



Sarah Leverette

*South Carolina lawyer,
teacher, mentor,
ground breaker*

Becci Robbins

Photo from the League of Women Voters archives taken about the time Sarah joined in 1950. "The accomplishments of the League are far greater than people realize," she said. "So much of the mission of making democracy work is major but not obvious in a sensation-seeking world."





Thank you

Brett Bursey

Steve Casey

John Crangle

Kyle Criminger

Herb Hartsook

Sarah Leverette

Ed Madden

Travis Medlock

Jimmie Monroe

Alex Sanders

Laurel Suggs

Lynn Teague

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Sarah Leverette objects to being called a pioneer (makes her think of covered wagons) or a trailblazer, because it implies an intention she never had. She didn't set out to make a point; she just wanted to practice law.

“I didn't feel like I was blazing any trails,” she said, “I felt it was just, right, moral, and the way it should be. I just did what came naturally, and I still can't figure out why that's such a big deal.”

But Sarah *is* a big deal. One of the first women admitted to the S.C. Bar, she graduated the only female in the University of South Carolina law school's class of 1942. She returned to her *alma mater* to work in the law library and teach, the first woman to gain faculty status there.

Sarah is a big deal to the women lawyers old enough to know that she helped pry open the door that allowed them passage into a staunchly exclusive men's club. And she should be a big deal to the women who now walk through that door without so much as a thank you or backward glance.

Now 96, Sarah has earned the admiration of some of South Carolina's most powerful movers and shakers, among them Alex Sanders, former chief judge of the state Court of Appeals and former president of the College of Charleston.

“When I was a student at the USC School of Law in the late 1950s and early '60s,” Sanders said, “Sarah Leverette was the law librarian and taught legal bibliography—among the more difficult courses and, in many ways, the most important.

“In those days, before the internet captured all law, the library housed the

content of every other course we were called upon to master. Students were expected to find the law there.

“At that time, the teaching method adopted universally by law school faculty was to visit an unrelenting reign of terror on the law students they were teaching. My fellow students and I lived in perpetual fear of our teachers, who seemed determined to drive us out of the law as soon as possible. Incidentally, they succeeded well over half the time.

“Sarah Leverette was different. She was a learned scholar and wonderful teacher, equal to any other member of the faculty. Uniquely, however, she devoted herself to our success, not our failure, in our studies and later in the practice of law. Beyond that, she was a very nice person, always available to help and encourage us, especially in times of despair.

“We ultimately came to respect and appreciate most of our teachers and even to understand their torturous teaching methods, but we loved Sarah Leverette. We loved her then—and we love her to this day.”

In 1917, two years before Sarah was born, suffragists paraded in New York City carrying placards with signatures of more than a million women seeking the right to vote.



“In all likelihood, Sarah Leverette has had more influence over twentieth century legal writing in South Carolina than any other person,” writes Ruth Cupp in *Portia Steps Up to the Bar: The First Women Lawyers of South Carolina*. “Sarah taught the course to every law student at the University of South Carolina for a quarter of the century.”

Former lawmaker and state attorney general Travis Medlock was one of those students. He met Sarah in 1956 when he entered law school.

He remembers her as “the only woman on a really magnificent faculty. Notwithstanding her gentle nature, she was a barrier breaker for women’s rights. She led with an iron fist in a velvet glove. She was a fantastic instructor who ranked at the highest level of professionalism as a law professor.”

Medlock was one of the Young Turks, a group

of upstart lawmakers in the 1960s and ’70s that, as the *The New Yorker* noted in 2002, included “the Rileys, who were not related: Joseph Riley, who led the revival of Charleston and became its seemingly

eternal mayor; and Richard Riley, who served as governor and then as Secretary of Education under Bill Clinton. [Alex] Sanders was a Young Turk, too: more flagrant than the others, perhaps, but always with a clear sense of where the borders of propriety lay.”

All of them had been Sarah’s students at the law school.

Former governor and U.S. senator Ernest “Fritz” Hollings thanks Sarah in the preface to his book *Making Government Work*. He recounts returning from overseas after three years of military service and pleading to gain entry into the law school in spite of being months behind his classmates.

Hollings was allowed in, and completed the three-year program in two years. He writes, “I’ll never forget Sarah Leverette, the librarian who came early every morning during the Christmas holidays and opened the law library so I could work.”

The two remain friends. So it is fitting that Sarah’s papers are



Some of Sarah’s students went on to shake up the State House as a group of lawmakers called the Young Turks in the 1960s and ’70s. The State ran this photo package on May 15, 1988, with a story recounting their influence on South Carolina politics.

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on file in the Ernest F. Hollings Political Collections at USC's Thomas Cooper Library. Her files fill 17 boxes. They include news clippings, cards and awards she's received, and dozens of handwritten speeches on yellow legal pads or recycled paper (on the back of one speech is a grocery shopping list). She never learned to type, as when she was coming up

that skill was only taught in secretarial schools. In her professional career, she always had assistants.

