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**Large Questions in Small Places: Why Study
Mount Pleasant's Institutions**

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I borrowed my title from a Low Country friend and colleague, Charles Joyner. One of the greatest books on African Americans was Charles Joyner's Down By the Riverside. Dr. Joyner lived in Mount Pleasant as a young boy and was inspired to be a historian by Mrs. McIver, author of the 1960 History of Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. Dr. Joyner's work on slavery is a local study with broad regional--indeed national--significance. Speaking at an international conference in Myrtle Beach, Dr. Joyner talked about "Large Questions in Small Places," and his references to the importance of local history in establishing the larger historical framework is germane to the study of Mount Pleasant. Local history is an important aspect of the work we do as historians.

The community of Mount Pleasant is, in the words of Josephine Humphreys, "rich in love;" it is also rich in history and culture. Humphreys describes in Rich in Love the ways the past and present have come together in Mount Pleasant:

"Where I rode, the old zones of country, town, and city had run together. Originally we had the city of Charleston, the town of Mount Pleasant, and then the country, but now they were jumbled, haphazard as a frontier settlementIt was as if new places had been slapped down over the old ones, but some of the old was still showing through. I tried not to lose myself in those pockets. It could sometimes be too much

for me, a house at the edge of a field, the rim of pines, the smoke. It wrenched my heart. There was too much emotion for me in the country" (2-3).

My own scholarly work has focused on the study of one community. Researching for my book, In My Father's House Are Many Mansions: Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina, taught me something of the irony of history and how one cannot escape one's past. Indeed as I ate lunch yesterday, I looked out over Mount Pleasant's Shem Creek, and there conspicuously anchored was the ship, Miss Edgefield! Another irony involved the accidental discovery of my family roots. My mother and father moved to South Carolina from Georgia, but through researching my book I found that my father's family, the Burtons, came out of Edgefield before settling in Georgia.

This book was part of what many people called the new social history, but it was not really new. It relied a lot on data from census records like Dr. Coclans has used in his work on the South Carolina Low Country. I tried to focus on the process of history rather than on a particular event or place. I believe it is important to understand the history of ordinary folks, anonymous people like women, immigrants, and African Americans who were left out of traditional history books.

Social historians are sometimes criticized for doing nothing but filling in the details. This reminds me of a story. In Ninety Six, where my mother still lives, I was home, sitting on the porch with my neighbor Hilton, when a mutual friend came up. This

friend, Bubba, asked if we had heard about a recent murder. He reported, "It took place in Aiken, no Saluda, maybe McCormick. Well anyway, a guy shot this fellow, no maybe stabbed him, no I think he beat him to death with a tire iron. I can't quite remember, but I think it was on the weekend, no Thursday or maybe Friday." My friend Hilton responded, "Oh yeah, I did hear about that; I just didn't have the details 'til now." Clearly, details are important to understanding the large picture.

In my study of Southern history and culture, I have found many confusions about the South. Some people see the South as a land of unwilling people. African Americans did not want to come here. Sullivan's Island off of Mount Pleasant is seen as the Ellis Island for Africans who were brought here as slaves against their will. White Southerners tried to leave the United States, but it was a Kentucky Southerner who moved to Illinois (Abraham Lincoln) who stopped them.

A sense of mystery pervades the South; therefore, we need to bring the South down to a particular place to really understand what happened. There is this notion of the outsideness of the South, that it is outside of American history. The South is known as the great exception, with its peculiar quality of caste and clan, its isolation, its in-breeding, etc. There is the distorted image of the Southern politician, the bitterness of the Civil Rights Movement. Yet the region was also able, under difficult circumstances, to produce figures of literary rank, both black and white, and to retain gracious living and an aristocratic lifestyle.

All these things have combined in the popular image to make the South bigger than life in American culture.

The South is also full of contradictions. One of the earliest settled parts of the United States, the South remains one of the nation's last frontiers. With its deep love of land, the South has had, from the Civil War on, the highest proportion and the largest number of landless farmers. The justly renowned Southern gentleness is shadowed only by Southern violence; extravagant hospitality is combined with lynchings and riots.

An interesting example of these contrasts can be found by reading local newspapers. A February 23, 1887 column in the Charleston News and Courier entitled "Hilarity in Hungry Neck" described the gracious side of Southern life:

A seemingly enjoyable dance was given in Mt. Pleasant by a number of young ladies. The 6:15 boat from the city arrived carrying over several beaux and belles under the careful supervision of a chaperon. Upon arriving at the wharf, the visitors were met by the Berkeley delegation and driven around the village. After partaking of supper, the spacious hall was cleared and dancing commenced continuing until shortly after 3:00 a.m. The young ladies went to the homes of their friends while the men camped out in the hall. There was no sleeping, however, as the night was spent playing jokes, telling yarns, serenading, etc. All returned to the city yesterday morning, all having enjoyed the entire nights pleasure.

