

A Brief History of the Greenville County Historical Society Jeffrey R. Willis*

In Volume I of *The Proceedings and Papers of the Greenville County Historical Society* Albert Neely Sanders, the first editor, wrote: "The Greenville County Historical Society is the result of two movements, a generation apart." (p.7) In 1928 the Upper Carolina Historical Society was organized; partially in response to the demolition of Greenville's second courthouse, designed by Robert Mills. Because of an absence of funding during the Depression, this first attempt at organization failed a few years later. Nevertheless, the need for the existence of a guardian of Greenville's heritage had been clearly established.

In 1959-1960, work on sketches of the Greenville District signers of the Ordinance of Secession revealed the serious need for original research on Greenville history. In response to this need, Professor Laura Smith Ebaugh of Furman University convened a meeting at her home in January 1961, of individuals interested in the history of Greenville. Two of the individuals at this meeting had been involved in the effort in the 1920s to organize. As a result of these efforts, the Greenville County Historical Society was organized at a subsequent meeting in 1962. Marion M. Hewell was elected as first president.

On September 30, 1962, The Society met at Citizens and Southern Bank on Camperdown Way. The meeting was held on the terrace overlooking the Reedy River Falls to unveil a bronze plaque commemorating the establishment, about 1768, of a mill and trading post in the vicinity by Richard Pearis, Greenville's first known European settler. Following the unveiling, Mildred E. Whitmire, the Society's Second Vice President, read a well- researched paper on "Richard Pearis, Bold Pioneer." This paper, which was published in Volume I of *The Proceedings and Papers of the Greenville County Historical Society* remains today one of the best sources for information about Richard

*This paper was presented at a meeting of the Historical Society on May 1, 2011, celebrating the fifth anniversary of the founding of the Society. The paper was compiled primarily from the minutes of the Board of the Historical Society and of the general meetings of the Society from 1962-2011. Information about the author may be found on page 37 of this volume.

Pearis, and represents one of the reasons the Historical Society was founded: "To identify and collect historical materials and data, to write historical studies, and to preserve the history and traditions of the county"

The Society was a true beehive of activity during its early years. Much of this activity centered on the work of the organization's many committees. In addition to the usual committees for membership and programs, there were committees for exhibits, collections, historical records, and historical buildings. The most active of these was the Exhibit Committee. The purpose of the committee's exhibits was to reach as wide a circle of people as possible, generate interest in the Historical Society, and attract new members.

In October 1961, at the Greenville Art Museum, the Society's Exhibit Committee organized an exhibit of portraits prior to 1900, which consisted of 105 portraits that told the story of Greenville and its leaders. Photographs of each portrait were available for sale. Also, an album of the portraits in the exhibit was compiled and resides today in the South Carolina Room of the Greenville County Public Library. In a sense, this exhibit still survives today for us to learn from. In addition to the portraits, several documents and items of historical interest were displayed.

At the Fall Meeting in 1964, Dr. J. Dechard Guess presented a paper on "Early Doctors of Greenville County." This paper remains an important source on the history of medicine in Greenville County. To accompany the paper, the Exhibit Committee arranged a display of early medical instruments and equipment and pharmaceutical supplies.

Following the presentation of Dr. Guess' paper on medicine, Greenville's legal community determined that its profession was not to be left out. At the Society's Spring Meeting in 1965, Joseph H. Earle, Jr. a member of the Society's Board of Directors, read his paper "The Bench and Bar of Greenville in Anti-bellum Days." Earle traced the development of the local bench and bar from the founding of the county, in 1786, until the Civil War, including sketches of the careers of such prominent attorneys as the two Waddy Thompsons (father & son) and Benjamin F. Perry. True to form, the Exhibit Committee, at the meeting, had a display

of paintings and photographs of early Greenville lawyers and judges together with several interesting old legal documents.

The year 1965 also saw the publication of Volume I of *The Proceedings and Papers of the Greenville County Historical Society*. Albert N. Sanders, a member of the History Department of Furman University, edited *The Proceedings and Papers* from 1965 to 1983 and set high standards for the publication, which contains not only the research papers presented at the Society's meetings but also a summary of each of the meetings and the actions taken. To date, 12 volumes have been published. The research papers printed in these volumes form an important source for current and future researchers of the history of Greenville.

At this point, my presentation has brought the Historical Society through the spring of 1965, leaving only 46 more years of research papers and meetings to cover. I am not going to cover those years in detail, but I do want to comment on several highlights. At the Fall Meeting of 1965 the Society had as its special guests veterans of the Spanish-American War and their wives. At the Winter Meeting in 1966, the Society abandoned the usual research paper format in favor of an historical pageant entitled "A Nineteenth Century Diary of Greenville, South Carolina," compiled by Laura Smith Ebaugh from letters, diaries, and early records, and consisting of five tableaux, which were staged by members of the Society, with Miss Ebaugh as narrator. At the Winter Meeting of 1970, Francis Marshall Withington presented a paper, "Camp Sevier, 1917-1918," which chronicled the history of Greenville's World War I army training camp. After the presentation, the nearly two-hundred member audience joined in singing songs popular during World War I.