Her paper trail includes yet more stacks of papers, magazines, and whatnot that are piled in two rooms of her Columbia home. "I'm 96, and I never throw anything away," she explained. The

papers trace an ambitious career and a life just as busy and productive in her retirement, days filled with meetings, working lunches, phone calls and, when the legislature is in session, lobbying for the many causes she holds dear.

Sarah's pace is remarkable. Looking back, it appears she has never been idle,



Sarah (standing, 4th from left) poses with USC's law school faculty for the 1946-1947 yearbook. Dean Samuel Prince (front and center) states in a photo caption: "I have seen many faculty members of many good law schools, but if I were today charged with the duty of organizing a teaching staff for the

ultimate purpose of training young men to become real lawyers in the general practice, I would rather have these present associates than any other group." After he retired, the dean told a reporter that Sarah had one of the best legal minds he had ever encountered.

*Sarah's parents,
Stephen E. and
Allie McGee Leverette*



Sarah Leverette

modeling the example set by her parents, to whom she credits her work ethic and deeply held belief in community service.

Family Values

Entering the world on the eve of women's suffrage in America, Sarah was born the youngest of six children at home in the small Upstate town of Iva on Dec. 30, 1919, to Capt. Stephen and Allie McGee Leverette. Her uncle, an obstetrician, had been summoned to deliver her, but the 15-mile train ride from Anderson took longer than expected.

"By the time he got there I was already born," she said. "My uncle came in and I let out a yell—so they tell me—and he said, 'What in the name of the Lord is that?' He didn't know I was there."

She was born a year after her father returned from France, where he served in WWI until suffering a severe leg wound.



*Sarah's grandfather
John Baylis Leverette
was a Confederate war
veteran who served as
a magistrate and in the
S.C. House.*

After convalescing in Paris, he returned home to South Carolina. (See page 12 to read the compelling letter he wrote to his wife from the front lines.)

From the time he was a young boy, Sarah's father took to heart the call to military service. It led him to enroll in Patrick Military Institute in Anderson, which nurtured in him a sense of obligation to national duty.

He tried to sign up for WWII, which the local newspaper noted under the headline "Iva Veteran Of Two Wars Is Now 65 But Anxious To Serve." He was quoted saying, "I'm over the age limit, but the only way they can keep me out is to put me in jail—and I don't figure they'll do that."

He was still making news into his 80s, with the local paper calling him "Iva's leading citizen" and Anderson County's most active octogenarian. "He's retired

"My parents were true believers in equity, justice, fair play, and peaceful negotiation. The law represented to me a profession in which there was great latitude and opportunity to advance these values." — Sarah Leverette

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from more jobs than most men hold in a lifetime,” it reported, alongside a photo of Capt. Leverette wearing a suit and tie clipping the azaleas in his tidy yard.

The captain was a postmaster for many years, ran a general produce business, and



Stephen E. Leverette at age 21, a 1st Sergeant in the Spanish-American War

operated a cotton warehouse. He was a deacon in Iva’s Baptist Church and head of its Sunday School. Later in life, he got into the insurance business “to keep from loafing.” He was a member of the Lions Club, one-time commander of the American Legion, and a charter member of the Iva Masonic Lodge.

“He was very civic-minded and conscious of his responsibilities as a citizen,” Sarah said. “My mother was too. She was the one who took care of those who were ill, those who were hungry, people who were in need. I was reared in a family in which service to others was a primary concern.”

Sarah said everyone called her mother Miss Lady because she was the epitome of Southern womanhood. “She served her community, held beautiful dinner parties, loved to entertain, cooked lovely meals, had the preacher over every Sunday.”

Besides tending to six children, Miss Lady also worked in the family’s general store and boarded school teachers in their home, which was also occasionally the site of weddings



Allie McGee Leverette as a young bride

performed by Sarah’s father, a magistrate. “My mother would decorate for them, put wildflowers up around the house,” Sarah said. “I used to sit there and watch them get married.”

Bright and engaging, Sarah’s mother might have had professional aspirations



When the Graf Zeppelin came to America in 1933 for the World Fair in Chicago, 13-year-old Sarah got to ride in it, thanks to a cousin with connections in the gas business.

of her own had she been born a generation later but “that didn’t even occur to women back then,” Sarah said. Instead, Ms. Leverette supported her husband and their children, ensuring they were well fed, well loved, well mannered, and well educated.

“We all went to college,” Sarah said of her siblings. “Two came up during the Depression, so they could only go for two years; the rest completed four years.”

She credits her 6th grade teacher with being an important early influence.

“Miss Maggie Thompson was one of the strictest women I ever knew,” she said. “She didn’t put up with any foolishness, but when I thought about it later, she taught me the importance of a disciplined mind.”

