

South Carolina - A Tribute  
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### South Carolina - A Tribute

(More specifically a tribute to the people of Liberty Hill, S.C., a town which embodies many of the traits of South Carolina. On the occasion of Brevard's Book and Plate Club program, March 7, 1989.)

A tribute to it's people - a people of great strength of character, of industriousness, of generosity and hospitality, of strong ethical and family values, of culture, of fun loving nature, of commitment to civic duty and service to state, of strong ties to the church and to their faith.....

A tribute to the place - a place of beauty because of it's location at the edge of the S.C. midlands with views over the piedmont hills, it's 10 antebellum plantation homes, it's sense of history and isolation, it's lack of commercialization.....

A tribute to the Joseph Cunningham house which has been our family home since the late 1860's. A tribute to all those who have lived there and made it a place of welcome - especially to my aunts Bettie and Margarete who are moving to Camden this very week and who have maintained this home with much love and care.

A tribute to the future of this place with an acknowledgement that this is unknown but that it too lies in the hands of a loving God. My wish is that it can continue to be a place where people can find welcome and renewal.

This small community of 100 residents has found evidence in stone of it's first residents as arrowheads and has it's later roots in the land grant period of the mid-1700's. It is about 15 miles out of Camden above Beaver Creek, a tributary of the Wateree.

The land climbs to 660 feet above sea level and made it an ideal place to oversee plantations. It's closeness to the Wateree made shipping possible and it became a bustling cotton-producing community with a cotton gin, tannery, school, church, doctor's office, store.... It was as early as 1813 a gathering place for the surrounding country. It was also one of the wealthiest, most elegant communities in S.C. at the time. An elegant old carriage found in the basement of the Thompson home shows an example of this type of life. A clipping noting the tradition of the lancing tournament with knights and their attendants (a tradition my mother remembers from her childhood) also shows something of the social nature of the community.

The homes on this hill were built as mansions typical of the period when southern hospitality was in flower. They were built in the Federal and Greek revival style using the native pine and also the slave quarried granite for fence posts, steps and house supports.

The Joseph Cunningham house was built in the late 1700's by a man who was known as "South Carolina's First Millionaire". The original house had four rooms and a wide center hall on each of two floors. Four large rooms and a wide hall were added by William Cunningham, a nephew, about 1840. The kitchen, which still exists, was a separate building as was a smoke house....all sorts of supporting buildings for a man with 800 slaves, mills, tannery, gins ... A lovely spring set with local granite exists down the hill. Many other lovely homes also still stand which were built during this period of South Carolina's history.

In 1858, Rev. John Gardiner Richards accepted a call to the Liberty Hill Presbyterian Church which was founded in 1851. He used to say that in all of his travels he had never seen such real elegance anywhere as was found in Liberty Hill when he came. (This from a man who married a Charleston belle and had lived there when he first finished seminary.) His family enjoyed this community and by 1861, at the beginning of the war between the States, had 3 children. (See clippings on carriage and tournament.)

The war brought great change to the community as it did to the whole south - change which this community of Liberty Hill has never recovered from.

Rev. Richards volunteered for service as a chaplain during the period of the war and served under his brother-in-law, General William Duncan Smith, in Charleston. Gen. Smith soon died of yellow fever and Rev. Richards served afterward with the Tenth S.C. Regiment under Gen. Manigault. He had been heard to speak of this trying period...(see quote, page 15 in Biography of Rev. John G. Richards, also page 17.)

Chaplain Richards remained in the army in active service until the surrender of Lee at Appomattox having made several furlough visits home.)

The community of Liberty Hill on his return was destitute. Sherman, with part of his army camped at or near Liberty Hill for 11 days. The army was divided by a freshet which accounted for the length of the stay.

A description of Sherman's stay was written by Thomas Cunningham, son of William in 1865. (see "Life in the "Big" House") Another description, a quote from Mrs. C.P. Poppenheim extracted from South Carolina Women in the Confederacy follows. (see "Life in the "Big" House").

Rev. Richards immediately began to look for ways to help this his community recover from effects of the war. He rode to Ebenezer, a community near where Rock Hill was to be and where he had friends from a previous pastorate, and came back with 4 mules and a wagon loaded with corn, meat, flour, sugar, coffee and other necessities. This helped tide them over until gardens could be planted and other arrangements could be made.

This also marked a change in the way of life for Rev. Richards, for the church could not provide his family with support other than the manse and he was forced to engage in secular enterprises. (The church was able to pay him \$30.00 the first year after the war.)

He purchased 7 or 8 mules or horses from friends in Ebenezer on the deferred payment plan and after getting 33 cents/pound for his cotton was able to pay all expenses and make \$500.00 for the years operation. He became a successful farmer and merchant and also a large land owner. The church continued to grow during this period and he continued to provide ministry as when he was paid.

The reconstruction period in South Carolina was in many ways as dangerous as the war itself with freed slaves given the ballot and control of the state and local governments. Mr. Richards became active politically (while never holding office) and was an advocate for peace and lack of violence. He was active in the Red Shirt movement and directed the activities of the Klan in the community. An example of his influence which steered these people through this bleak era without bloodshed is found on pages 25 and 26 of Biography of Rev. John Gardiner Richards.

