy and Bess*, went on to conquer the world.

His good friend Josephine Pinckney, who turned down his proposal of marriage, got the bug, too. She produced a volume of poems, and four novels, as well as think pieces about the South. The Vanderbilt poets, the Fugitives, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, *et al.*, thought she was one of the most exciting women in the South. Her *Three O’Clock Dinner* was a world-wide wonder, a runaway best seller, and at the time, it earned the largest cash advance ever given for a book-to-film deal.

And Herbert Ravenel Sass, cousin of the artist Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, wrote nine books, scores of articles, and hundreds of columns. He was a novelist and published in the leading magazines of the day including *Saturday Evening Post* and *The Atlantic*; he was translated around the world and had at least two of his books made into films.

If there had been a tradition of this going on for generations, or if Charleston had been a large city, maybe that would not have been startling, and we wouldn’t be here today. But culture in Charleston, as noted, except for dirges and elegies for the Confederate dead, had pretty much died in the Civil War.

But suddenly here are writers, and artists, most born within fifteen years and most of them less than five blocks from each other, producing so much so quickly that it’s astonishing to consider. People around the country noticed it and spoke of a cultural renaissance, a Charleston Renaissance. Suddenly, Charleston, a city that had a reputation of being a place where things had happened, was now a happening city.

What was going on to trigger this rebirth of culture, this Renaissance?

Was there something in the water? In the air? Actually, I think there was.

I think what triggered the Renaissance was in the very atmosphere of the city. What all these writers and artists and architects and preservationists had in common was more than the air they breathed, or the artesian water they drank. If not the physical atmosphere, which must have played a contributing role (ruin is hard to witness without reflecting on it), it was the moral and ideological atmosphere that affected and maybe even infected them. It tinged everything around them: imagine being raised on memory and mold and mildew.

Nothing was new, everything was old, spent, used. And no one wanted anything new; anything new was called Yankee this and Yankee that; condensed milk was called Yankee milk, and most folks, you know, did not have a high opinion of Yankees.

The artists and writers mentioned were tethered umbilically to the past, and more: they were bound, almost hand and foot, tangled even, and trapped, by the ideals their parents believed. It’s my theory it was the presence of the past, the glorious, enshrined past saturating their upbringing, the way summers are saturated with humidity, that got them all writing, drawing, painting, and preserving. Because the world of their parents and grandparents and great grandparents, all the lore and legends on which they were raised and for which their ancestors fought and died, was vanishing in front of their eyes like a mirage or a dream. In 1919, John Bennett, of whom I will speak, wrote a letter to his family that said, “Sons, old Charleston is gone and a strange loud day rolls in.”

**JANIE SCREVEN HEYWARD AND HER SON DUBOSE**

One of the oldest items in the exhibit out there, dated 1912, is the terribly politically-incorrect group of poems called *Songs of the Charleston Darkey* by Janie Screven Heyward, mother of DuBose Heyward, who would become one of the most famous exponents and exporters of the Charleston Renaissance.

You also see in the exhibit his book *Porgy*, published just thirteen years later, and in that period of time, the world changed. Then by 1935, so different again as to be almost a millennium later, it became the opera *Porgy and Bess*. 
DuBose Heyward had an intense relationship with his mother Janie, the author of the Darkey poems. She was descended from some of the earliest settlers of the state and was born during the Civil War—the forge that burnished and created Southern identity. Her life and that of her family followed the Southern planter arc from wealth to poverty as they went from enslaving people to facing a genteel poverty when the war ended. And as you can see from her book of poems she also carried on the idea, prevalent in the South, of romanticizing slavery, emphasizing how wonderful it had been for those who benefitted from it, and minimizing, even denying any possible suffering.

I don’t mean to be cruel. I don’t mean to indict poor Janie. But she was of a generation before the era of the Renaissance, born in 1864—ten to twenty to thirty years before some of these other artists. Her book shows us an example of the past that the artists and writers of the Charleston Renaissance inherited and had to deal with: a worldview where Black people had been better off enslaved.

Janie married into Charleston aristocracy, to Edwin Heyward, the direct descendant of a signer of the Declaration of Independence. She was widowed quite early, and the widow is the epitome of what Charleston was in these years. Henry James, visiting in 1905, just when these artists were in their early twenties or so, saw Charleston as a feminine city, still mourning her men, all lost in the war. The women wore black constantly, and Charleston, too, always seemed to be in mourning for all she had lost.

Janie never remarried and focused all her energies on her children, especially her son. In her diary, after her husband’s death, she wondered who would cut her fingernails, and care for her. In a word, it was going to be DuBose, just as all of his peers would have to take care of the genteel demands of their parents who handed them their tarnished silver and ideals with the demand to keep both of them polished. She, as a genteel woman, could only do certain things to support her family. She could write verses, paint china, and take in boarders, but she still had Black servants to support her. In one of his early poems, “Your Gifts,” Heyward wrote a tribute to his mother, saying that even though they were poor, and he went to bed hungry, she nevertheless fed his imagination with stories of wonder and color.

“You could not give me toys in those bleak years,” he wrote. “Having no books, you sang a shining word into my palm / And closed it tight.” And with that tightly closed palm, gripping a pencil, he would write of the world he had inherited from her.

In another poem, his beautiful “Dusk,” he conflated his mother and his city. The words go like this:

They tell me she is beautiful my city
That she is colorful and quaint alone
Among the cities. But I, I who have known
Her tenderness, her courage and her pity
Have felt her forces mold me mind and bone
Life after life up from her first beginning
How can I think of her in wood and stone?

Charleston to him was not wood and stone, but flesh and bone. The city mothered and sheltered and inspired him as Janie did. At the end of the poem, he wrote:

Hers are the eyes through which I look on life
And find it brave and splendid. And the stir
Of hidden music shaping all my songs
And these my songs, my all, belong to her.

This (finally!) provides the kernel of my talk’s concept: DuBose Heyward, born in 1885, was dutiful. He dropped out of school to support his mother. He was brought up on her stories, mother’s milk, the simile, coincidentally upon which Josephine Pinckney closes her novel Three O’Clock Dinner. And interestingly, Janie told him a story of a little enslaved girl in her family who grew into the woman who had raised her; that girl had come from Africa before 1808 and all she had was a little crude wooden doll. Guess what that little wooden doll was called? Porgo. And guess what Heyward’s original name for his novel was before he suddenly changed it to Porgy?

You got it. Porgo!

Janie wrote about “darkeys” and told her son about Porgo. Heyward took that crude doll Porgo and made it into a living breathing man dealing with fate, Porgy. It’s a clear example of how he took his inheritance, what Janie believed and what she taught him to believe, but changed it, refined it, having refused to take it literally.
Josephine Pinckney had a mother called Camilla the Gorilla (behind her back, of course), and Josephine was brought up on stories, too, constantly reminded of how great the Pinckneys were and how she was too grand to marry DuBose Heyward. She rejected the idea of marriage altogether because she knew she would have to give up her artistic ideals if she married. She refused to believe in what her mother and all her ancestors before her expected her to do.