Sarah was a serious student, a big reader, and a hard worker. “I remember coming home one time with my report card that had two ‘B’s on it and my father said, ‘What’s the matter, they don’t give ‘A’s?’”

Sarah was clearly a daddy’s girl, tagging along with him whenever she could. “I followed him everywhere he went,” she said. “I listened to him counseling people, and my conclusion in later years was that he was a better lawyer than I ever was even though he never went to law school. He was a mediator. He was able to get people out of trouble when they got into debt.

“I was interested in community things, but most of them involved men. I was active in the American Legion, and used to sell poppies on Poppy Day.” The flowers that dotted Flanders Field were worn to mark the end of WWI and the war’s fallen.

While her mother took great pride and care as a homemaker, domestic life never interested Sarah, who says she has trouble boiling water. “I wasn’t crazy about the kitchen. I was kind of a tomboy, and I guess that’s why I spent more time with my dad.”

He took her to her first political convention, a gathering of the state Democratic Party in Columbia, when she was a young child. She doesn’t remember much, just the excitement of it all. “I



The home in Iva where Sarah grew up

enjoyed it thoroughly. It was my first introduction to the political process.”

As a child she was athletic and competitive, running track and playing basketball in spite of her slight frame. (A “fraction under five feet,” she once asked USC women’s basketball legend Dawn Staley if she’d ever heard of a slide-center. The coach said she had not. “I said, ‘Well, I was a slide center because I was so short I could slide under the opponents.’”)

At USC she took up fencing, the last sport she would practice, not counting the failed attempt at golf in her later years. Now, the only time she picks up a club is when she needs to reach something on a high shelf or to steady herself. “I use my golf club for a cane occasionally. And if I need to, I can turn it upside down and use it for defence.”

Sarah lived a sheltered, happy childhood in Iva. “It was a wonderful place to grow up,” she said. “I could go into the country to play in the creek, to the pond to go swimming, could go to town and see a



The Leverette sisters: Sarah (left) Margie, Helen, and Evelyn

movie. I paid 11 cents for a Nehi and a hotdog.”

She remembers riding to the Anderson County Fair at age 5 or 6 in a car that, instead of regular windows, had flaps that buttoned down. She played in the family’s cotton warehouse, jumping on the bales bound for the town’s lifeblood, the textile mill.

“We had a good community,” she said. “We had mill people, town people, and

country people. We all went to school together and did the same things.” The lack of class division in her neighborhood gave her a perspective that informed her later work, and gave her an ability to relate to people different from herself.

Class was one thing, of course; race another. By law, Iva was racially segregated when Sarah was growing up, as was the rest of South Carolina. Sarah’s African-American neighbor children did not go to school. Instead, many of them worked on family farms. Though not classmates, they were playmates.

A black married couple lived in a house on her family’s property, and worked in the kitchen and garden. “That’s the way it was,” she said. “We just didn’t know any better.”

Sarah finds that sort of blindness to racial inequality glaring in hindsight. “It’s just amazing when you look back on the way it was—it was so unjust, but it was a way of life.”

As an adult, she came to understand just how deep and wide a wound South



Sarah's father sends harrowing news from the front lines of World War I

France, Aug'st 20. 1918

My Dear Wife and Babies:

After two and one-half months of hard fighting at the front, we have at last been moved back for a few weeks rest. We have been on the front continually since June 1st with an occasional rest of only a day or two, but always in range of the German guns. It is impossible to tell you what we passed through during the last big drive in which the Americans played such an important part, especially our regiment.

On July 16th the Germans sent over the greatest barrage of artillery fire in the history of the war, followed by an attack on our lines and succeeded in breaking through the lines held by the French. They crossed the [Marne] river, gaining a foot hold on our side. It was our regiment which checked this—the greatest drive of the war. We pushed them back across the river and drove them for about 25 miles. For this work our regimental flag is to be decorated with the Croix de Guerre, being the first American regiment in France to receive this honor.

Of course we suffered many casualties. I am the only officer left in our company, all others either killed or wounded. I have been in command of the company since July 22nd, when our captain was killed and have been recommended for a captaincy by our battalion commander.

While our losses were heavy, the enemy losses were much heavier. On either side of the river their dead were piled in heaps, while the river was full of floating bodies and ran red with their life blood.

I lost all my equipment, in fact everything I had. My only earthly possessions now are the clothes I have on. Guess you'll think I have no chance of losing them when I tell you that I haven't had them off in three weeks. I'm sure the kiddies will think "Daddy" is disgraced when they hear that I haven't had a bath in so long. I slept with my shoes off last night for the first time in 16 nights.

We don't mind small matters like this so long as the Huns are on the run—and we've certainly got 'em going. I was in the drive from start to finish and came through without a scratch. I can never

explain how I got through, unless it was by the prayers of you people back home. It's fierce to face German artillery, machine gun fire and gas, all of which we get in abundance, but rest assured the Americans have got the grit to stand it.

