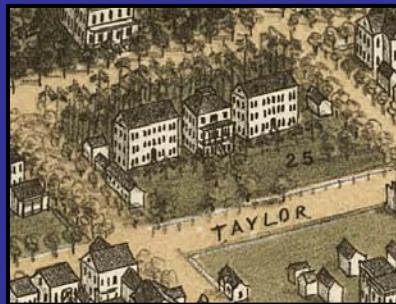




A Landmark in Preservation

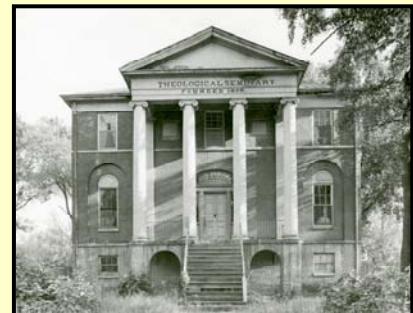


The Columbia Theological Seminary was a prominent feature of C. Drie's 1872 Birdseye Map of Columbia.
Image courtesy of Library of Congress

The Robert Mills House has held different meanings for generations of Columbians and visitors to the capital city. Intended as a private residence by renowned architect Robert Mills (1781-1852), this three-story classical revival mansion has been put to only public uses. Mills, known mainly for his public work projects, designed very few private homes. Following the untimely death of the property's original owner, Ainsley Hall, in 1823, this site served as the campus for various religious institutions, including the Columbia Theological Seminary, for over a century.

Historic Columbia Foundation was founded in 1961 to save what was then known as the "Ainsley Hall House" from demolition. Following extensive restoration, the property opened in 1967 as the city's second historic house museum.

Later renamed for its designer, the Robert Mills House is recognized as one of only five National Historic Landmarks associated with the country's first federal architect.



By 1962, only the property's historic main building remained and the four-acre tract was for sale to potential developers.

Historic Columbia Foundation Collection

By 1960, Mills' architectural gem was destined for destruction.

Historic Columbia Foundation collection

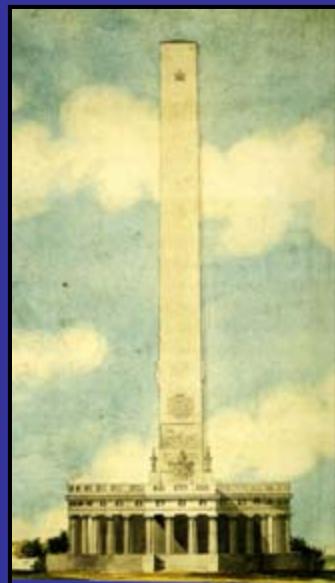


A Figure of National Prominence



*Robert Mills and wife, Eliza,
circa-1850.*

Image courtesy of South Carolina
Historical Society



*Mills' original sketch for the
Washington Monument.*

Image courtesy of National Archives
and Records Administration

Robert Mills (1781-1852), a native of Charleston, South Carolina, studied at Charleston College before moving to Washington, D.C. in 1800. There, he met Thomas Jefferson, who shared his architectural library at Monticello with the young man and introduced him to James Hoban, Charles Bulfinch, and Benjamin Latrobe, all of whom would influence Mills' work.

In 1836, Mills was promoted to Federal Architect and Engineer, an appointment which would encompass the final phase of his career. Mills designed numerous custom houses, hospitals, the United States Treasury Building, and the United States Patent Office. Despite extensive work on plans for the Washington Monument, Mills did not live to see the completion of what today is one the most popular and visible attractions in Washington, D.C.



United States Treasury Building.
Image courtesy of National Archives and Records
Administration.



Robert Mills in Columbia

In 1823, Mills began work on this residence for Ainsley and Sarah Hall. The most documented of Mills' private ventures, this residential structure resembles the architectural designs of some of his institutional buildings.