And then there was Herbert Ravenel Sass, his father a poet of elegies on the Confederate dead and the great lost civilization of Greece. And as for Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, she was her father's daughter and she was in thrall to his stories about his childhood, tales of all the glories the family had known before the Civil War. Herbert Sass summed up this attitude towards the past in the title of his novel of the Civil War, Look Back to Glory.

So imagine, if you will, what it was like for all these artists of the Renaissance, growing up when they did, all pretty much born within a dozen years of each other: Alice Smith, 1876; Verner, 1883; Sass, 1884; Heyward, 1885; and Pinckney, 1890. Think of White Russians after the Russian Revolution growing as dark and as bitter as the tea they drank; think of disposed French royalty after the Revolution, the refugees from Santo Domingo, the Cubans who fled Castro. Our Renaissance artists grew up in a world where the past was brighter than the present.

Oscar Wilde sensed this attitude in his 1882 visit here. Present right when our Renaissance writers were being born, he later told a funny story about Charleston, explaining that one night when he walked on the Battery, he saw a full moon riding over the water, and thought it beautiful. Charlestonians, he said, disagreed. The moon, he was told, had been much more beautiful before the Civil War.

“WHERE YESTERDAYS ARE BETTER THAN TODAY”

Closer to home, born some fifteen years later, Gamel Woolsey, a poet of the Renaissance we’ve lost track of, as she went off to be part of Bloomsbury, wrote of the past this way in her poem “The Carolina Lowcountry.” She recalled it as

The land of ruined plantations, soft brown speech
The lands of mists and memories we regret
The land where loves are never put away
Where yesterdays are better than today.

That’s a pretty sad world for young people to grow up in.

And so, raised on rice and ruin and regret, these artists of the Charleston Renaissance were seemingly doomed to live in the shadow of the past, hearing (and believing in) repeated stories of glory they did not know.

I’m here to say that some did that; some accepted that. Alice Smith, the oldest one of the lot, the one closest to the past, who lived most intimately with it, did not challenge it. She believed in the beauty of it, and she captured the myths, the mists, the sublime beauty of the land. We cannot challenge her view of that, but we can challenge her view of the beauties of slavery captured in her series of paintings of A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties. Her cousin, Herbert Ravenel Sass, like she, had the hardest time breaking away from the paralyzing backward glance. He was the grandson of Mrs. St. Julien Ravenel, who published her book, Charleston, the Place and the People, in 1906. But do you know when she ended her book? 1865. After it, there was no story worth telling, there was no Charleston culture left. It had been crucified in 1865; and her grandson inherited that belief.

What is interesting about these two is that they collaborated on at least three books together, and they shared the same beliefs. A shy man, Sass was not a founder or prime mover in the organization that really launched the Charleston Renaissance, the vehicle that was its voice and its engine, the Poetry Society of South Carolina. Alice Smith was not a major leader either. She cut her neighbor across the street, DuBose Heyward, because he wrote too sympathetically about Black people in his novel Porgy, and Sass would become a shrill spokesman for the dangers of integration. They were tied most loyally to the past like Janie.

But others felt the pull of the past, too, others like DuBose Heyward and his posse. In his first book, Carolina Chansons, a shout out to Janie and her Songs of the Charleston Darkey, he and his
coauthor, Pittsburgh native Hervey Allen, wrote of the legend and lore, the old stories that had come down to them from the older generation: Theodosia Burr, the Hunley, blockade runners, pirates, as if they were too dazzled by the past to see anything in the present. Heyward in his next book wrote of a crew of ghost pirates coming back to haunt the city, but seeing all the changes going on—the tearing down of old buildings and the new hotels rising—he really did say this!—they are incensed. So, one night the ghosts come back and take their buried treasure away with them, thinking that the progress-mad twentieth century will never find or appreciate the treasures of the past buried and forgotten at their feet.

Simon, the drunkard, swears he saw them going
In a shaking world of neither-here-nor-there...
Across the park, lighter than harbor air...
Yes, he will tell you that he watched them travel
Out to the city’s edge with a mouldy chest...
Heaving their treasure to their backs, they waded
The last salt stream, and, where the forests keep
The old lost darks and silences, they faded.
...
Back in the early grey, steel throated, deep,
The engines ripped the silence, and the jaded,
Driven city stumbled from its sleep.

This, I think, is one of the most powerful metaphors of the Charleston Renaissance and what its artists were doing. They were trying their best to deal with the legacy of the past, the treasure and the mold, as the present became more and more insistent. To some extent they were like people rushing in to save what they could before an invasion. They rushed around, obsessed, grabbing this and that, taking anything they could save from the wreck. At first these Renaissance artists had no voice of their own, burdened as they were with these souvenirs of the past. When they opened their mouths, their ancestors spoke.

They had to get the gospel version of the past out of their systems before they could find their own truths. Early on, they parroted what their parents and grandparents had told them, but then they found voices of their own.

It’s interesting to note that each of these Renaissance writers, without exception, focused their first works on the past. DuBose Heyward’s first poems were about the past; Herbert Sass never set a novel in the present; even Josephine Pinckney set her first novel in the 1600s before abandoning the past for the present.

Think of Elizabeth Boatwright Coker; her first novel Daughter of Strangers is set before the Civil War, so she did it too. It was almost as if you had to pay the boatman with a tribute to the past before you would be allowed to be carried across to another shore.

But what makes these writers so interesting is that they eventually went against what they had been taught to believe. They began to trust their own senses, sensations, and instincts. They loved the beauty of the past, but they matured and were torn between it and the truth facing them as new ideas came in to change their city and their century. Some took the past and ran with it; some ran from it. I’ve already thrown Alice Smith and Herbert Sass under the bus (a bus they’d have preferred segregated), but what about those who were different, and chose not to worship the past but investigate it? What made the difference?

How to account for those who looked back like Lot’s wife and were frozen, and those who looked ahead instead? What made some people question what others blindly accepted?

Before I answer that, I’d like to say that, in my opinion, these are the interesting ones. In the literary sphere, it’s my contention that those who did not surrender to the past, who did not take it for gospel, but who questioned it, were, more often than not, the better artists. And I think this is the key to why the Renaissance is remembered today, why Wikipedia speaks of it in the present tense, and why we, a century after its start, are still speaking of it: because many of the artists were haunted by the past even as they tried to escape its grasp. Something similar is going on in the South today. I am not brave or foolish enough to weigh in on this hot button issue, but you have to admit that in 2020, we are still obsessed with the Confederate flag and statues.

What brought these people together a century ago was not just their inheritance of being Heywards and Pinckneys, but their propinquity, in time, in geography, and in thinking, with whom they were mixing. If the Civil War was the furnace that forged Southern identity, it was organizations like the Poetry Society of South Carolina and the Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings (now
the Preservation Society) that helped shape the Renaissance and shape the culture we know today. But it was not these organizations themselves; rather it was who belonged to them, the folks with whom our Renaissance artists began associating. In a word, they were from “off.”