We are now 30 miles behind the lines, yet on July 22nd, the Germans were within 200 yards of where I am now writing. Although we were sent back here for a much needed rest. I have days of work ahead in straightening out company records as to killed, gassed, wounded, missing, etc., besides much other work I can't explain. In my exhausted condition, I am in bad shape to take up the task of mental work which awaits me.

In addition to my other work, I have to censor all letters. Some nights when I am so dead tired and have to read hundreds of letters, I come to the conclusion that every man in my company must have two or three wives and two or three sweethearts. Its a great pleasure—no matter how tired—to read the beautiful letters the boys write to their mothers, which shows the kind of stuff a fellow is made of. I also very often run across very nice things indeed they say about me whether or not they say these things just because they know I'll read the letters, I can't say, any way it looks good.

How I wish you people at home could see some of the battlefields of France. The desolation and destruction are awful. Also wish you could see some of the wonderful battles in the air. I have witnessed many.

Sometimes as many as ten and twelve machines are engaged in a battle and its a most thrilling and awe-inspiring sight to see the daring aviators make their dives and dips after one anothe[r]—their machine guns firing hundreds of shots a minute and each trying to get advantage of the other. You often see them shot to pieces and come crashing to earth.

The sector where we have been fighting has been one of open warfare altogether. Our front lines were only fifty to 100 yards from the enemy. We couldn't show our selves at all in the daytime as a rifle would pick us off, consequently our moving was all done at night. During the day we would crawl on our stomachs or stay in our little dugouts.

During a battle the big guns boom so loud it makes the little infantry rifles sound like popguns. They get to firing so fast its just one continual roar. Men can shout right in your ears, but you can't hear a sound. To sleep we would just lay down on the ground and roll up in our blankets.

When the big shells would explode near us it would turn us completely over. It is a most beautiful sight to be back among the big guns and see them open up on the Germans. You can see them fire, then see them hit on German soil and as they explode acres and acres of ground are literally torn up, to say nothing of the Huns.

This war is a great game and all the more fascinating because of the great danger. You soon become accustomed to the din and roar—and danger too. With shells falling all around me the other day, I actually caught myself singing that old son[g]; "I Love to Tell The Story."

Well the "half has not yet been told" but I must stop. Please say to the many friends who have written me such nice letters, that I have appreciated and enjoyed them more than I can say, but it's impossible for me to answer all of them now.

Much love to you and all the babies.

Ernest
First Lieut. Co. D, 38th Inft. 3rd Div.

(Edited for length. Read full letter online at USC's political collections' site [A Capital Blog](#).)

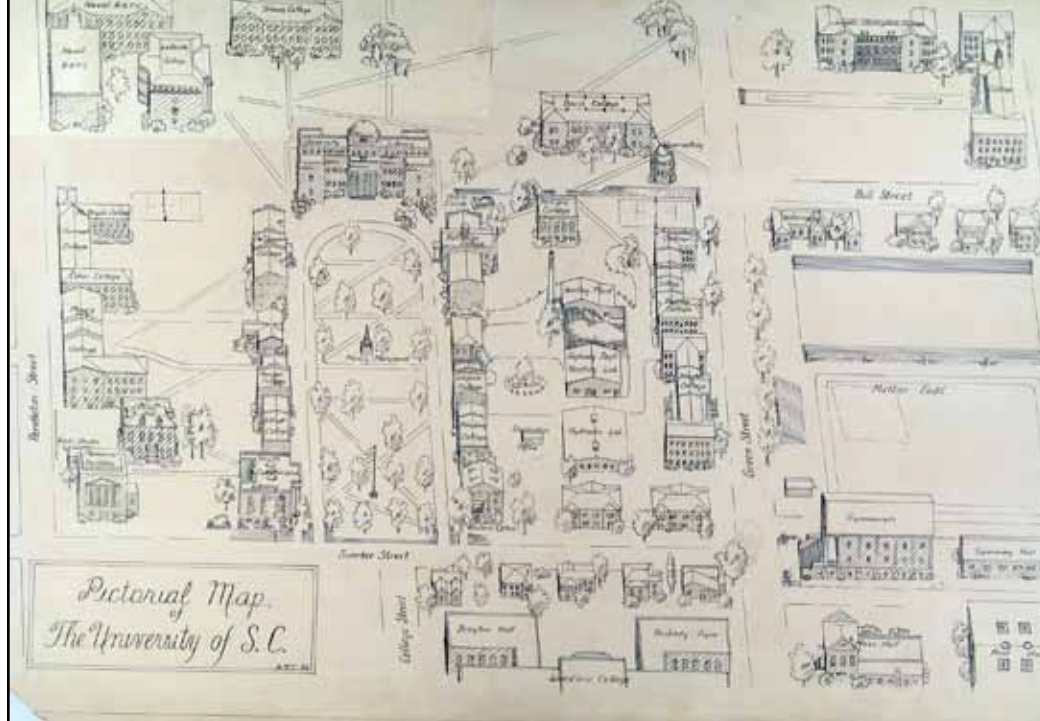
Carolina suffered, and suffers still, from the social consequences of its slave-owning past. “The race situation in this state,” she said, “the culture, the politics, it’s all so affected by race. It warped a lot of things.”

