



Summer 2013
VOL. 29, NO. 1

CAROLOGUE

A PUBLICATION OF THE SOUTH CAROLINA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

2013 Fall Tour: Cooper River Ramblings
Exploring Family History with Census Records
Commodore Duncan Ingraham
2012–2013 Membership Listing



Director's Notes: Connecting with the Past

There is clearly a lack of historical awareness in our nation. One reason for this is that history is presented in dry, boring terms to a public that is used to sophisticated, fast-moving entertainment.

A time-proven way to interest people in history is to have them connect with the past through the lives and experiences of individuals. I recently reviewed the society's material on Robert Mills. As architectural historian John M. Bryan puts it, "Mills' accomplishments, the diversity of his interests, and the historical context of his work make him a fascinating figure." He is one of many South Carolinians who should be known by visitors to Charleston as well as citizens of this state.

The son of a Scottish tailor, Mills grew up just blocks from where the Fireproof Building now stands. We believe he took courses at the College of Charleston and studied drafting and drawing with local instructors. When he was around nineteen years old, Mills set off to the nation's new capital to study under James Hoban, architect of the White House. While in Washington, the young South Carolinian met Thomas Jefferson. Mills later wrote that Jefferson offered him access to the library at Monticello, which had an impressive collection of architectural books. We know that the two men corresponded for over twenty-five years.

Around 1802, Mills went to work with Benjamin Henry Latrobe, a pioneer of the Greek Revival style in America. During the years that Mills worked with Latrobe, their main focus was the U.S. Capitol Building. In 1808, Mills set off on his own to design buildings in Philadelphia, Richmond, and Baltimore. At the age of forty, Mills returned to South Carolina as acting commissioner of public buildings. For the next nine years, he designed or rehabilitated courthouses and jails in twenty-one counties throughout the state. In 1822, Mills submitted plans for the two buildings that are considered his most important public buildings in the state: the South Carolina Asylum and the Fireproof Building, or "County Records Building," as it was called.

Many of you are familiar with our building's fireproof features, such as foot-thick masonry walls, stone floors, metal window casings, and copper roof. But did you know Mills stipulated the building was to be surrounded by green space and wide roads? To create this firebreak, he actually peti-

tioned the city to widen the street that is now Chalmers. Mills was instructed to design a building to house the records of the county as well as offices for local officials. To facilitate public access, he designed the structure with eight entrances, each leading to a hallway. In turn, the hallways lead to a beautiful central stairway, thus allowing an individual to enter from any door and go directly to any office. The design also enhanced the circulation of both air and light. As far as we know, this is the first of Mills's buildings to feature double hallways and a central staircase.

The Fireproof Building was finished in 1826. Mills would go on to design the U.S. Treasury Building and the Washington Monument. But the Fireproof Building will always be, to many, the quintessential Robert Mills building. Now, if you were to delve into the society's collection of Mills's personal papers, you would find that this amazing man's interests went beyond architecture. In 1825, he published *An Atlas of the State of South Carolina*, which was followed the next year by *Statistics of South Carolina*. Both of these are fabulous resources on nineteenth-century South Carolina. Mills was keenly interested in internal improvements, and his correspondence reflects an enthusiasm for steamships, canals, and a transcontinental railroad. Both an engineer and an artist, Mills was truly a visionary.

Robert Mills is a wonderful example of a historic figure whose story needs to be told. Biographers note that growing up in Charleston had a profound impact on Mills. His love of travel, interest in transportation, and dedication to fine architecture can be traced to this port city. What better place to describe the legacy of this man? Mills once said that "we have entered a new era in the history of the world. It is our destiny to lead, not be led." It is time for the SCHS to lead. Using our collections, our building, and our incredible location, we need to excite people about the figures of the past. We must portray the accomplishments, philosophies, and dreams of individuals like Mills to remind Americans of the struggles and beliefs of the men and women who built this nation.

Faye Jensen, Ph.D.
Executive Director
faye.jensen@schsonline.org

THE SOUTH CAROLINA HISTORICAL SOCIETY WAS FOUNDED IN 1855. ITS MISSION IS "TO **EXPAND, PRESERVE, AND MAKE ACCESSIBLE** OUR INVALUABLE COLLECTION, AND TO **ENCOURAGE INTEREST AND PRIDE** IN THE RICH HISTORY OF OUR STATE."

The South Carolina Historical Society does not discriminate in any of its operations or activities, including employment, on the basis of gender, race, age, or on the basis of any other classification that is protected by law.