If the Charleston writers and artists had their heads stuffed with the past, and were like Poe characters, buried alive or walled up in a cellar, there were others on the scene who could arrive like the cavalry to help release the entombed from their coffins, and revive them with fresh air. It was outsiders and their outside ideas impacting the locals which set off the Renaissance.

**JOHN BENNETT**

You can see it in the exhibit. There are books out there by John Bennett. Born in 1865, in Ohio, he had come to town and married into the Smythe family. A kind, handsome, and very winning man, Bennett, in his mild-mannered way, was a radical. Unlike the locals, who had a vested interest in believing in white superiority and supremacy as a past ideal worthy of re-establishing, he had no animosity to Black people. He did not see them as the reasons his family was no longer rich. Bennett was the first to elevate Black culture. Unlike Janie Heyward, who saw quaint childlike qualities in the Charleston “darkey,” Bennett saw dignity and integrity. He realized Gullah was not bad English spoken poorly by uneducated children, Gamel Woolsey’s “soft brown speech,” but a distinct language worthy of study. He found Black folklore one of the great contributions of American culture.

And time has proved him right. He was one of the first to write down the oral traditions of Lowcountry Black people. He respected the ex-slaves he met; and knowing he would not make fun of them, they confided in him their oral traditions. They told him, a white man, of how when slavery grew too hard, their enslaved ancestors grew wings and flew back to Africa. In the twentieth century, African American writers and composers seized on these stories and have used them for their own creative works. So, I’ve brought a book or two along with me this evening—ones we could put in the exhibit, as well. Here’s one by African American author Virginia Hamilton called *The People Could Fly*, a Coretta Scott King Award Book, referencing Black Charleston folktales saved by John Bennett, a white writer of the Charleston Renaissance.

Wikipedia was right: The Renaissance is, not was. The Renaissance lives.

Bennett was the real force behind the founding of the Poetry Society; he was the one who showed DuBose Heyward it was legitimate to look upon African Americans as human beings and worthy objects of high art. Bennett, the outsider, opened Heyward’s eyes to looking at Black people differently than his mother had. And Heyward looked around and saw a Black beggar on the street and because of John Bennett, he wrote a novel named *Porgo*. Moving away from his mother’s version and vision of things, he changed *Porgo* to *Porgy*.

**DOROTHY HEYWARD**

And now we have to bring in Heyward’s wife Dorothy. Born in Ohio, like Bennett, she had no ideas about the inferiority of Black people. It was she, as we know, who changed *Porgy* from a novel to a play. Her husband DuBose had left Porgy defeated at the end of the novel, leaving him in “an irony of morning sunlight” as his life came to an end, a life without Bess.

But Dorothy did not see him as a victim; she gave the story a new ending and the Black character Porgy new dignity. She had him joining the great migration to New York City to search for Bess. This outsider brought in outside ideas of Black possibility, mobility, not victimization but agency.

Yet another outsider did, too: Laura Bragg, of Massachusetts, whom I was privileged to know, was a prime mover of the Renaissance, a friend of both Heyward and Pinckney. She was a scientist who not only opened minds, but also opened up the Charleston Museum to African Americans and founded the Public Library. She was a founder of the Poetry Society, too.

The outsider artist (not how we use the term today) was Alfred Hutty, who came down from the North, and who mentored Black artists, and who brought a broader perspective with him. Many of our insiders came into contact with these outsiders who brought in foreign and radical ideas. Maybe white supremacy was not the most important thing in the world, and the keystone of Southern civilization. Maybe it could be questioned. Art could be subversive. In books, and in art, and on the stage, and one day, maybe...
even in the streets, Black people could be granted humanity.

The irony, of course, is that most of the best-known works of the Renaissance are Black-related, if not Black-created. There’s Bennett’s collection of folk tales, *The Doctor to the Dead*; DuBose Heyward’s *Porgy*; and think of the art of Huty and Verner and Anna Heyward Taylor—so much of it is African American themed. The utter fulfillment of the Charleston Renaissance is in the book *The Carolina Low-Country.* The title page is a litany of all the names we’ve mentioned, and more, a who’s who of Charleston writers, architects, preservationists, artists, and genealogists. It was written at the behest the Society for the Preservation of Spirituals (songs again!), an organization that, like Janie, missed the old songs being sung by what they called the “old-time Negro,” the songs of the Charleston “darkey.” It’s so ironic that the most articulate book of the Renaissance, comparable to *I’ll Take My Stand* by the Agrarians, is a collection of nostalgic essays about how Black life used to be, a tribute to the culture before the Civil War.

**PAST IMPERFECT**

The Agrarians in Nashville took their stand on rural agricultural life versus a modern mechanized version as their touchstone. The Renaissance writers took their stand on African American heritage, which in their vocabulary meant slavery and subservience, as their defining quality of the Carolina Lowcountry. That they did this unwittingly is the real tragedy.

That some regretted that slavery had ended is beyond tragic; but not everyone included in that book did. Those who broke with the past were admitting that slavery was their mudsill; it was their new beginning, their wake-up call, so to speak, their reason to realize that the past was not perfect and that there was something not quite so lovely in the legacy of the old South, the South of slavery.

Once they realized that the past was imperfect, and they were going to be tested on it, that they might have divided loyalties and that they might have to choose between the twentieth and nineteenth centuries, the present or the past, they were conflicted. That is the key tension that pricked their consciences and inked their pens.

**JULIA PETERKIN**

And in this great dilemma, in this cultural shift, we have to include Julia Peterkin, outside of Charleston geographically, but right in the center of the city’s Renaissance themes. All her novels are about Black people, people she knew. Her characters leap off the page. She made them real. They brought her fame and a Pulitzer Prize, and blame. How dare a white woman write of these things?

The sad thing about Peterkin is that for a decade or so, she chose the present and the future; but she retreated through the years. She backtracked over time and repudiated her writings. Like Eurydice, she slid back into the underworld of belief in segregation and white supremacy. She regressed, but her characters went on without her.

In 1990, A.J. Verdell knocked the socks off of literary critics with her novel, *The Good Negress*, wherein her main character growing up in Detroit worships a heroine she wants to grow up to be: Julia Peterkin. When her teacher tells the little girl she cannot do that because Peterkin is white, she finds it hard to believe. So here, again, is another book we can add to the exhibit to prove that Wikipedia is right in putting the Renaissance in the present tense. The Renaissance is. The Renaissance lives.

Peterkin’s last novel was *Bright Skin*, the story of a mixed-race heroine, the product of miscegenation. Miscegenation was also the basis of a Charleston folk tale John Bennett told to a group of ladies in 1908. It was a wonderfully magical story that had been told to him by ex-enslaved witnesses about a woman whose skin had darkened even as her daughter passed the color line and passed as white. Bennett, however, was punished for speaking about this, the reaction so violent, that just about all proper white Charlestonians shunned him. He gave up writing for ten years, became a cocaine addict, and retreated to Flat Rock, N.C., (in the winter!) where he would never be seen.