This is one description from 1887 of what Mount Pleasant was about. But a very different version of life in the town emerges if we read the January 1886 newspaper story of the death of L. P. Coleman. Mr. Coleman was a white male, 30 years old, a well respected merchant (he had taken over his father's insurance business) in Mt. Pleasant. He had lived in Charleston all his life. Apparently, an Italian who ran a bar room was beating his own wife, and the woman's brother went to Coleman and asked him to intervene. Mr. Coleman did and was shot for his courtesy. The bar owner then ran to a house nearby and shot himself. His wife escaped by running to the courthouse. This story reveals a far less gentle side of Mount Pleasant.

And there are more contradictions. The South is a region that prided itself on individuality, yet no region was so cursed with conformity. Of all sections of the United States, only the South rebelled in an open revolt and tried to leave the Union. But now the South is seen as super patriotic. While New England was founded on a great religious purpose, the South, certainly up to the Revolutionary Era, was the least religious section of the nation. Now it is perceived as the Bible Belt and the seat of religious fundamentalism. But if you look at the pop literature, this staid image is countered by licentious scenes from Gone With the Wind, the Streetcar Named Desire, Tobacco Road, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, and Rich in Love, all taking place in the South, and even right here in Mt. Pleasant.

A difference between the South and other parts of the country has to do with the ethnic make up of its population. The South received a much less diverse influx of immigrants. Yet here, too, are contradictions. Despite its relatively few immigrants, the South is a region where ethnic polarity has been most noted throughout our history. Historians can grapple with these contradictions more easily on a local level.

To understand the South we must understand the history of blacks as well as whites. All the work in black history in the last 20 to 30 years has demonstrated that African Americans had a tremendous influence on the culture of the South. One sees this in the language of the South, smells it in the food, and hears it in the music, be it hillbilly, plantation work songs, black gospel, rhythm and blues, soul music, or rock and roll. The Beatles, for instance, borrowed heavily from Elvis, who was influenced by Bo Diddly and Chuck Berry.

A local history in the South must be a history of the interaction of blacks and whites. The oldest history books told about great white men. More recently, books were written about the great black men of the South, and then on Southern women. Instead we need a history of all the people; this includes the interactions among classes, races, and sexes.

Most people do not realize that early on South Carolina had a tri-racial society, consisting of whites, blacks, and American Indians, and all these groups contributed to the development of Mount Pleasant's institutions. Although Africans were brought to

South Carolina as slaves, they were also people who made incredible contributions to our Southern institutions. Africans knew how to grow rice; they were brought here because of their knowledge of rice culture, and their knowledge and labor helped to establish rice as Carolina's "gold." Basket weaving is another example of an African contribution to the Low Country. In the antebellum period, it was the men who made the big baskets, but now that has changed and it is the women who pass the art from generation to generation. Mount Pleasant is a center of this great national folk art tradition that must be studied and preserved.

Local studies can often reveal new versions of historical events. I thought I knew a lot about the Civil War until I looked very closely at a work by James Chester who had been an Union Officer at Fort Sumter. In an 1894 book about Union officers, Chester wrote:

"Promptly at 4:30, a flash of a distant lightning in the direction of Mt. Pleasant followed by the dull roar of the mortar, told us the bombardment had begun. The eyes of the watchers easily detected and followed the burning fuse.....until it landed inside the fort and burst. It was a capital shot and then the batteries opened on all sides and shots and shells went screaming over Sumter as if an army of devils were sweeping around it."

So, some people claim that Mount Pleasant fired the first shot of the Civil War.

Mount Pleasant has a number of useful sources for studying its local history. Dr. Anne King Gregory's "Notes of the Seewee Indians" (1925), for example, looks at Native Americans, and the Mount Pleasant museum has artifacts dated back to 2,000 BC. Other useful sources for studying Mount Pleasant's institutions are the former slave narratives which contain information not only of former slaves but also of people stationed in the Mount Pleasant area at the time. "Everybody in the Town of Mt. Pleasant, Christ Church Parish ... knows 'Tena White, the washer,' 'Tena, the cook,' 'Maum Tena,' or 'Da Tena the nurse,'" one WPA interviewer wrote. From these excerpts we can see the different ways Tena was known in the community and the varied roles she played. The narratives reveal much about the social structure in the black community. "The house where Tina lives is the second in the row of negro houses." From the narratives you also get the sense of the segregation that was part of the South in the 1930s. This was to a large extent different from slavery times.

