



## S.C. Hall of Fame Transcript

### *Robert Mills*

(Who was Robert Mills?)

Robert Mills was born in SC in 1781 and became the first native born American to study specifically in a career in Architecture. He went on to build buildings from New Orleans, to Newberry Port Mass. He was the first Architect for the Federal Government and the creator of the Washington Monument in Washington DC.

(How did he get into Architecture? Where did he study?)

Mills father was a tailor in Charleston, lost money and social status during the revolution, and as a result, Mills wasn't – mills started life with no capital.

At that time Architecture was not an organized profession, but it was something that Mills and his family and his neighbors thought was needed.

Mills went to Washington DC just before he was 20 to study under James Hoban, who was building the White House which he had designed, and the US Capital, which he had not designed.

He was an apprentice to Hoban and there he met Thomas Jefferson in Washington, and Jefferson had a lifelong interest in Architecture and took young Mills under his wing. And that really got Mills started.

Mills did drawings for Jefferson – drawings of Monticello – he didn't design Monticello, but he did drawings, and when the construction of the white house came to an end and the work with Hoban came to an end, Jefferson placed Mills with Henry Latrobe as a draftsman and an apprentice and Latrobe was an Englishman who had immigrated to America and at that time was the best trained and most successful practitioner of Architecture in America.

Mills stayed with Latrobe for 4 years and then went out on his own.



There were no schools in Architecture during Mills lifetime – the first Architectural classes were taught at a university level in America just after the civil war at MIT. So no, Mills did not go to school, he did hands on work and he read widely.

Mills major theme – his major idea was permanence. Mills believed that if you spent money on Architecture, you had a moral obligation to keep people safe and to protect not just them physically, but to protect the investment for generations. So Mills made a reputation very quickly for fireproof construction.

Mills turned to historical sources and used Roman techniques of Masonry vaulting, that is not using structural wood in his designs – this made his designs more stable and more permanent but also more expensive than what was traditional wood and construction at the time.

For Mills and designers of his time, looked back on democratic Greece and Republican Rome as the origins of American political and moral philosophy. And the Architecture would be a stage set if you will that we would all play appropriate democratic part.

He believed that architecture told a story and influenced us – that we shape our buildings and then our buildings shape us.

He always did residential architecture but it was a sideline. His first major public work was the Washington monument in Baltimore – not the Washington Nat'l monument in the nation's capital, but a monument in Baltimore built in 1814 right after the war of 1812. It was the first major monument to George Washington.

During Mills lifetime the Arch. Profession was not organized and Mills had a difficult time finding work. There were only 2 periods in his career when he had stable employment or a check coming in so to speak –

the first period was in 1819 he was hired by the state of SC to help build the canals and courthouses and jails throughout the state to help develop the upstate. That job lasted from about 1819-1823 when cost overruns for the Asylum and a recession caused the state to let him go.

He remained in the state of SC until 1830 and did build courthouses and jails throughout the state, but he did those on a building by building basis, and had a very difficult time putting together a living.



Then in 1830, Andrew Jackson is elected president, and Mills – Jackson was a South Carolinian and a democrat like Mills and Mills went to Washington and very quickly found himself part of the Jackson administration. And – so the 2nd period when he has a steady income, is when he works as architect to the Federal Govt. and he does that from the early 1830's to the next 10 or 15 years.

one thing Mills is famous for is his writing. He published over 2000 pages of prose – one of his first big books was the Atlas of SC.

In addition to the atlas – the first systematic mapping of any state in the US, Mills immediately published an 800 page book called the statistics of SC in which he describes verbally the things that are shown visibly on the maps – that is he describes the mineral resources and the cultural resources and the agricultural resources of each county, district and town in the state.

I think Mills was successful in giving a concrete form, that is an architectural form to his and Jefferson and others idea that public buildings should be an appropriate expression of public purpose.

For example. Mills built the first Marble Building in Washington, and today, Washington is a city of Marble buildings. Temples of democracy if you will. Mills designed and superintended the US Treasury office which is still in use by the treasure dept. He designed and constructed most of the US patent Office – a building that is still in use although it's in use as a museum – a memorial. Mills designed and super'ed the construction of the Washington National Monument.

Thomas Jefferson observed – that each generation tear down 25% of what they've built, and he commented that this was a terrible waste from any point of view. It was a waste of labor, it was a waste of materials, it was a waste of energy and of course Mills as his student came to believe exactly the same thing. And they both believed that all social investments should be permanent long-lasting investments. They didn't live in a time where technologies and buildings and people shifted the way they do today.

Like any person who makes significant achievements, Mills was multi-faceted.

He had a wonderful career as a writer – published more than 2000 pages, he traveled extensively, he had a wonderful family life, a committed marriage and children



He was persistent he worked very hard in the context or in the setting of a chaotic professional – a lack of professional structure and he adhered to his ideals even when others around him insisted he change the way he was doing things he did not. He didn't compromise his ideals.

The last few years of Mills life are rather sad. The political situation had changed, he lost his influence in the Federal Govt., he proposed additions to the US Capital as he's nearing 70 years old – the wings and the elevated dome that now stand – his proposals were adopted by others – they got the work, they got the credit, he got fired. He became ill in his early 70's, he's lying in his bed and his obituary said: Looking out of his window he could see the stump of his monument – the Washington National Monument- which was then unfinished – he could see the stump of his monument rising from the mud, became deranged, and died. He was buried in an unmarked grave in the congressional cemetery and the American Institute of Architects erected a monument to Robert Mills there in the 1930's. He died in 1851.