Heyward wrote of miscegenation in his Broadway play *Brass Ankle*. It bombed. Julia Peterkin wrote of miscegenation and then gave up writing. Elizabeth Boatwright Coker, later than all of these, in a freer time, and someone who freed herself from her upbringing, wrote *Daughter of Strangers* about the life of a mixed-race woman and had a best seller.
The lone writer of the lot who did not take up race or miscegenation was Josephine Pinckney. But she did use unsanctioned sex as the crux of her best book, *Three O’Clock Dinner*. While Heyward and Bennett and Peterkin and Coker used race and Black characters to challenge accepted and outmoded ideas about white supremacy, Pinckney used other tactics. Her choice was more like E.M. Forster’s *Howard’s End*, a book challenging English ideals through class. Who will inherit England, and the house called Howard’s End? The dull and ponderous and practical Wilcoxes, or the romantic, flighty, and idealistic Schlegels? Who, Pinckney’s novel asks, is a true Charlestonian? Who will inherit the city? Is it going to the down-at-the-heel, tattered aristocrats, the Redcliffes, or the vulgar, but energetic Hessenwinkles who live behind them? (Pinckney could never foresee Black people inheriting; but Heyward could, and did. In *Mamba’s Daughters*, his heroine is welcomed and acclaimed in New York, if not the Holy City.)

Coker, like Pinckney, could put on all the trappings of a great lady, but not be trapped by them. Both of these women lived the lives they wanted, managing to defy convention, even as they ostensibly obeyed it. In her going back and forth between the past and the present, she wore many hats so to speak. (Another pun intended.) And that could be the topic of a lecture one day: the Charleston Renaissance and feminism, but not today—you’re lucky.

Much younger than the Renaissance artists, Coker got to know many of them later in life, and in many ways the torch was passed to her. She carried it on into time, and she carried it into a different era and a different city. Yet her *Daughter of Strangers* has a title that is a throwback to the Renaissance, for there’s an implied inheritance here, too: the shock of prejudice and injustice, and what to do with it. She, through her heroine, was doing just what the better Renaissance artists before her had done. They had separated themselves from the world their parents had come from, and one they could not live in comfortably. Their parents, their families, were now strangers to them as they pursued a new destiny.

COLUMNS

14

**Changing Yesterdays into Tomorrows**

The book was published in 1950, the era of *Brown versus Board of Education*, the blinding of Isaac Woodard and Judge J. Waties Waring. Many here tonight know his feats, defeats, and victories. Waring, fittingly enough, was the uncle by marriage of Gamel Woolsey, the poet who left the Lowcountry for Bloomsbury and who summed up Carolina as a place where yesterday was better than today.

But Waring changed those yesterdays into tomorrows. To my knowledge no book has done this yet; no scholar has made the link, but tonight (for the first time in front of a live audience!) I’d like to posit the theory that Judge Waring has to be counted as a participant in, and a product of, the Charleston Renaissance, too. He was a man steeped in tradition, who literally divorced himself from his past, his first wife, and married a woman from “off.” Some people still want to say that it was because of her, because of the way Charleston society treated him for that divorce that he came out for integration and changed his views on race.

I disagree. I think he was just like the Renaissance artists. After accepting it in his youth, he rejected the past as gospel and became open to outside ideas, what was brewing in this country. Just as these writers broke from their enslavement to their pasts, so did Waring with his ruling opening up the Democratic Party to Black people and being the first sitting judge on a federal bench to rule segregation as per se inequality, a ruling that led like a fuse to the Supreme Court decision of *Brown versus Board of Education*. He, like the others mentioned in the Wikipedia article, changed his city as they did. But he had more power; he, in the stroke of a pen started a movement that changed the country.

When I began this talk (and thanks for your patience) I spoke about opening lines that any author would look upon with envy—and now, perversely, here’s my chance to use them in closing.
Think of Dickens and *A Tale of Two Cities*. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times....” Think of what was happening in Charleston in the 1920s. The local chapter of the NAACP was founded in 1917, but there were still ex-enslaved men and women walking the streets. Old ladies could reminisce about dancing in hoopskirts on the walls of Fort Sumter and chide their granddaughters for bobbing their hair, rolling their stockings and dancing the Charleston, a Black dance step that had been inspired by the city. It was navigating all these contradictions and tensions, living life as a high wire act of balancing between the past and the present, the bad and the good (and there was some in each) that drove them, and makes the study of these artists and this era so compelling.

So, call them Ishmaels. (Melville, you know, did write a poem glorifying the Swamp Angel, the federal gun that rained terror and destruction on Charleston.) That first line summons up alienation: Ishmael, sent away to wander. Ishmael, the son of Hagar, the heroine of DuBose Heyward’s *Mamba’s Daughters*. We usually think of Charleston Renaissance writers as smug, belonging, all of them born into the aristocracy of the city. And most were, but they did not imbibe and swallow it whole. Their inability to belong totally and accept all the old stories alienated them from their time and their culture, their cousins and their peers; and that was the seed, I believe, that set them writing. They loved their city, but their love was not blind. Waites Waring was exiled like Ishmael. Magazine stories called him, “The Loneliest Man in Town.” He died in exile, in New York City.

“THE PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY”

And, finally, there is *The Go Between* with its opening line: “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” I think these Renaissance artists would have understood this. Our pasts are our homelands, and you can’t go home again; we who grow up and leave our parents’ lands behind us are exiled forever.

We can look back in anger, or in longing, which is one thing, and nostalgia, which is something else entirely. I believe the best of Charleston writers, artists, preservationists, and even jurists, caught in the best of times and the worst of times, in a period of cultural shift, moving from a blind acceptance of the past to an examining of it, found themselves Ishmaels, alienated from their birthrights. They portrayed what happened back in those foreign lands of their pasts, still speaking in their native tongues, while trying to learn new vocabularies.

I think it’s their struggle, the South’s struggle with its heritage, the grace and the grimness of it, wanting to preserve some of the beauty, but not surrender blindly to what can often be a very homely and homogenized modernity that was, or rather, as Wikipedia states, is the key to the Renaissance. It’s what compelled them to write and draw and paint, to dramatize and issue rulings, and thus what we in turn find so compelling in them. We today, in our way, are go-betweens, just as they were, caught between what was, what we want, believe, and what will be.

Thank you for listening.