A growing family (9 of theirs and 2 nieces) made the manse, which the church tried to give him as part payment for its obligations to him, too small. The Cunningham property became available and after arranging that the Cunningham family would be able to use the manse free of rent as long as he was pastor of the church and the manse available to him, the Richards family moved into this large home. This purchase was also with the financial aide of his wife Sophie. (This was around 1865.)

The school situation was also intolerable with the state and counties only providing money for 1 1/2 months of school. Mr. Richards became chairman of the board of trustees and helped found good schools for Liberty Hill. 7 of his 9 children were sent to college. 4 graduated, one to become a minister and professor at Davidson College, 2 to become members of the South

Carolina legislature, 1 to become a governor of the state.

When his son John was 19, he agreed to take over most of the farming responsibilities and Mr. Richards devoted the rest of his years to ministry. He organized the black Presbyterian Church, was instrumental in organizing 10 new churches as evangelist for Harmony Presbytery, was moderator of Presbytery, the Synod of S.C. and 4 time commissioner to the churches General Assembly. (one of these was the last Assembly before the war) He moved to Blenheim from Liberty Hill and stayed there until he died, preaching until he was 83.

Five families lived in this home which was shared and the birth place of many fine people. It was left to his 3 sons but his brothers shares were bought or traded for land by John G. who reared his family of 11 children there.

Another characteristic of this community was their ability to enjoy living. Fox hunts were favorite activities as well as community baseball games when this sport was popular. The Richards "9" were feared in the area.

This period of time has many eye witnesses still around willing to share their memories of growing up on Liberty Hill. My mother has done this beautifully in her "Life in the "Big" House" which she wrote last year.

World War I touched this community as sons went to serve. The only son from this household to reach adulthood, Stephen Malone, enlisted upon his graduation from Clemson in 1915. He planned to farm the place upon his return but the flu epidemic took his life out in Iowa.

Farming became less an interest as Papa spent more and more time in public service. He served as magistrate, representative, railroad commissioner and the governor from 1927-1931. These positions made it necessary for him to spend much time in Columbia so the girls relied on boy cousins to spend the night at home. (see story of "Haints" from Mama's book)

The family moved to Columbia to live in the Mansion during his time as governor but only the youngest was living at home at this time. Others enjoyed visits there and 2 daughters held their weddings at the Mansion. It was at one of these that my parents had their "storybook meeting".

The highlights of this period in S.C. history were better roads for S.C., a strict enforcement of the Blue Laws and the opening of the Cooper River Bridge.

The effects of the Great Depression were felt in Liberty Hill and my parents wedding there in 1933 was a small affair as a result. This period saw Papa continuing to serve the state as tax commissioner. He also served his state as trustee of Clemson and Winthrop and his church as elder, sunday school superintendent and moderator of presbytery.

In 1941 Papa died. The 40's also saw grandsons leave Liberty Hill to serve in World War II and to return safely, some after narrow escapes. It saw Nannie enjoy the visits of families and the Christmas return of many. I have many happy memories of these years of childhood; playing in the red gullies, running up and down the porch, sleeping in the middle between 2 cousins, making mud pies and hiding under the house, walking to the spring....

These Christmas celebrations are among my fondest memories and saw sometimes as many as 40 family members sleeping and eating in the old home. We all remember trying to be first to shout "Christmas Gift".

It was on a Christmas night after one of these full days, complete with the traditional fireworks, that our Nannie died at age 89. She never had to give up her gift of music, having played the organ in church the Sunday before she died. This was a gift she shared from the time she was a young girl in Camden. She left many the gift of inspiration at her welcoming spirit, her wit, her way of putting people first and letting other, less important, things go. Her faith was a real inspiration to many.

Since that time the house has been the home to my unmarried aunts Bettie and Margarete who moved there upon their retirements. They have been very involved in the Liberty Hill community and have served it in many ways. They have been instrumental in seeing it have public water, keep it's post office, support the work of the church by serving as elder and organist.....They have also shared the history of the home with many and carried out the gracious task of being welcoming hostesses.

Today at the ages of 87 and 92 they find the difficulties of dealing with freezing pipes, lack of central heating and general upkeep to be too demanding and are moving, with our blessings, to a retirement home in Camden.(I admit that I am guessing these ages today.)

They will leave a community of 100 people who will be sad at their leaving but enriched by their having shared so many good years there in this community which is in it's entirety on the Historic National Register.

What will become of this old home? Who will it's new residents be? We don't know but we hope and trust that they will feel some of the warmth of living and loving that has gone on there since the late 1700's be enriched by it and enabled to carry on the tradition of sharing this great treasure with others.

## References

"Biography of Rev. John Gardiner Richards" by John Gardiner Richards his son

"Life in the "Big House" by Mildred Richards Francis my mother

"Liberty Hill" from South Carolina Wildlife, Nov.Dec. 1987, pp.33-39, Debra-Lynn B. Hook.