

THE SOUTH CAROLINA ACADEMY OF AUTHORS: A BRIEF HISTORY



In 1903 the internationally known writer, translator, and critic Ludwig Lewisohn (1882-1955), born in Germany but reared in Charleston, wrote that more people “cared for pure literature [in South Carolina], and cared for it more sincerely, than in any other province.” Eighty-three years later there existed among some South Carolinians the sense that the state’s outstanding writers were not being sufficiently recognized for their work. English professor Paul Talmadge, who also served as vice president and academic dean at (then) Anderson College, had the idea that the establishment of a literary hall of fame within the state might help to redress this situation.

The result was the founding of the South Carolina Academy of Authors in the spring of 1986. In a promotional leaflet he later wrote, Talmadge claimed that the Academy was “the state’s first organization specifically to recognize the authors of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and drama.” He further maintained that showcasing the state’s authors would “encourage and inspire the literary arts” and serve “to increase the reading of their works by the general public and perhaps the rediscovery of the works of those recognized posthumously.”

The board of governors held its initial meeting on April 19, 1986, at Anderson College. In his leaflet Talmadge listed the founding board members: William W. Starr, Columbia, chairman; Francis W. Bonner, Greenville; Emma Lee Holman, Anderson; Steven Lewis, Columbia; Charleen Swansea, Sullivan’s Island; Eleanora Tate, Myrtle Beach; and Frances Mims, Anderson, secretary. Talmadge described the board as a self-perpetuating body comprised of scholars and professional persons in South Carolina whose knowledge of literature and of writers qualified them to name each year those authors, living or deceased, whose literary accomplishments warranted their induction into the Academy. In addition to Starr, these persons have chaired the board at various times through the years: Mary Crow Anderson, Elizabeth D. Bernardin, Wayne Cox, Stephen L. Gardner, Andrew Graves, Thomas L. Johnson, Steven Lewis, Quitman Marshall, and Frances Mims. From 2010 through 2018, Dr. Tom Mack, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of USC-Aiken, served as chair.

South Carolina Academy of Authors Founding Members

Paul Talmadge, Anderson
Francis W. Bonner, Greenville
Emma Lee Holman, Anderson
Steven Lewis, Columbia
Francis Mims, Anderson
William Starr, Columbia
Charleen Swansea, Sullivan’s Island
Eleanora Tate, Myrtle Beach

Poet and novelist James Dickey was unanimously chosen as the first Academy honoree in 1986 and was inducted, along with posthumous honorees William Gilmore Simms and Julia Peterkin, in ceremonies held in the dining hall of Anderson College on the evening of June 28. The following year Louis D. Rubin, Jr., was the living inductee; Mary Boykin Chesnut and DuBose Heyward, the posthumous ones. That 1987 induction was the last to be held in Anderson until 2016. In 1988 Pat Conroy and the late Josephine Pinckney were inducted in Charleston. By 1989 the College of Charleston had assumed the role as sponsor of the Academy, with financial and logistical support provided by its Foundation and

administered through the office of the vice president for academic affairs, who at that time was Professor Conrad D. Festa. During the College of Charleston years, the Academy achieved its status as a registered nonprofit corporation (May, 1992) and usually held its annual induction banquets on campus.

When the college's sponsorship ended in 1999, the Academy began holding its induction events in various cities around South Carolina—in Columbia, Greenville, Spartanburg, Aiken, Conway, Florence, Beaufort — thus virtually making the organization a statewide one. In addition, since 2010, the Academy has increased its public profile by the establishment of an online presence (not only an educational website but also a Facebook page).

The Academy has always emphasized its educational mission as the primary one. Early on, Paul Talmadge registered his belief that the work of the Academy in honoring the state's outstanding authors should not only educate the general reading public but also "encourage youthful writers to develop their talents." Thus, with the mandate of assisting emerging writers, the board in 1988 voted to award a one-year literary fellowship to any writer who had lived in South Carolina for at least six months and had published no more than one book of poetry or creative prose. That year Columbia poet Paula Goff became the first recipient of a fellowship and received an unrestricted cash award of \$1600. Since 1988, the Academy has provided numerous literary fellowships, worth many thousands of dollars, to emerging writers of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and drama. These have been funded through both public and private sources. For many years the Academy has received grant monies for this initiative from the South Carolina Arts Commission (which receives support from the National Endowment for the Arts), working closely with the Commission's Literary Arts directors— first with Steve Lewis and later with Sara June Goldstein. In 2017, for example, the Academy awarded \$3000 to new or emerging writers of poetry and fiction through its Carrie McCray Nickens and Elizabeth Boatwright Coker fellowships, respectively. Indicative of the success of the program is the fact that three early fellowship recipients have gone on to receive national and international acclaim as authors, and themselves have recently been inducted into the Academy: Sue Monk Kidd, Ron Rash, and George Singleton.

Since 2010, the Academy has also expanded its annual programming to encompass a full weekend of induction events in each host city. The traditional induction ceremony remains the highlight of each weekend, but that event is now accompanied by public readings and other special events focused on each year's honorees. The 2017 induction in Beaufort, for example, featured the screening of a film based on a novel by Valerie Sayers and staged "conversations" with both Nathalie Dupree and Mary Alice Monroe, all three inductees for that year.

Since 2017, the Academy has also partnered with other statewide entities to sponsor the American Library Association Literary Landmark program in our state. In 2017, the Pat Conroy Center in Beaufort became the second ALA landmark in South Carolina; in 2018, the Benjamin Mays Site in Greenwood joined that distinguished roster.

All in all, the many initiatives of the South Carolina Academy of Authors serve to highlight our state's rich literary heritage and ensure its vibrant future.