— Charleston native Harlan Greene is widely considered an authority on the history of Charleston, and specifically the Charleston Renaissance. Mr. Greene has authored several works on the subject, including *Mr. Skylark: John Bennett and the Charleston Renaissance*. He currently is Scholar in Residence at the College of Charleston’s Addlestone Library.
A native of Columbia, S.C., Anna Heyward Taylor (1879–1956) settled permanently in Charleston in 1929 after studying art in Europe, Japan, and Provincetown, Mass. She served in the Red Cross in France during World War I, and accompanied scientific exhibitions to British Guiana (now Guyana) as an artist. Though accomplished in numerous media including watercolor and batik on silk, Taylor was best known for her linoleum and woodblock prints. Her subjects included Lowcountry flora and fauna, Charleston street scenes, and romantic visions of Black plantation labor. Her print, “Harvesting Rice,” was selected for the “American Art Today” exhibition at the 1939 New York World’s Fair, and her black and white prints illustrated Chalmers Murray’s history of the South Carolina Agricultural Society, *This Is Our Land* (1949).
“The House of the Doctor of the Dead” by John Bennett is his only printed etching. A native of Chillicothe, Ohio, John Bennett (1865–1956) was already a critically and commercially successful author following the publication of his children’s book *Master Skylark* (1897) when he permanently relocated to Charleston in 1898. He was a founder and the key sustainer of the Poetry Society of South Carolina, and closely studied the Gullah language and Black Lowcountry folklore throughout his life.

Bennett authored five other books, including the first true work of the Charleston Renaissance, *Madame Margot* (1921), as well as *The Pigtail of Ah Lee Ben Loo* (1926), which featured silhouette illustrations by Bennett, and *The Doctor to the Dead* (1946).

Bennett was instrumental in launching the careers of many Charleston authors, most notably Hervey Allen and DuBose Heyward.
In this letter to Joseph Everett Hart at Columbia University in New York City, dated March 16, 1935, Josephine Pinckney identifies “DuBose Heyward, Hervey Allen..., John Bennett, Laura M. Bragg, and I” as “the prime movers in starting the Poetry Society [of South Carolina].”

Officially founded in November 1920, the Poetry Society of South Carolina emerged as the driving force behind the Charleston Renaissance. Originally conceived at one of the regular literary discussions between John Bennett, DuBose Heyward, and Hervey Allen held at Bennett’s house in the years following World War I, the Society was formalized when the three men were joined by women who had been holding similar meetings at the home of Laura Bragg, including Josephine Pinckney and Helen von Kolnitz. The Society published an annual yearbook, awarded prizes to established and rising poets, and sponsored talks in Charleston by leading authors from around the nation. Two of its members would be awarded Pulitzer Prizes: Robert Lathan for editorial writing in 1925 and Julia Peterkin for fiction in 1929. The Society would also serve as a model and support the formation of similar groups dedicated to visual and musical art and historic preservation.
Julia Peterkin, seen here in a photograph from the 1930s by Doris Ulmann, won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1929 for her novel *Scarlet Sister Mary* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1928), the first Southern writer to win a Pulitzer for fiction.

A native of Laurens County, S.C., Julia Mood (1880–1961) married William George Peterkin in 1903 and moved to his plantation, Lang Syne, near Fort Motte, S.C. She would live at Lang Syne for the remainder of her life, surrounded by the Black men and women who worked on the plantation. Beginning in 1924, she published a series of books centering on these men and women: *Green Thursday* (1924), *Black April* (1927), *Scarlet Sister Mary* (1928), and *Bright Skin* (1932). She also wrote the text for *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1933), which featured photographs by Doris Ulmann and documented the men and women on Lang Syne plantation. Though a member of the Poetry Society of South Carolina, Peterkin was only an occasional visitor to Charleston, and was associated with the Charleston Renaissance in the public’s mind due largely to her choice of Black Southerners as her subject matter.
The artwork on the endpapers of this first edition of *Scarlet Sister Mary* is evocative of the South Carolina Lowcountry.
Peterkin’s handwritten outline of “the story of a black girl” that became Scarlet Sister Mary
A native of Charleston, Elizabeth O'Neill Verner (1883–1979) studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and became one of the leading artists of the Charleston Renaissance. She was best known for her romanticized etchings of Charleston architecture and street scenes, as well as pastels of Black women flower vendors.

A founding member of the Charleston Sketch Club, the Charleston Etchers' Club, and the Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings, her devotion to a nostalgic view of pre-World War II Charleston is evident in her published collections *Prints and Impressions of Charleston* (1939, reprinted in 1945) and *Mellowed by Time: A Charleston Notebook* (1941). Pictured are her miniature etchings “Roof Tops” (above) and “St. Michaels Alley” (page 23).
Charleston native DuBose Heyward (1885–1940) was arguably the most nationally-recognizable figure closely associated with the Charleston Renaissance. Featuring Black characters and avoiding the overtly racist stereotypes prevalent in earlier artists’ works, Heyward published poetry, novels, and, with his wife, Dorothy Kuhns Heyward, plays.

A founding member of the Poetry Society of South Carolina, DuBose published his first volume of poetry, *Carolina Chansons: Legends of the Low Country* (1922), in collaboration with fellow founder Hervey Allen. Three years later, DuBose published his best-known work, the novel *Porgy* (1925), which would be adapted for the stage in 1927 in collaboration with Dorothy, and into an opera by George Gershwin as *Porgy and Bess* (1935).

During his career, DuBose wrote five additional novels: *Angel* (1926), *Mamba’s Daughters* (1929), *The Half Pint Flask* (1929), *Peter Ashley* (1932), and *Star Spangled Virgin* (1939), as well as two other plays: *Brass Ankle* (1931) and *Mamba’s Daughters* (1939), the latter again in collaboration with Dorothy. Given that the real-life examples for the characters in *Porgy* would likely have spoken Gullah, it is fitting that, in 1990, Wyrick and Company of Charleston released a version of the play in Gullah by Virginia Mixon Geraty, which is pictured here.
Elizabeth Boatwright Coker by Alexander Brooke, ca. 1948—1949 (courtesy of Coker University)
In the spring of 2020, the South Caroliniana Library presented an exhibit called “Elizabeth Boatwright Coker's Life and Legacy,” which featured a display of manuscript and visual items drawn from the Elizabeth Boatwright Coker papers as well as examples of her published works. In addition to the items from the Library’s collections, other items were loaned by members of Coker’s family, Coker University, and the Hartsville Museum.

Elizabeth Boatwright Coker’s professional literary career began in 1925 with the publication of her poem “Noches.” She went on to become a prolific writer, eventually publishing nine popular novels.

In conjunction with the Coker exhibit, the South Caroliniana Library and the Irvin Department of Rare Books and Special Collections mounted an exhibit, “The Charleston Renaissance,” which featured manuscript, published, and visual materials produced during the burst of literary and artistic activity that occurred in Charleston during the 1920s and 1930s. Though a generation younger than the writers commonly associated with the Charleston Renaissance, Coker was heavily influenced by their work.

“Young Southern writers will always be drawn back to a real past. We have a shared past, a profound sense of the past. I am talking about the importance of history when I say this: And face it, we Southerners are a race of storytellers, myth worshippers and local bards. Regard the current vogue of country music. Most songs are pure short stories in rhythm!”