Small Town + Big Dreams = College Degrees

Education was very important in the Leverette house. “A degree was something my mother and father wanted to see us all get,” Sarah said. “They had the feeling that being reared in a small town you had to not only have a college education, but you had to get away from the smallness to where there were opportunities.”

After scouting schools with her parents, scholarship in hand, Sarah chose to go to Anderson College for her first two years. “I’m glad I went there,” she said. “They had small classes and great teachers. The foundation I got there was excellent.”

At first, she considered studying to become a doctor, but claims she wasn’t cut out for a career in medicine. “I did not have a mathematical or scientific mind. I’m sure there are people still living because I didn’t go into medicine,” she quipped.



Map of USC’s campus in 1942, the year Sarah graduated from law school

A high school report card shows that she took trigonometry and earned a ‘B,’ suggesting she might have excelled as a doctor. But it wasn’t her calling. Instead, she was drawn to the craft of language. “I liked to read,” she said. “I was interested in writing, I enjoyed expressing myself, and I realized that medicine was not for me.”

Aviation was another professional route not taken. Inspired by Amelia Earhart, the first woman to fly solo across the

Atlantic, Sarah wanted to learn how to fly. “I was pretty young in those days. That was all I thought about.” She tried to join the Air Force during WWII, “but I was too short and wore glasses. They were very particular in those days.”

Sarah did join the Civil Air Patrol, a stateside operation that watched the coastline and did rescue work. She quickly rose in the ranks, in spite of a weak stomach she discovered on her first flight. She has otherwise fond memories

of her service in the air. “We flew around and threw pamphlets out— war promotionals and bonds—all over South Carolina.”

After finishing two years of college in Anderson, Sarah moved to Columbia with the audacious intention of pursuing a law degree. She wasn’t angry or driven by a social agenda; she just wanted to study law and become an attorney.

Sarah arrived at the University of South Carolina in 1938 “short and skinny,” wearing high-wasted pinafores and saddle oxfords. A sophisticate she wasn’t. But she was smart and determined and knew, down deep, that she was exactly where she needed to be.

She soon discovered that she loved everything about law: the challenge of analysis and deliberation, the intensity and emotion in a court room, and the craft of language. “It taught me the importance of both oral and written expression,” she said. “The ability to look at a case and break it down is fascinating. The law is a live, constantly changing and fascinating picture of the complex world in which we live, a reflection of human thought and behavior.”

Sarah entered USC’s law school in 1940, along with three other women. Each



Sarah as a law school student

“**T**he women of the early 1900s and 1920s were not seeking the right to vote for selfish purposes, and women leaders of today are not seeking equity and rights from a selfish motive.

The impetus behind the move to seek equity in the marketplace, in government, and in all walks of life goes far deeper.

From the early days of the suffragettes to the present, women in the forefront of this struggle have always had as their goals the opportunity to make a better life for their family, and to make a better community, state and nation, and a better future for their children.

It is their innate and natural commitment to solving problems of health care, education, family unity, and a desire for peaceful solutions to conflict that give value to women’s participation in solving our social, cultural and political problems.

It is this ideal—achieving the balance that has motivated women leaders to seek full participation in all areas of society and government. You might call women the leavening in the bread of life.”

From one of Sarah’s many speeches

would drop out, leaving Sarah to graduate the only woman in a class of seven, so small because WWII had drafted all the able-bodied men.

A Little USC History

Like the state that founded it, USC was slow to get with the times. The university was founded as South Carolina College in 1801, but it would be nearly a century later, in 1894, that it would admit women. The first to break the gender barrier on campus were formerly enslaved women training to be teachers.

In 1897, USC’s law school grudgingly opened its doors to women. That year, USC President John Gary Evans reported to the General Assembly that 16 women had enrolled and that their average academic standing “is higher than their fellow students.”

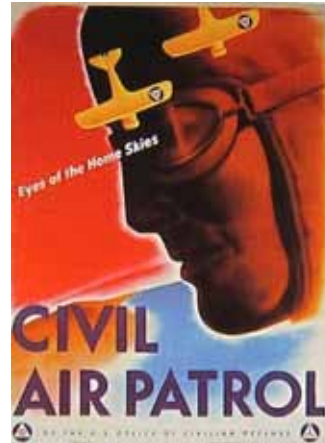
In spite of their performance, it was another 15 years before women law

students were granted their own lounge—in a former coal storage room.