After holding its early meetings at a variety of venues around Greenville County, many of them churches, the Historical Society assembled in October 1970 for the first time in the Parker Auditorium of the new building of the Greenville County Public Library, now the Museum of Childhood. The Society continued to meet at the Library for almost twenty-five years.

Another area of activity, and *raison d'être* for the Historical Society, was advocacy for the cause of historical preservation. Therefore, the Historical Society campaigned earnestly in the early 1970s to save the

Greenville City Hall, which had been built in the Romanesque Revival Style in 1892 as a Federal post office. The effort, although persistent, was unsuccessful, and Greenville lost a significant landmark.

In October 1986 the Society made an agreement with Dr. A.V. Huff, Professor of History at Furman University, to write a history of Greenville County under the sponsorship of the Historical Society. By January of 1987, \$55,173 had been raised to finance the publication. In 1993 the manuscript of the book was completed and a contract signed with the University of South Press for its publication. At the Society's Fall Meeting in 1995, announcement was made that the first copies of the book had been received from the University of South Carolina Press. The full title of Dr. Huff's history was *Greenville: The History of the City and County in the South Carolina Piedmont*. Following the meeting, Dr. Huff signed copies.

During the decade of the 1990s, the Historical Society held several on-site meetings at historic properties in the county. The Spring Meeting in 1995 took place at Tullyton Plantation, near Fountain Inn. The hosts were Dr. and Mrs. James F. Richardson. Dr. Richardson read a paper on the ancestors of Tully C. Bolling, the builder of the home. The Spring Meeting in 1996 was held at the George Salmon House in the upper part of Greenville County. The owners, Mr. and Mrs. John Walker, hosted the meeting. A large blue and white tent provided shelter and added a note of festivity to the occasion. A research paper entitled "George Salmon: Surveyor and Citizen" was presented by Anne King McCuen. Following the spring 1997 meeting, the members of the Society were invited to tour Whitehall, the oldest standing home in the City of Greenville. In the spring of 1998, Judy Iselin Cromwell invited the Society to meet, under another festive tent, at Brushy Creek Farm. Roy McBee Smith presented a paper: "Brushy Creek Farm: the Country Home of Alexander McBee." In April 2000 the Spring Meeting was held at Cherrydale, the nineteenth-century home of James Clement Furman, which had recently been moved to the campus of Furman University.

In 1989 an important event occurred. The Historical Society was offered a collection of Greenville photographs collected and taken by William B. Coxe. The gift consisted of approximately 120,000 negatives of photographs taken by Coxe and his daughter, Isabelle Coxe Cely.

For a period of almost 70 years in the 20th century, Coxe compiled a photographic record of Greenville history. When the collection came to the Historical Society, many of the negatives were chemically unstable and in danger of decomposing. After a period of several years the Society was able to acquire the large sum of money needed to reprocess and save the negatives. The Coxe Collection of Historical Photographs is now housed at the headquarters of the Society and accessible through a data base.

At one time the Historical Society had no office and no telephone. The only contact was the home telephone number of the current president. In May of 1992 the Society occupied its first office in a basement area on Bergamo Plaza on North Main Street. Brenda Hays became the Society's first executive director. In September 1992, the office was moved to a house, owned by Christ Church Episcopal, at 107 Broadus Avenue. After serving unselfishly as executive director for seven years, Brenda Hays retired in the spring of 1999. Her place was filled by Nancy Parker. In the fall of 1999, the Society moved to its current headquarters at 211 East Washington Street. In February 2001 Sidney Rutledge Thompson was appointed executive director.

In the fall of 1997 the Historical Society launched its first in a series of ornaments of Greenville landmarks. The first was of Greenville's second courthouse, which was designed by Robert Mills. Every fall a new ornament has been issued.

In 1998 the Society became part of the communications revolution and launched its first webpage. Information about the Society and its collection is literally assessable by the whole wide world.

In 2001 the Society began working with the City of Greenville to erect a statue of Vardry McBee, the Father of Greenville. By the Spring Meeting, \$40,000 had been raised to finance the project. In May 2002 the statue was dedicated on Court Square on South Main Street.

In May 2002 the Historical Society met in the auditorium of Canal Insurance Company on Stone Avenue and has continued to meet there. The old parking problems associated with the meetings at the Public Library were gone.

October 2003 the Society acted to make the riches of the Coxe Historical Collection more available to the public. A selection of several hundred photographs was published in *Remembering Greenville: Photographs From the Coxe Collection*, with research and commentary by Jeff Willis.

Fifty years have passed since that Sunday afternoon meeting, at Miss Ebaugh's home, of citizens wishing to record and preserve Greenville's history. The Greenville County Historical Society has admirably fulfilled the goals of the founders and will continue to do so for the next fifty years, and beyond, with the support of your efforts and your membership.

Editor's Note: Since the presentation of this paper in 2011, several important developments have occurred in the history of the Society. From May 2002 to February 2012, the Historical Society met in the auditorium of the Canal Insurance Company. Since October 2012, the Society's general meetings have been held in the auditorium of the Salvation Army Kroc Corps Community Center. Sidney Rutledge Thompson served in exemplary fashion as Executive Director of the Historical Society from February 2001 to August 2014. In the summer of 2014, Lucy Quinn began working with Sidney in preparation for assuming the duties of Executive Director at Sidney's retirement.