—Elizabeth Boatwright Coker, from her papers at the South Caroliniana Library

“A writer is a bender of horizons into new shapes, a finder of a rarer gem in a new place, a sayer of how we mortals lived and loved and died, how we saw each other, how we sought and lost our God and how we suddenly one day found a glory and knew that though life is a short thing—a changing thing—there is hope, there is much beauty and kindness, much goodness and things of real value here for us if we just will refuse to turn our backs on life; but will savor every different phase of it as it comes up on it.”

—Elizabeth Boatwright Coker, from her papers at the South Caroliniana Library

“I believe in the blessed balm of laughter. Even laughing in the dark is a more melodious sound to our Creator than whimpering over our fears and incapacities. By developing an innate sense of humor, I have gone smoothly through many situations that would have undone me had I tried to kick them over with criticism and caustic comments. For if we place the proper value on laughter we learn to believe in tolerance which in the end is my strongest credo.”

—Elizabeth Boatwright Coker, from a speech delivered in 1992, published March 19, 1994, by the Board of Governors, South Carolina Academy of Authors, in Celebration of the Life and Work of Elizabeth Boatwright Coker, 1991 Academy Inductee
Elizabeth Boatwright Coker was well known for her extensive collection of fashionable hats, which were loaned for the exhibit by The Hartsville Museum, and for driving around in her latest yellow Corvette as shown here in 1988 (image courtesy of Penelope Hall and Eliza Ingle).
“There are three ways in which we women rule the world (meaning influence men): through their weakness, through our sweetness, and through our strength. Therefore the first basic lesson for us, as women, to learn is wherein lies our individual and strongest weapon.”

—Elizabeth Boatwright Coker, from her papers at the South Caroliniana Library

“For writing is like an invention—you have to be familiar with the tricks and spills of the trade. Each scene must be as vital and necessary as the parts of a smooth-running machine.”

—Elizabeth Boatwright Coker, from her papers at the South Caroliniana Library

“There never is any proper time to sit down at a typewriter and write. I have heard women writers say smugly, ‘Oh I sit down to write every day from nine until twelve and then again from two until four-thirty; come out and have a cocktail and leisurely dinner…. I look on these writers with awe and disbelief. What do they do when the phone rings?’

—I write every day. I write as many hours a day as I can steal from housekeeping without being downright neglectful. I never start anything that I don’t finish. It isn’t always good and sometimes it lands in the wastebasket as soon as I’ve read it over—but to the end, I go. I read hundreds of books a year. I keep my eyes open everywhere I go for a face, a pair of hands, a funny incident, a rare flower, an unusually beautiful sunset that I may be able to use in a later book. I keep a file of things like: hair, eyes, mornings and the mornings are divided into—fog, rain, sunny happy, sad. The evenings are in the same categories and the noons. I have stars in my files, and mountains, horses, trees, flowers—when they bloom, what color they are, where they grow. I have the sea, a man’s thumb that I saw on a bus one day, noses, expressions, the way the sun flickers into my workroom window through the dogwood branches outside, birds, dogs, food. My food file would make your mouth drool it’s so enticing. I try to do something just a little better, a little stronger, a little different than any other writer who has gone before me.”

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—Elizabeth Boatwright Coker, from her papers at the South Caroliniana Library

While a student at Converse College in 1927, Elizabeth Boatwright Coker was awarded the ten-dollar Skylark Prize “for the best student-poem published in a college magazine in the State of South Carolina during the current year” for “Red Moon,” shown published here in Year Book of the Poetry Society of South Carolina, Vol. III, No. 1 (Columbia: State Company, 1927).
Elizabeth Boatwright Coker published many novels with E.P. Dutton & Co. of New York, including *Daughter of Strangers* (1950); *The Day of the Peacock* (1952); *The Bees: A Story of a Family* (1968); and *Blood Red Roses: A Romantic Novel of Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, During the War Between the States* (1977).
Manuscript pages with Coker’s handwritten revisions for her novels Daughter of Strangers (1950) (above) and Blood Red Roses (1977) (on page 31)
Chapter Twenty-Two

I was crabbing with Button on the creek one morning in early June when Henrious appeared with two letters. One was from the Heywards announcing the arrival of the rich spinsters and Asun at the Combahee. They would be driving down to Beaufort in three days. They would deliver Asun at the Berrien Mansion in mid-afternoon. The other note was a scram! barely legible: "They are poisoning me, Elsa."

Henrious looked dreadful; all skin and bones. Livia must be poisoning him too. He cried and begged me to keep him here at Cotton Hall. He'd sleep in the kitchen with Anatole and wait on me "enduring the day and far into the night." I said I'd speak to the Master.

Beau was concentrating on caterpillars. He hardly listened when I asked him what I should do if it turned out Elsa really was being poisoned.

"Tell Livia to double the dose," he said, laughing and showing the longest worm I'd ever seen. An infestation of them would drastically cut down his cotton crop.

Three days later I went to Beaufort for the first time.

[Handwritten note:] signed by Nasiri holding the umbrella. Beau was busy in the fields
“I am more than jubilant!”

First Ladies at USC: Some Delightful Memories

by C. Robert Jones
Carolina’s first lady from 1922 to 1926, Netta Melton, took me to my first Broadway play. Neither she nor I had any idea I’d end up having a career in theatre, but she helped to open a door to a vibrant and exciting world, and that door would never be closed again. That I even met Henrietta Loeb Melton was highly unlikely given the fact that the tenure of her husband, Dr. William Davis Melton as president of USC, had happened exactly thirty years before my own time at USC, 1950–54.

And it was all because of the University of South Carolina Press.

When I arrived on campus in the fall of 1950, I needed a job to help with my expenses. Burt Wheeler at the “Y” got me an interview with the editor of the USC Press, Louise Jones DuBose. I suspect my being an English major and a good typist were helpful in my landing a student assistant’s job, though my duties had nothing to do with the editorial side of things. I started off filling orders and mailing USC Press books all over the world. As luck would have it, I ended up working at the Press all four years.

Shortly after I began my work there, I had my first interchange with a USC first lady. While cleaning out some shelves one day, I ran across a handsome photo of former president (1936–1944) J. Rion McKissick. When I asked Mrs. DuBose where it belonged, she clearly was delighted to see it, telling me it had been lent by his widow (who was then Mrs. Irvine F. Belser) for a McKissick book that the Press had published earlier. Somehow, the photo had been mislaid. She asked me to call Mrs. Belser. I did, and when I gave her the news, she exclaimed, “I am more than jubilant!” I don’t think I’d ever heard anyone use the word “jubilant” in a sentence before, and the response became a part of my life-long love affair with words. I have often used her exact statement, always thinking of her as I did so.

Caroline Virginia Dick McKissick Belser Dial (best known as “Miss Caroline”) was one of the founding members of the University South Caroliniana Society. I came to discover that she was a gracious and totally delightful person—and a generous benefactor at USC which gave her an honorary Doctor of Laws degree for her contributions to the school. In an unusual gesture, she donated her body to the USC Medical School at her death in 1994. A plaque in her memory was installed on the side of the South Caroliniana Library overlooking the grave of President McKissick who’s buried on the Library’s grounds.