In Columbia, Mills designed monuments as well as institutional buildings. His Egyptian Revival style obelisk honoring Jonathan Maxcy, the first president of South Carolina College, has graced the Horseshoe of the University of South Carolina since 1827. A greater contribution to the college's campus came in 1837 with Mills' design of the institution's library, which today houses the South Caroliniana Library. This building is celebrated as the first free-standing college library in the country.

While Robert Mills found success in Washington and other large cities, he also made a lasting mark on Columbia. One of Mills' greatest achievements was the design of the South Carolina Asylum. Completed in 1828, this landmark featured a revolutionary plan that incorporated an enlightened approach to the treatment of mental health patients.

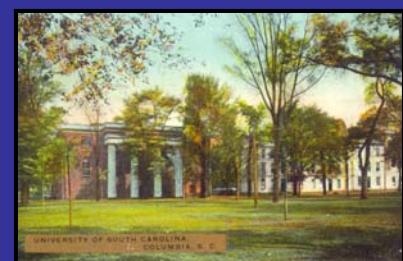


Main Building, South Carolina Asylum, as it appeared circa-1905.

Historic Columbia Foundation Collection



Maxcy Monument, USC Horseshoe.
Historic Columbia Foundation Collection

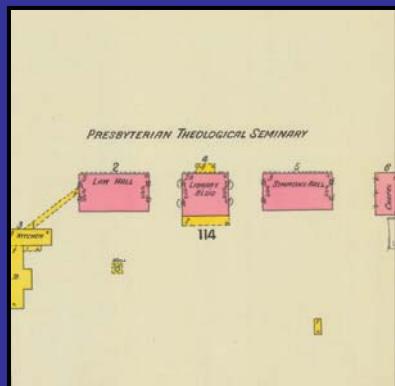


South Caroliniana Library, as it appeared circa-1908.

Historic Columbia Foundation Collection



The House Becomes a Holy Home

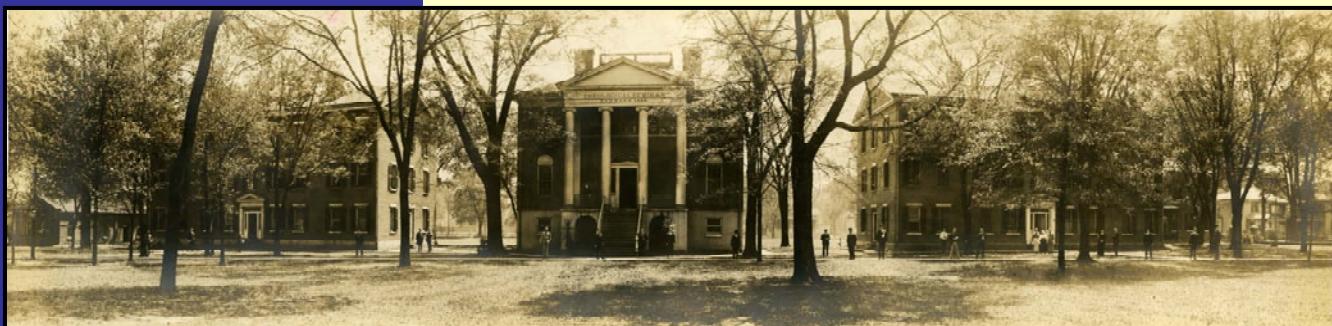


The 1898 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map depicts in detail the campus of the former theological seminary. In the middle stands today's Robert Mills House.

South Caroliniana Library Collection

After Ainsley Hall's death, his wife Sarah Hall was forced to sell the couple's unfinished house to the Presbyterian Synod of South Carolina and Georgia. Following the completion of the main house, classes began by January 1831.

Students quickly learned to be flexible to the ever-changing use of buildings, as enrollment often exceeded the capacity of the structures. Students lived in the east and west flanker dormitories, Law and Simons Hall, constructed in the 1850s, as well as the main house, which doubled as a library and chapel. In 1861, the chapel was moved into the carriage house where students were reminded of the biblical significance of the stable. By the late 19th century, Columbia was no longer the geographic center of the southern synods, and in 1927, the Seminary moved to Decatur, Georgia, where it operates today.