Women trying to enter the legal profession were met with considerable consternation and fear-mongering. A 1912 annual report of the Georgia Bar Association, which ran a verbatim record of the symposium on admitting women to the state Bar, offers a glimpse of how the conversation played out down South.

“Have we no rights left?” Roland Ellis asked his fellow lawyers. “We have nigh come to pass where we are but the proud caretakers of poodles and submissive bearers of suffragette banners.

“The history of our male ancestors tells us of the times when we were vested with the right to imprison or decapitate unruly or recalcitrant spouses. We all know our rights were gradually yielded by enervated forbears, until it was permitted to chastise them only with a stick, and how finally it came to pass that



From a young age, Sarah was interested in aviation. Unable to volunteer for WWII because of her short stature and poor vision, she instead served in the Civil Air Patrol in South Carolina.

even that insufficient weapon should not exceed the thickness of a thumb.

“Women have invaded every field of men’s activity, and have made him their constant and unreasoning prey. They are taking away our ancient and immemorial right to manipulate the ballot box and control conventions.

“We must rally men—men of the Bar of Georgia. In this state, at least we have kept our profession as a refuge. It is an old and honored profession, and we constitute an ancient and respectable, though weakened sex.”

Four years after this passionate plea to deny women access, in 1916 Georgia began to admit women to the Bar. South Carolina followed suit two years later.

Claudia James Sullivan was the first female to graduate from the law school in 1918, and was the catalyst for the legislation that allowed women to practice law in South Carolina. Recounting her petition to attend, she wrote, “At a faculty meeting, the dean presented my application, and one rather grim looking professor asked me (and not too kindly) what gave me the idea that I had the right to make such a request. My answer, ‘I am white, of good character, and have the proper credits.’



Sarah early in her career as USC's law librarian

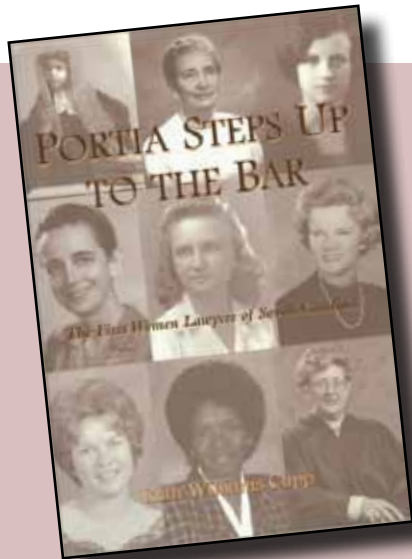
Sullivan understood the law better than those who would deny her the opportunity to study it. The day she laid it all out for the powers-that-be was one she savored the rest of her life. “I made history for at least 30 seconds,” she wrote about the reading aloud the passage of law that made her case. “Article So and So, Section So and So: Women are hereby permitted to enter ALL schools of the university. After a short silence—you could hear the traditions of the elders splintering—the law school faculty decided there was nothing else to do but let me register.”

Although Sullivan was far from a firebrand, that did not stop the Garnet and Black yearbook from implying otherwise. “Miss Sullivan is just one of the fellows—witness the nickname Jim. Flits about the campus chattering like a jaybird, saucy as a wren, and self-assertive as an eagle. Chafes under conventions and chimes in over every conversation. [T]he only branch of law that will be of service to her is that of domestic relations.”

Twenty years later, when Sarah enrolled at the university, not much had changed. She felt isolated at the law school, out

of step and out of place. She remembers inviting herself to a study group and finding her classmates, trying to beat the Carolina heat, had stripped to their under shorts. When she surprised them, they scrambled to make themselves presentable to the interloper. It was hard not to feel like she was crashing a private club. In many ways, she was. But while Sarah often felt the odd person out, she never felt disrespected. She suspects they never looked at her as serious competition.

“I was treated with courteous professionalism by the male students and by a



At the turn of the century, women lawyers were universally called Portias, for Shakespeare’s heroine in *The Merchant of Venice* who disguises herself as a man to appear in court, where she outwits the opposition.

In Portia Steps Up to the Bar, The First Women Lawyers of South Carolina, Ruth Cupp profiles 128

lawyers who broke gender barriers in the law. The book includes Sarah, whose portrait appears on its cover.

“The history of South Carolina women attorneys officially began Feb. 14, 1918,” Cupp writes in the introduction. “The ‘sisters-in-law’ of the teens and twenties rode in on the first wave of American feminism.

“By the mid-seventies, women were no longer an anomaly in the legal profession. They were numerous, they were competent, and above all they were taken for granted—a status they had been seeking for more than half a century.”

Cupp concludes, “Stamina and perseverance in the face of disapprobation characterize the predecessors of the twenty-first century women attorneys. An awareness of this history should serve as motivation to play an even larger role in their profession, in government, and in the justice system.” ❖

dean who wished I would just go away,” she said. “A scholar of the old school, the dean would confront me periodically with ‘Miss Leverette, are you still with us?’ I thought, but did not say, ‘Yes, sir, and I plan to stay to the end.’”

