



Jordan Fisher Smith

September 26, 2007

Dr. Benjamin B. Dunlap
President
Wofford College
429 North Church Street
Spartanburg, SC 29303

Dear Dr. Dunlap:

I am a writer of nonfiction in the field of nature and the environment. In June, on the invitation of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, I traveled to Spartanburg to speak on a couple of panels at the Association's conference, held at Wofford College. I was so very impressed by the stately, verdant, and well-cared-for campus.

One afternoon I had a few hours off and I asked John Lane whether he might direct me to a place nearby where I could see something wild, or something old, so I could really see what this part of South Carolina was. John hooked me up with B.G. Stephens, who was generous enough to give me and a fellow author an in-depth walking tour of Glendale. That's what I'm writing you about.

I should tell you that I have something of a fascination with history, not as a historian, but in a nature writer's sort of way. When I first started reading history it interested me to know the trajectory that left humanity so crossed up with nature by the time of my arrival on earth. Later, as can happen with the study of anything, my agenda fell away and I came to love history for its own sake. I also take an interest in the future, in a father's sort of way.

In my opinion, one of the things that most threatens our future in this country is a sort of culture-wide amnesia about what and who were here before us, and what was learned, and in what ways the people in the graveyards failed or succeeded. This amnesia is reflected in the increasingly homogeneous nature of our built environment, so that my room at the Spartanburg Marriot I could have been anywhere, and with the exception of the climate, the same was true outside on the street. As Spartanburg makes the transition from an industrial economy to an information/service one, frankly, parts of it look little different from California.

But from the minute I parked my car, shook hands with B.G., and walked across the iron bridge over the shoals of the Lawson's Fork, I was transported in time, yet firmly fixed in place in a way I hadn't been in town. There it all was: The mill, sited by the river for its original water power, the low-head dam, the advent of steam, the company town—small houses for workers, big ones for mill managers, the company store, church and graveyard on the hilltop. And all around us, all the native vegetation, stone, bird songs, and aquatic life increasingly missing in the suburbs nearby and so exotically different from where I live, out west. B.G. showed me a map of the cotton mills up and downstream and old photos of mill-town baseball teams. In a couple of hours I saw in the most compelling way the immense engine of wealth creation and social organization that made South Carolina what it is or was, up until the near present.

As we walked and B.G. Stephens told me what I was seeing, I became aware of something I have known for a while, but only recently put into words. All over the country, up until only recently, things like Glendale have survived by accident or by virtue of the sluggish economies and a low rate of change. But that's over, and with it goes the clear line between town and countryside, to be replaced, as it is around Spartanburg, by miles of low-density suburbs with a striking homogeneity.

I left Glendale with reluctance, late that afternoon. I had a book signing to attend back at the College. Now when I think about South Carolina, I don't remember the airport—I've been through several small ones since then and I can't distinguish it from them anymore than I can the Spartanburg Marriot, which I am now confusing with two others I have stayed in since. What I do remember is the verdant and stately Wofford campus and especially, Glendale, which I now understand as part of the campus. It's like the best instructional movie of South Carolina history, geology, vegetation, limnology, engineering, architecture, and dozens of other subspecialties; but it's one I could walk into, smell, hear the water in the river, and feel the bricks and the headstones under my fingers. You must be thrilled to be setting out on this project. What you are doing there is a potential showpiece in education.

And one more thing: I remember the graciousness and generosity I have come to associate with South Carolina, as embodied in B.G. Stephens and John Lane.

Sincerely,

Jordan Fisher Smith
Author