I came to know Netta Melton and Virginia Russell in different ways. In 1952, the new Osborne Administration Building, near the Bull Street entrance to the campus, opened just as new president Donald Stuart Russell and his wife, Virginia Utsey Russell, arrived on campus. The USC Press had been located up to that time on the first floor of Maxcy College, a men’s dormitory which also housed the University Post Office and a canteen in its basement. Luckily, the Press was given a handsome suite on the second floor of the new building, so I had a chance to see Donald Russell often since his office was literally only steps away.

The Russells were a glamorous couple, in their mid-fourties. They had met at USC and were students during the 1920s era of the Meltons. She had even been May Queen, and that impressed us students a lot. They were quite a change from President Russell’s predecessor, Rear Admiral Norman N. Smith, who was in his late sixties when he retired earlier in 1952. Admiral Smith had actually been retired from military service for six years when the USC Board of Trustees chose him to succeed J. Rion McKissick in 1944.

It was Virginia Russell who turned the old Wauchope
House on the Horseshoe into the stately home of the USC president as it exists today. The house had originally been built in 1854 as a faculty duplex. English professor George A. Wauchope lived in the west half from 1903 to 1943. The McKissicks moved into the east half in 1931 when he was Dean of Journalism, and he and Miss Caroline stayed on in the house during his presidency. The house became a girls’ “dorm” for several years after the McKissick era, but between 1949 and 1952 it was essentially not in use, needing significant repairs. The Russells oversaw the renovations and furnished the house in lovely antiques, mostly at their own expense, and I was among the first who got to experience the house when the work was completed in 1953. As the McKissicks had done before them, the Russells opened up their house to the campus community right away. The newly-enlarged space made entertaining much easier. They had the Student Council over one evening, and a short while later I was back again when they started a tradition of inviting all the seniors to dinner. We were divided into several groups, of course. Virginia Russell, like Miss Caroline, had that old South charm that made us all feel we’d been singled out for some special honor.

Netta Melton had it, too. One afternoon I walked into the USC Press offices for my usual work hours, and there, sitting at a table poring over some papers, was a lady I’d never met before. Mrs. DuBose introduced her as Netta Melton. I quickly put together “Melton” and “Melton Observatory” (named for President Melton) which I often noticed on the way to classes and realized who she was. Short, rotund, and something of a pixie, she was delightfully outgoing with a robust sense of humor. We immediately struck up a friendship.

Netta Loeb was born in Charleston in 1885. Her husband’s short, four-year tenure in the early 1920s was deemed by University historian Daniel W. Hollis as one of the most significant in the University’s history—the beginning of the modern university. World War I was over, the Nineteenth Amendment giving women voting rights, and the Roaring Twenties were now realities, and he worked to broaden the scope—to popularize—USC. Netta was a dynamo, seemingly everywhere at once in events at the University and in civic and political affairs throughout Columbia and South Carolina. In 1925, she was even delegate-at-large at the 1925 Democratic National Convention. After Dr. Melton died of a heart attack the same year, Netta held a number of jobs, one of which included being secretary to South Carolina Governor Burnet R. Maybank. At USC, she was alumni secretary, secretary to the Department of Education, and secretary of the BAM Club where she handled the sales of USC football tickets for many years. When she died in 1962 at the age of 77, her pallbearers were a virtual Who’s Who in South Carolina politics and higher education.

Because Mrs. DuBose’s secretary was away on maternity leave, I ended up spending more time in the Press offices, briefly taking over the secretary’s role while continuing my work with the books. I got to spend more time with Netta and loved her stories. She knew everybody, and she could spin wonderful tales. It was my last semester, and suddenly terrific things were happening to me, including notice that I’d been named a Fulbright Scholarship Fellow to France for the next school year. Netta wanted to celebrate all these honors and told me she was taking me to the matinee of the Broadway road-company production of South Pacific then playing at the Township Auditorium.

This was a “big deal” since shows performing at the Township (the only major house for concerts and touring shows in those days) were usually there for only one performance. South Pacific was “hot” in the arts world and had been so since it opened on Broadway in 1949 with Mary Martin and Ezio Pinza. It had won James A. Michener a Pulitzer Prize for his novel and the same prize had also gone to Rodgers and Hammerstein and Josh Logan, the creators of the musical. Amateur performance rights around the country are usually not available during the Broadway run of a show, so practically no one locally had seen it. The movie was another four years in the future.

Netta insisted on being the chauffer and general hostess for the whole afternoon. Almost no college students had their own cars in 1954, so I was glad to be Netta’s date. Until I got in the car. It was a big one, maybe a Packard or Lincoln, and Netta was so short she could barely see over the dashboard. My knuckles were white from holding on to the door handle. It seemed Netta was one of those drivers who likes to really look at a front-seat
Mary Jones in the President's House with her family
March 3, 1953

Dear Bobby:

Mrs. Russell and I would like to have you and the other members of the Student Council join us for dinner at home at 6:30 p.m. on the night of Thursday, March 5, 1953.

If you find that you will not be able to attend, I would appreciate your advising my office.

We are looking forward to seeing you Thursday.

Sincerely yours,

[Signature]

Donald Russell

Mr. Bobby Jones
Box 2141
Campus
Letter signed by President Donald Russell inviting members of the Student Council to dinner at the President's House in 1953.

Virginia Russell
passenger while talking. Oh my.

Happily, we escaped fender-benders coming and going, and had a delightful time. I was enraptured by the whole thing. I’d seen local productions at the Town Theatre, but nothing like this. Jeanne Bal was the Nellie Forbush in the production. She had been one of Ethel Merman’s co-stars in the 1950 Broadway production of Call Me Madam, and would go on to have a busy career in the still-new entertainment medium called television.

One of my great joys about our date was seeing Netta having such a ball. She was more like a twenty-year-old Charleston debutante than a sixty-nine-year-old lady of “senior” years. (Of course, anyone over fifty seemed “senior” to me at that point in life.) That afternoon remains one of those gently defining moments in a lifetime: affirming the theatre career I would follow thereafter. To Netta, it was as natural as day to share time with students. That was also true for Miss Caroline and Virginia Russell, and I’m sure all three presidents knew what treasures their wives were at USC. If the ladies were here today, I would without hesitation appropriate Miss Caroline’s words: “For all the lovely memories, ‘I am more than jubilant.’”

She loved to tell the story of the afternoon she found herself at the President’s House on campus during the Thomas F. Jones presidency, 1962—1974. There was a tea for guests visiting the University, and mother and several other housemothers had been invited to provide social “backup.” For some reason, Mary Butterworth Jones, the president’s wife, was indisposed that day, and mother, noticing no one was manning the punch bowl, did what Southern ladies do in such cases: she took charge. And things moved along smoothly.