She didn’t just stick it out; she thrived. “I had three years in law school, and I really enjoyed it.” In fact, she loved the law more than the boys who sought her hand in marriage.

“When I was in law school I dated several fellas,” Sarah said, “a preacher’s son who my uncle said was the ugliest boy in town, and one from Charleston, a Jewish boy I was crazy about. But it didn’t work out.”

The only one she was ever serious about, a New Jersey boy who was only slightly taller than she was, went overseas to serve with an elite outfit. Before leaving, he asked her to marry him. She said she had to think about it.

After taking time to weigh her options, she chose a career over marriage. She had worked too hard to throw away everything she had earned. “I knew I would never be able to practice law in New Jersey,” she said. “Being married I would have to bring up children and have a family. You have to picture the times.”

Midlands Woman Magazine featured Sarah on its cover in the summer of 2001. A package of stories inside posed the question: How far have women come? The conclusion: not far enough.

“Things happen slowly in South Carolina,” Sarah said. “There is a resistance to change.”

The magazine ran the numbers. The state ranked first in women being murdered by men, 46th in women’s health, and dead last in the number of women lawmakers. It cited, with great hope, Gov. Jim Hodges’ Commission on Women, designed to quantify and propose remedies to address the state’s grim statistics on women citizens.

It’s striking, 15 years on, how little has changed for women in South Carolina, which no longer has a commission “to recommend policies and procedures to change practices which prevent full participation of women.” The most recent report card from the Institute for Women’s Policy Research gave South Carolina straight Ds in political participation, employment, poverty, and in health and well being.

That same issue asked a dozen girls what they would do if they were the first woman president. Kayla Bennett said she would “say to all my fellow people that just because I am a woman doesn’t mean that I can’t do what a man can do.” Holley Chappell “would make bunches of laws to make the world a better place. Then everyone would have the day off and remember me for Holley Day.” Rachel Mattison’s platform included free pizza for kids because “students need to be appreciated.” 🍕





Sarah never had children of her own but was close to her nephew Richard Lane, who created this mural of the ancient Egyptian sun god Ra on a demolished railroad trestle in Columbia's Olympia neighborhood. He also painted the Incredible Hulk smashing through the wall of the GROW building, behind the old ballpark on Bluff Road. The Grass Roots Organizing Workshop was a precursor of the S.C. Progressive Network. Richard died in 1998, but his work lives on.

Sarah Leverette

Women today are free to balance work and family—or at least are allowed to try. “In those days it was impossible,” she said. She wrote her beau a three-page letter, hoping he understood. “At the time you were forced into a choice. Today you can do anything you want.”

Her only regret is missing out on motherhood. “I would have loved to have had children,” she said, “but I think I made the best decision for me at the time.”

“It’s lonely at the bottom”

Before women could even see the glass ceiling blocking their way, they had to get in the door. Gaining access proved harder than they imagined.

It wasn’t until Sarah had finished school and began looking for work that she understood just what she was up against. Only then did she realize that a law degree in her hands didn’t carry the same weight it did in the hands of her fellow graduates. The legal elite, reluctant to share their rarefied air, were slow to welcome women to the fold.

“In the 1940s and 1950s, the practice of law for women was virtually a closed door” she said. “When I entered law

school, I did not know that the door to practice was not only closed, it was locked. And men had the keys.”

In 1942, a woman lawyer getting a job “was like going to the moon”—which of course had not yet happened. So when former classmates invited her to join their Columbia law firm Barnes and Fulmer, she was glad to accept.

However grateful she was to be working, her first job out of law school was a rude awakening. “I’d been there about a year when they told me Capt. Jennings, a retired naval officer, was coming to the firm and I was to make sure the office was white-glove clean,” she said. “That’s when I got my ire up. I told them I did not go to law school to be a cleaning service.” With that, she quit.

That experience taught Sarah that academic excellence and top-drawer legal skills would not guarantee her fair treatment in the workplace. “The law degree opened doors to opportunity,” she said, “but not equal pay.”

She learned the same lesson at her second job, with the state Labor Department, where she worked between 1945 and 1947. “This was the beginning of the realization that law firms and businesses were only too happy to have



Breaking Barriers

In 1947, when the dean of USC's law school asked Sarah to fill a vacancy in the library, she accepted. She would stay there for 25 years.

When the dean realized that Sarah lacked the library background for the job, he sent her to Columbia University for an intense summer of study. "It was a wonderful experience," she said. "Dean Samuel Prince was responsible for that, and I'll thank him for the rest of my life."

Her months in New York, her first extended foray outside of South Carolina, were challenging and exciting. "I enjoyed the study," she said, "but we also had a wonderful time pub crawling and running around New York City. We studied very hard—it was a very concentrated course—but we also had a ball."

