

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Winyah Indigo Society ©

One of the oldest and most esteemed societies in South Carolina is found here in Georgetown. Some of the Winyah Indigo Society's documentation may be lost in the mists of time, but we still know quite a bit of its history. An article in the Georgetown Times of June 12, 1952 reveals a good story.

"Practically all of the records of the Winyah Indigo Society were lost or destroyed at the close of the Civil War. The Academy building, with only a small number of volumes of what was once a very large and valuable library, are about all that is left of the property. 'As tradition hath it; the planters of Georgetown District about the year 1740, formed a Convivial Club, which met in the Town of Georgetown on the first Friday of each month, to talk over the latest news from London, which was never less than a month old, to hold high discourse over the growth and prosperity of the Indigo plant and to refresh the inner man, so keep up a proper pitch the endearing ties of social life by imbibing freely of the inevitable bowl of punch. The Old Oak Tavern which stood on Bay [Front] Street, not far from its intersection from Broad Street, was the place of the monthly re-union. The first Friday in May each year was the anniversary meeting, and on those occasions anecdotes and song added to the good cheer of the punch bowl, and many staid and solid old planters became as blue as the residium of the plant he cultivated. Indeed, tradition says, it always required great skill for these jolly old fellows to sit their prancing steeds after one of these anniversary festivals, for a spur in the head always equals two in the heel, and master and horse became so mobile and agile, that the ground and lofty tumbling was generally equal to a small sized circus.'

There was an initiation fee and the annual contribution from each member went to defray the expenses of the meeting. These were always paid in indigo. In those good old days, when there was not protective tariffs or license to sell poison under the euphonious names of bourbon and Summerdine, and no Maine Liquor Law to stop the trade in Wholesale beverages, the appetite did not grow upon what it fed on, and the brain did not reel under the maddening influence of narcotic, their peach and honey and genuine Old Rum rose to the height simply of genial gentlemen and liberal benefactors. And so it came to pass that about the year 1753, the exchequer became plethoric of gold, and the hearts of our founders overflowed with the milk of human kindness.

And, hence, it became the question of the hour, to what good purpose should they devote the surplus funds of the Society? As the tale runs the discussion was brief, pertinent and solid. At the close of it the presiding officer called on the members to fill their glasses, he wished to close the debate by a definite proposition: if it met with their approbation, each member would signify it by emptying his glass. After flowery preliminary remarks, he said, "I move, therefore, that the surplus funds in the Treasury be devoted to the establishment of an Independent Charity School for the poor." The meeting rose to its feet. The glasses were each turned down without soiling the linen, and the Winyah Indigo Society School was established.

The Act of Corporation was signed by B. Smith, speaker, in the council Chamber, May 21, 1757, the same being assented to by William Henry Littleton, governor.

Such was the origin of the Society whose school was and has been the school for all the country lying between Charleston and the North Carolina line for more than a hundred years. In its infancy it supplied the place of the primary school, high school, and a collegiate institute. The rich and poor alike drank from this fountain of knowledge, and the farmer, the planter, the mechanic, the artisan, the general of armies, and governors of the State, have lawyers, doctors, priests, senators, each looked back on the Winyah Indigo Society as the great source of education. Here, they began, here, they ended that disciplinary course which was their only preparations for the stern conflicts of life.

The Society received a royal charter from King Charles in the year 1743. Some other privileges have since been granted to it by the legislature of the State. Its constitution still contains the imprint of the wisdom of its founders. Few changes have been made to adapt it to the changed circumstances of the times. It lived through the rugged "times that tried men's souls", and came out of that contest with loyalty still clinging to the Royal Charter, and cherishing with the recollections of a favored child the good old laws and customs and practices of England, but yet unmindful of its new duties in its new relations to Carolina.

It has never suffered politics to enter its doors. In the wildest periods of political excitement, it has kept its gate undeviatingly fixed on its true, its only mission. But the Civil War came, and with that a disastrous result, which swept away the accumulation of more than a century. The Academy building was occupied by the military as long as the Town of Georgetown was garrisoned and the building and premises were very much abused by the soldiers. The best and most valuable in the library were appropriated and carried off, including Audubon's great work on Ornithology, which cannot be replaced except at enormous price. By dint of great effort, the members raised among themselves the money to repair the building and fences, and started the school again by charging a small tuition to aid in raising the salary of the preceptor.

The Academy was continued, under the single School Master system, until about 1885 when the graded school system was established, the same receiving the patronage of the Winyah Indigo Society, was represented on the Board of Trustees by a majority membership. This continued for a number of years, almost up to the time when the modern school building, known as the Winyah Graded School building was erected in 1908. At present, under force of circumstances, the old Society finds itself separated from its former missions, and only contributes in a general and indirect way in the cause of education in this section. The Academy building was thoroughly renovated and the interior modernized and handsomely improved by 1933. One room was reserved for the ancient library, The Georgetown County Library occupied another room, another for an amusement and banquet hall and either of these rooms have been freely given for the use of various civic enterprises and organizations.