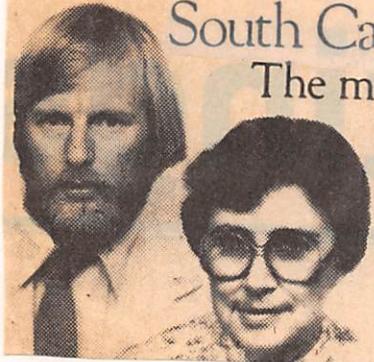


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South Carolina's Story The making of a state

By Ron Chepesiuk
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A Versatile South Carolinian

By Ron Chepesiuk and Louise Pettus
Winthrop College faculty

Anyone who wishes to acquire accurate and detailed information on early South Carolina cotton manufacture and uses of water power must first turn to August Kohn's writings.

The Cotton Mills of South Carolina (1902) and The Water Powers of South Carolina (1910) were the works of a man so versatile that finding an occupational label to give him is almost impossible. Kohn, at one time or another, was a journalist, warehouseman and philanthropist. He was a leading figure in Columbia society for more than 40 years.

Born in Orangeburg, Kohn received his early education there. After two years in New York schools, he and his brother, Sol, were sent to the University of South Carolina where they both graduated with distinction.

The university gave Kohn a chance to try out his considerable talents. He plunged into debating and developed a lifelong fascination for statistics. After he broke his habit of "thinking in German," Kohn became the editor-in-chief of the "Carolinian."

After graduation in 1889, Kohn became a roving reporter for the Charleston News and Courier. Soon he was manager of the Columbia bureau. The initials "A.K." at the end of a story guaranteed its accuracy.

As a roving reporter Kohn covered everything — hurricanes, elections, lynchings — and developed reliable sources in every county of the state. He also gained a nationwide readership through his articles in the New York Journal, Cosmopolitan, Harper's and numerous business magazines.

While Kohn was skilled in all types of reporting, he was considered unparalleled in reporting the doings of the South Carolina Legislature. He frequently offered solutions to social problems, which were later adopted by the Legislature. Observers of the South Carolina political scene in the early 1900s gave credit to Kohn for educating politicians to the need for compulsory education, auto licensing, marriage licenses, birth certificates and other social reforms.

Kohn's paper, the News and Courier, was anti-Tillman, and Kohn never voted for the Populist governor. Kohn, though, was the sort to "give the devil his due," and, consequently, at times expressed admiration for certain Tillman reform measures.

Ben Tillman's feelings toward Kohn were just as ambivalent. Tillman was so infuriated by Kohn's superb reporting of the Darlington riot (very badly handled by Tillman) that he threatened to put Kohn in jail. On the other hand, when Tillman left the governor's mansion for a seat in the U.S. Senate, he wished to take Kohn with him to fill a position in the U.S. Treasury. Kohn refused.

The only political office Kohn ever held was as trustee of the University of South Carolina, an honor he cherished. John Swearinger, the state superintendent of education, wrote that "August Kohn introduced business methods into the running of the University."

In 1906, in the prime of his life, Kohn abandoned his reporting career to devote more time to his fast-growing business enterprises.

Kohn became a successful stock and bond broker and the sole mortgage loan correspondent for Prudential Life Insurance Co., founded the Standard Warehouse and developed two of Columbia's largest suburban areas — Wales Gardens and Rose Hill.

Kohn moved his family into a mansion on Senate Street and became noted as a host. Woodrow Wilson, John D. Rockefeller, Bernard Baruch and many others enjoyed his hospitality.

Kohn's collection of antique furniture was one of the state's finest. His book collection was unrivaled, especially the South Caroliniana and first editions.

Kohn was always personally generous to numerous good causes — student loans, welfare, the Red Cross, and the Hebrew Benevolent Society, among others. He was often the chairperson of fund-raising groups. He was especially skilled at raising money from out-of-state sources for South Carolina causes. He had a non-sectarian approach that appealed to his Jewish and Christian friends alike.

Truly, August Kohn merited the title "versatile South Carolinian."