Until she realized that her name tag identified her: “Louise Jones.” (Yes, there were two Louise Joneses in my life: my mother Louise Kilgo Jones and my boss Louise Jones DuBose.)

The guests, not knowing the president’s wife, assumed mother was indeed she. Dilemma. Not wishing to embarrass anyone who had made such an assumption, mother immediately made the choice just to say “thank you” to the effusive observations: “What a lovely home!” “How thoughtful of you to have us.” “Such beautiful china,” etc. Fortunately, the press of guests and social chatter in the room kept everything “generic” enough for mother to carry off her “gift” to the real president’s wife, and she escaped undetected. She did wonder later, however, if guests might have thought Mary B. Jones had “aged” prematurely during her husband’s presidency. The president’s wife had several young children, and mother, by then, was a grandmother. Ah, the charm of Southern women.

An afterword...

A slightly different president’s wife story

Not long after I was graduated from USC, my father died. By then, my brother, Bill, my sister, Jennie, and I had all left home. Our family doctor told mother she needed to get busy and be with young people. In no time, she found herself as a housemother at Wade Hampton Dormitory on campus. And indeed, she remained in that position until she retired twelve years later.

—C. Robert Jones has contributed several articles to Caroliniana Columns, including “Just Being There: Adventures in a Life in the Theatre,” which appeared in the Spring 2015 issue. He retired from the position of Chair of the Department of Theatre Arts at Mars Hill University in Mars Hill, N.C., in 1997, but continues an active writing and theatrical career.
In my letter to you in the Spring 2020 issue of Columns I expressed my hope that spring 2021 would usher in a “normal” annual meeting complete with a stimulating speaker, a good meal, the election of a new slate of officers and Council members, and time for conversation and fellowship—in person! Well, I am regularly accused of being too much an optimist, and I accept service of that observation. But in my own defense I plead that I was about seven-eighths right: we most definitely had a stimulating speaker in the person of Dr. Marjorie Spruill (to whom I am greatly indebted), a great new slate of forward-thinking officers and Council members were elected, and there was conversation and fellowship of the hybrid variety—that sort to which we have all grown accustomed this past pandemic year: in person and via Zoom! At the risk of sounding too hopeful, I’ll venture to say that we are making great progress! I hope to see all of you in person at our annual meeting in May 2022! And maybe—just maybe—at a Society-sponsored event in the fall of 2021!

It has been a privilege to serve as your president these past four years. You are in excellent hands with the officers and Councilors who were installed at the annual meeting in May, and I am already looking forward to attending the many stimulating events and gatherings which will follow in 2022 and beyond—LIVE AND IN PERSON in the halls of our beloved and soon-to-be-completely-renovated South Caroliniana Library. Many thanks to Dean Tom McNally for doing such a superlative job of overseeing the various individuals and groups responsible for the renovation, and for cracking the whip when necessary. Who would have imagined a project of this size, scope, and importance being undertaken in the midst of a pandemic? And a very special thank you to my friend Henry Fulmer for keeping his head when those around him were losing theirs (i.e., me!) and to my fellow officers Beryl Dakers (now our newly-elected president) and Lynn Robertson (continuing her service as one of our vice presidents) who did much of the work. And I will not forget the many kindnesses, gentle nudges, and creative thinking which the Society’s administrative assistant Todd Hoppock brought to the table week in and week out. Most of all, I want to express my appreciation to you—the members of our Society—for the patience and loyalty you have shown during a singularly challenging year and for the unfailing encouragement and support you have given to our officers, Councilors, and staff.

Great things await us! Even though I am no longer an officer of the Society, please don’t hesitate to call on me with any questions, concerns, or suggestions for improvements to the work of your University South Caroliniana Society. I will be sure to bring your issue to the attention of our newly elected officers and Councilors. My mobile number is 803-606-0550 and my email address is wilmot@wilmotirvinlaw.com.

It is always a pleasure to hear from one of our members and to provide assistance where I can.

Wilmot B. Irvin

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*Editor’s note: Dr. Marjorie Spruill’s address to the 2021 Annual Meeting of the Society may be viewed on the Society’s YouTube channel. Search for "University South Caroliniana Society" at www.youtube.com.*
How has your life been affected by the new protocols of the pandemic world?

These days, most of us live our daily lives vacillating between the expectations of resuming pre-pandemic behaviors and mitigating the dangers of the virus’ variant strains.

For the South Caroliniana Library, the rapidly evolving world, in which we find ourselves redefining the term “new normal” on a daily basis, presents myriad opportunities to reevaluate models of service.

When COVID-19 interrupted our lives in 2020, the library’s work paused yet never ceased. Our staff effectively transitioned to a regimen of virtual meetings and conducting reference interviews with researchers from around the globe via email, phone, and chat sessions. Teamwork and innovation made it possible for public services librarians to achieve significant goals, even in the face of so many obstacles.

As we reopened to researchers, those responsible for public services implemented a hybrid access model for research that provided a two-prong approach: in-person research visits by appointment only and the creation and distribution of digital scans. Table-top overhead scanning equipment and upgraded digital microfilm reader/scanners have allowed us to quickly create digital research scans for remote patron use. And of the more than 1,200 reference requests received over the past year and a half, the majority were completed using such technology. More than 65,000 scans of books, manuscripts, microfilm, and visual materials were provided to patrons worldwide.

For other patrons, especially historians and graduate student researchers, the amount of collection materials held by the South Caroliniana Library that were relevant to their research was simply too great to scan, so in-person visits were arranged. Even in these uncertain times more than one hundred persons travelled from as near as around the corner, and as far away as France, to consult collection materials.

The Library does not stand alone, however, in having weathered the storm. Across the decades since its organization in 1937, the University South Caroliniana Society has steadfastly fulfilled its stated purpose: by promoting a better understanding and appreciation of South Carolina, its history and culture, aiding the South Caroliniana Library through contributions of service, materials, and money to build up, preserve, and provide access to the collection; encouraging the gift of South Caroliniana materials; cooperating with other organizations and individuals in the work of keeping South Carolina historical material in this state; encouraging the use and publication of materials with the South Caroliniana Library; and providing assistance to other worthwhile activities adjudged to promote a better understanding of South Carolina, its history and culture.

Truly, the members and friends of the Society are the Library’s greatest support system. The staff of the South Caroliniana Library remain in your debt and thank you for your loyal support. Working together, both now and into the future, may we persevere and accomplish even greater things.
## MEMORIALS & HONORARIA

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The University South Caroliniana Society is the patron organization supporting the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina. The Society works to acquire and preserve materials documenting South Carolina’s history and culture.

Membership dues and income from the Society’s endowment are devoted primarily to the purchase and preservation of South Carolina materials for the South Caroliniana Library’s collection. Scholars from around the globe use the collection to enhance our understanding of South Carolina’s history and how that history has helped shape the South, the United States, and the world.

For more information, search for University South Caroliniana Society at www.youtube.com.