Columbia Theological Seminary, north view, circa-1920.
Historic Columbia Foundation Collection



Student Life at the Seminary



Students enjoy an oyster dinner, circa- 1890.
Historic Columbia Foundation Collection

Students' daily regimen included morning and evening prayer services combined with extensive theological studies such as Biblical Criticism and Sacred Rhetoric.

Students also participated in local politics and socialized with students at South Carolina College. During the Civil War, the seminary's student body formed a rifle company and held drills in the evening, while many seniors volunteered as chaplains. Though a majority of the students and faculty had strong ties to the North and opposed slavery, they nonetheless remained loyal to the Confederacy.



*Columbia Theological Seminary
Class of 1883, on north side of campus.*
Historic Columbia Foundation Collection



Dining Hall, circa-1914.
Historic Columbia Foundation Collection



Other Institutions Make Their Mark



Male students attending Westervelt School play volleyball on the northwest corner of Hampton and Henderson Streets.



CBC Library in former Theological Seminary dining hall, 1943.



McQuilkin and CBC students.

The Westervelt Home, established by Josephine Hope Westervelt in the late 1920s, operated as a Christian school for children of American missionaries. The school settled in Columbia in 1930 and occupied the Hampton-Preston Mansion. In 1934, Westervelt became a boarding school and expanded its complex to include the former theological property. The school remained on this site until 1937, when it was relocated to Batesburg, South Carolina.

In 1938, the Columbia Bible College (CBC) purchased the Robert Mills property to use as men's dormitories until the school moved to a site in north Columbia in 1958. Columbia Bible College, formally the Southern Bible Institute, was created as an interdenominational school to offer classes in "Bible study and personal evangelism." The school initially held classes in the Colonia Hotel on Hampton Street, currently the site of a modern office building for the University of South Carolina.



R.C. McQuilkin, founder of Columbia Bible College

Restoration of Property

Historic Columbia Foundation was formed in 1961 in an effort to raise the necessary \$450,000 to purchase the property from the Columbia Bible College. By this time, the site had become dilapidated and the college had acquired a demolition permit. The Foundation successfully solicited the help of 4,000 donors for a project that was initially deemed “near the bottom of everybody’s list of community needs.”

When restoration work began in 1963, those involved were dedicated to finishing the house as Robert Mills originally had intended. By studying nails, saw marks, and bricks, architects sought to leave the original construction materials intact. Ten coats of paint were removed to uncover the original wall surfaces.

Craftsmen recreated the grand front staircase to match Mills’ plans. Every effort was made to use materials that would have been available to workers when the house was built in the 1820s.



*Mills House South Porch,
pre-restoration.*

Historic Columbia Foundation Collection



*Mills House during restoration,
circa-1966.*

Historic Columbia Foundation Collection



*Porch of Mills House during
restoration.*

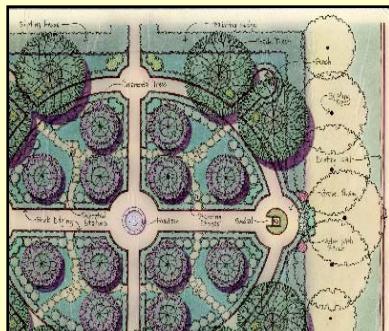
Historic Columbia Foundation Collection



Historic Frame, New Face

During the restoration of the Robert Mills House, preservationists envisioned a restored house with grounds featuring historically-inspired gardens.

Early plans included monuments and elaborate plantings. Today's landscape reflects a master plan by landscape architect Edward Pinckney. Highlights include the Founders Garden, which honors Historic Columbia Foundation's initial members and supporters, and both formal and naturalistic vistas.



Kellogg Firm drawing of garden plans, December 2003.

Historic Columbia Foundation Collection

The centerpiece to this landmark property is the Robert Mills House, whose period rooms and focus galleries interpret 19th-century decorative arts.



Robert Mills House restoration sketch.
Historic Columbia Foundation Collection



Robert Mills Gardens, pre-restoration.
Historic Columbia Foundation Collection