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Steeple Savers

Family of Furman alumnae work to preserve historic Abbeville church

by RON WAGNER ’93
Trinity Episcopal Church has been the centerpiece of downtown Abbeville, South Carolina, since 1860, but one of the most unique structures in the country faces an uncertain future after years of neglect.
The family roots of Jean Robertson Hutchinson ’74, Ann Hutchinson Waigand ’76, and Mary Baskin Hutchinson ’43 run as long and deep in the history of Abbeville as the iconic church they’re trying to save.
Look for the redwood, **Ann Hutchinson Waigand ’76** says, and you’ll know you’ve arrived at her mother’s house in Abbeville. That’s a startling thing to hear, considering South Carolina is almost 3,000 miles from where you’d expect to find a redwood. More startling is discovering there is more than one.

At least two other coastal redwoods rise majestically along Abbeville’s North Main Street, looming dark and green over the scrub pines. Why a 110-foot prehistoric tree native to the Pacific Northwest stands sentinel outside the residence of **May Baskin Hutchinson ’43** is a question with no obvious answer, though, making it precisely the kind the family specializes in answering.

“Less than two months before he left for the Mexican War, Captain Jehu Foster Marshall signed the deed to purchase 12 acres in the village of Abbeville Court House in upstate South Carolina,” Waigand wrote in the Summer 2014 edition of Magnolia, a publication of the Southern Garden History Society. “Little did he know that he would be starting a landscape legacy that would unveil fascinating secrets five generations later.”

As a historical researcher, Ann has been doing a lot of that unveiling in recent years, in no small part because she is that fifth generation and her family now owns some of those 12 acres. While unable to find records to support the legend that Marshall returned with the redwood sapling in his saddlebag after fighting in the Mexican-American War, Ann’s digging concludes that one way or another he is responsible for planting the tree that is now approximately 167 years old and has spawned at least three other saplings.

But that isn’t the only Abbeville legacy of Marshall’s that May, Ann and her older sister, **Jean Robertson Hutchinson ’74**, are fighting to protect.

The ladies are seated around May’s dining-room table, notes laid out, ready to advocate for their shared cause: the preservation of Abbeville’s Trinity Episcopal Church, which was built in 1860 and, thanks to a steeple donated by Marshall, happens to be the only thing in downtown taller than the tree in the front yard.

“*In Abbeville, they refer to it as ‘our church,’ even if they’re Baptists,*” Jean says, which is significant since most everyone in Abbeville is Baptist. “You’ve got to come and see our church.”

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1971, Trinity is a stunning example of Gothic Revival architecture that remains as originally constructed, right down to some of the rarest stained-glass windows in the U.S. — though nobody knew just how rare until recently when Ann debunked another bit of local folklore. It was always assumed the windows had arrived from England and eluded Union blockades to reach Trinity, but evidence shows they are the second largest collection of windows made by renowned glass painter William Gibson, and Trinity is one of only five places in the U.S. where William Gibson windows have been found.

But the Civil War and decades of mismanagement since, starting with Marshall’s wife investing their money in Confederate bonds, have been unkind. Trinity has been closed to the public for more than a year because of instability in the 125-foot-high steeple, and if a way can’t be found to raise the money required...
May is the church historian and an unrivaled source of knowledge. Ann, who lives in Camden, Maine, is president of the church’s fundraising body, Friends of Trinity, and Jean, who resides in Charleston, South Carolina, is writing, designing and costuming a documentary short on Trinity’s Civil War history. They were in Abbeville together to see a presentation by students in the College of Charleston/Clemson master’s in historic preservation program’s Mitigation in Historic Preservation class offering ideas on how to save the structure. Unfortunately none addressed funding. Repair estimates are pushing $8 million. That’s a huge amount for a church with 28 mostly elderly members, and begs the question: Why take on such a daunting task? Understanding history, as is often the case, helps us understand the present, and shows that “daunting” is a relative term.

Members of the family have worshipped at Trinity from the day it opened.

Marshall was killed at the Battle of Second Manassas, and his property was sold in a bankruptcy proceeding in 1868. The purchaser, Sallie Martin, owned the property for about two years until she was foreclosed on, at which time May’s great uncle bought the house and then sold it to May’s grandmother, Eugenia Miller Robertson. May’s mother and aunt grew up in the house, which was built in 1881 after the original structure was destroyed by a fire. And though May raised her children in Charleston she’s slept in the bedroom where she was born since she retired 40 years ago. Jean and Ann were baptized at Trinity and spent the summers of their youth roaming the eclectic gardens Marshall planted.

“Daddy would go off on active duty – he was in the Air Force – and we would come up here, and we had the run of this huge yard. We would get so dirty that my grandmother would squirt us off with the hose before she would let us into the house,” Jean remembers as the sisters show off the now overgrown paths that still meander through some of the oldest crape myrtles and magnolias in the Southeast. “And we’d just have a wonderful time.”

That was how May, who earned a history degree, often describes her experience at Furman.
“(Virginia Thomas) conducted a course that every woman in the freshman class had to take, Education 11, and that molded my college, I think. She was such a wonderful woman and so human, and that’s what I liked about Furman,” May says. “It was a place where you could be yourself and be somebody.”

May also met her husband, Rufus Hutchinson ’38, at Furman, and Hutchinson’s brother was also a Paladin. Her enthusiasm rubbed off, at least on Jean. Ann was a bit more resistant, however, insisting she’d “go anyplace but Furman” and attended The College of William & Mary. That lasted three whole semesters until she transferred to Furman.

They laugh at memories like Jean having to overcome struggles with PE in order to graduate with an art degree, as well as Ann’s still-wounded pride at John Crabtree’s stinging critique of her early writing.

Jean went on to earn a master’s degree, but after years as a vocational expert in court what she learned from art professors Tom Flowers, Glen Howington and Jim Lawless has helped her burgeoning second career as a costume designer. Ann, meanwhile, took advantage of Furman’s individualized curriculum program to earn a diploma in history, German and political science. And she credits Bill Lavery’s ability to make history come alive with riveting stories for her lifelong interest in the field.

Ann also met Fred Waigand ’75, a physics major, whom she later married in the family’s Abbeville house.

Abbeville and Furman are two powerful bonds holding the three together, but there’s yet another that could be the strongest of all: All three are breast cancer survivors.

“As Mama says, we did it backwards: I was diagnosed stage 3 at the age of 37, (Jean) was diagnosed stage 2 at the age of 54, and she (May) was diagnosed stage 1 at the age of 85,” Ann says with a smile that masks how dire her own situation was. She was hospitalized five times and doubted her daughters would see her turn 40.

“Ann getting sick was the worst thing that ever happened to us,” May says, ignoring the fact that she and Jean battled the disease simultaneously. But, like Ann, they won. That’s a truly daunting task. Saving a church? Not so much for these women. Not now.

“I took a lot out of the pot when I was sick 26 years ago, and I’ve been doing my best to put back in,” Ann says. “The people in this church prayed for me when I had cancer, and that really meant a lot to me. And a lot of those same people are struggling to keep this church alive.”

“It’s important to do something,” Jean adds, and that something right now is helping a place they love. Emphasis on right now.

“Mama and I made an agreement when I turned 60 and she turned 90,” Jean says. “We shook hands, had a glass of wine, and said, ‘If you make a hundred I’ll make 70.’ And we’re almost halfway there.”