



S.C. Hall of Fame Transcript

William Gilmore Simms

William Gilmore Simms was born April 17, 1806 in Charleston, South Carolina. Born to a Scots-Irish family, his mother died when he was still an infant, and his father, facing economic difficulty, joined Coffee's Indian Fighters, leaving Simms to be raised by his grandmother. Simms began to study law at the age of 18, however he quickly dropped this pursuit in order to become a writer. Simms had always had a love for poetry and literature; he wrote his first poems at the age of eight. In 1828, he began his career as a journalist and as the editor of the City Gazette. It was after the failure of this venture, that Simms began actively writing poems, short stories, and novels.

Many of Simms's early works focused on the pre-colonial and colonial history of the South. The sentiments of the American Revolution were very important to Simms. For example, he greatly admired the founders' desire to build a new nation distinctly different England and the rest of Europe. Many of Simms's works focus on South Carolina's role in the American Revolution, including *The Partisan* in 1835, and *Katherine Walton* in 1851.

Borrowing from those themes from the American Revolution, Simms sought to create a Southern identity and culture that was markedly different from the rest of America. Having spent time on the western frontier with his father, Simms embraced the idea of Manifest Destiny and admired the many developments occurring along the nation's border. On the frontier, Simms spent much time among the Native Americans. From these experiences, Simms wrote some of the most accurate portrayals of the Native Americans during his time. Although Simms had great respect for the Native Americans, he supported Indian Removal because he felt it benefitted the greater good of the American people.

In an effort to build a vibrant image of the South in his works, Simms often wrote in dialect. He was one of the first authors to do so, but this style was picked up by other authors and made famous, most notably by Mark Twain.

Simms was also a member of the Young America movement. This patriotic movement was led by many famous authors, artists, and politicians and advocated the rise of a great American



state and its expansion westward. Another prominent member of Young America was Walt Whitman.

Later as the Nullification Crisis raged and the Civil War drew near, Simms wrote adamantly in favor of slavery and Southern rights. Simms was enraged by Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and in response wrote his own pro-slavery novel *The Sword and the Distaff* a few months later.

It was these controversial views that lost Simms his readers and supporters in the North. When Sherman's troops marched through South Carolina, Simms fled his home and took refuge in Columbia, however his beloved family estate *The Woodlands* in Bamberg, was burned to the ground. The details of the fire are unclear: many historians blame the Union troops for burning *Woodlands*, however at the time one of Simms's slaves was accused of starting the fire. Simms, however, defended his slave and refused to believe he started the fire.

After the Civil War, Simms saw his popularity decline sharply. This was partly due to his loss of Northern supporters but also because the style of literature had changed. Simms wrote of an ever-evolving, dynamic South, whereas post-Civil War authors portrayed the South as a land frozen in time, whose glory had been destroyed during the war, much like the South of Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. Consequently Simms fell out of readership and study, and only recently have scholars revisited his work.