The narratives complement census records in providing information about family residence patterns. "My people belonged to Mr. William Venning. The plantation was Remley Point....I stayin' here with my youngest sister chile-youngest son. He got seven head of chillun." In other words, Tena was staying with her nephew. How were old folks cared for in the 1930s by this black family? "[W]hen I look an see my flesh, I tenk de Lord for ebbery year what pass on my head. Taint my goodness, tis His goodness...Nothing but the purest of heart...."

Religion was very important in the lives of African Americans, slaves and free. Whereas many whites used religion as a form of social control, for many African Americans it was liberating. In my book on Edgefield, I discuss a folklore tradition that God was black: "Only man did God make in his own image, that is black and it was only when man sinned and God came into the garden and caught him that he turned white in fright for his sin." This story exemplifies how people use religion as a way to survive in difficult circumstances. Blacks were being told that they were not worthwhile, but some were able to turn color imagery on its head and achieve a sense of inherent goodness.

A valuable source when studying local history is the local newspaper. Another source is other cities' newspapers. The difference between the way a story is covered in the Charleston paper, the Columbia paper, and the local paper can demonstrate something about the community. Local newspaper accounts of violence support the historical view of the South as a violent region. It is said that a Southerner will be polite to you up to the very moment he gets mad enough to kill you. Homicide in the South is greater than suicide, while suicide is much higher in the North. This difference is probably connected with modernization. I joke with my students in central Illinois that if they are depressed and worried about themselves, they can go South and take it out on someone else or go North and take it out on themselves.

Newspaper accounts suggest that racial relations in Mount Pleasant, although not perfect, were probably better than those

elsewhere in the South. An 1883 article in the News and Courier on Mount Pleasant, then the new county seat of Berkeley County, noted that "For the first time in a quarter century, the historic Town of Mt. Pleasant enjoyed something like a boom ...[and] a great many improvements are in progress." At the end of the article, the correspondent listed the names of the city government and the last three listed were "colored." Mount Pleasant had an integrated city government, well before the Voting Rights Act. The town also had a black police officer who was well respected by whites and blacks in the community.

Photographs are another valuable source of institutional history. The South Caroliniana Library in Columbia has recently acquired the collection of Abby Monroe. Monroe was a Northern woman who had been the second principal of Laing School, the school for black children established during Reconstruction by the Friends' Association for Aid and Elevation of Freedmen. Ms. Monroe's papers and photographs describe with some detail the education of African Americans in postbellum South Carolina. The history of Laing school exemplifies black and white interactions and even different world views. Whereas whites in the American South loathed John Brown who had led the 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry hoping to instigate a great slave revolt, African-American children and their teachers at Laing school in Mount Pleasant celebrated Brown's birthday as a tribute to a martyred saint.

Another published collection of letters are by Cornelia Hancock, a teacher from New Jersey who moved to Mount Pleasant

after the war to help establish the Laing School. These letters provide an outsider's view of a town she described as a "secesh vilage" which had been "the summer residence of the Charleston Big Bugs." Hancock had been a nurse for the North during the war, and her perspective of white Southerners, particularly right after the war, was very unfavorable.

This story of the founding of Laing School varies with the perspective of the author; residents of Mount Pleasant disagreed over the division of the Common to build that school. All history should be comparative--Edgefield and Mt. Pleasant, Mt. Pleasant and Charleston; blacks and whites in Mt. Pleasant; poor farmers and merchants. A comparative approach shows different interpretations of the same situation, thereby getting a larger picture.

History is very complex, not easy to understand. I think history should be studied in its complexities; we cannot make good informed decisions if we do not know our history or if we oversimplify it. My generation has been forever plagued by this oversimplification. In the Civil Rights Movement, for instance, we totally glorified ourselves, ignoring our mistakes. In the history of the Vietnam War, we were so trapped by our own guilt that we totally rejected our heritage. This is true for blacks and whites alike. One has to learn to deal with history with its ambiguities and yet with compassion and to understand that people make mistakes and can learn by them. Local studies of whites and blacks and their interactions will improve our understanding of Mount Pleasant and the South.

As these examples illustrate, studies of small places can provide answers to many larger questions about Southern history and Southern institutions. Through our examination of communities such as Mount Pleasant, we can learn a lot about social patterns in South Carolina, the South, and the nation.