When President John F. Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act into law in 1963, women made up a third of the nation's workforce, and earned 59 cents for every dollar men made. In more than 50 years, that gap has narrowed by just 20 cents. At this rate, it will take women another 100 years to reach parity in the workplace. The pay gap is even worse for women of color, for mothers, and for older women.

my legal background but did not want to compensate for it in kind," she said. "This same attitude prevailed until my retirement."

While she acted as a legal consultant and researcher for the department, she was paid as a statistician rather than a lawyer. "They would always put you on that lower level," she said. "It would make me very, very angry today, but I just accepted it as par for the course in the cultural climate of that day."

SHE SAID

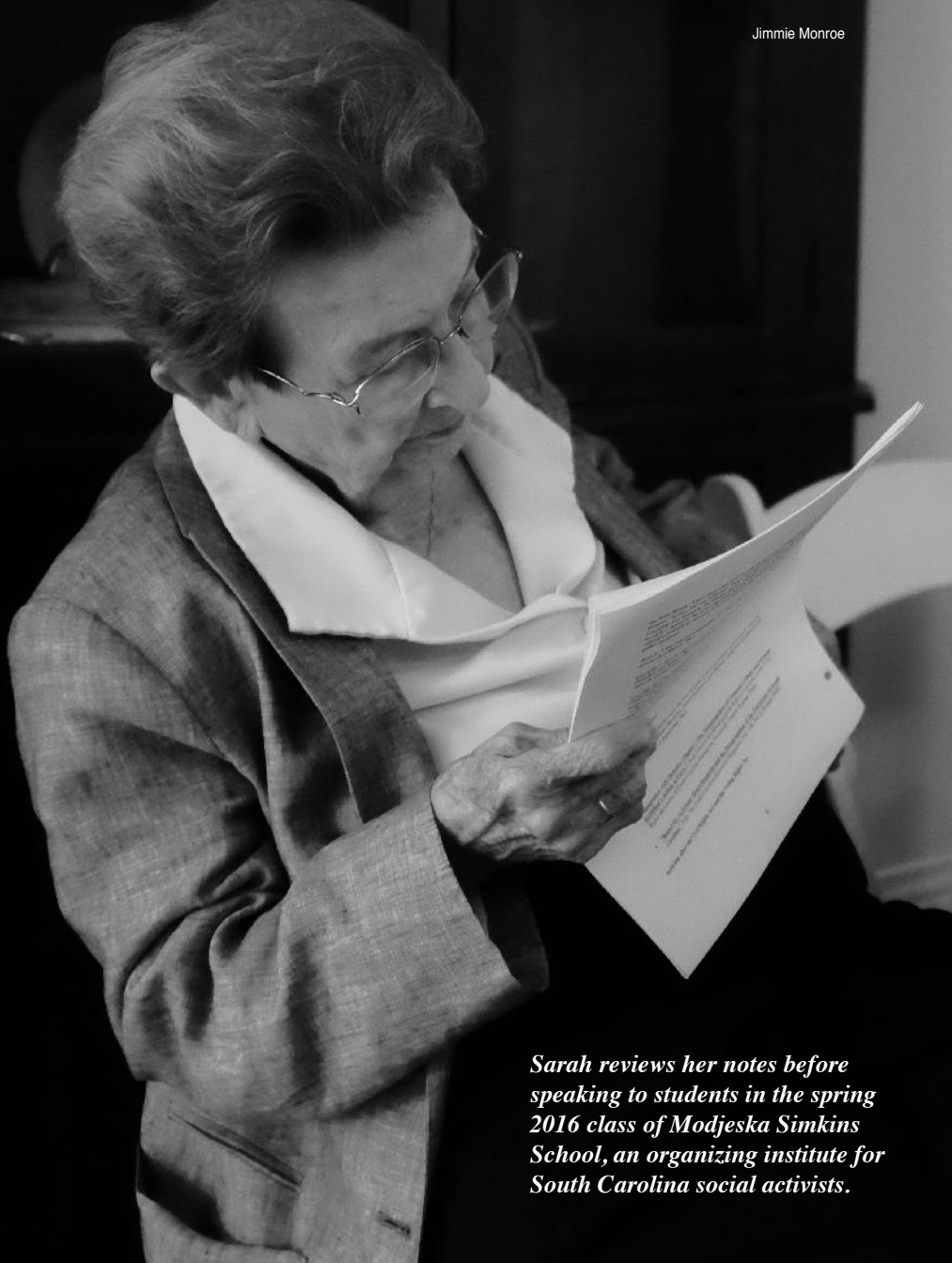
"The concepts of justice, ethics and fair play are really the laws of life."

"Women have the voting power. Women have the economic power. Women have the responsibility for using both."

"Money has always been an issue, but it has come to the point that it defines everything—relationships, politics, everything."

"Be kind to animals and all God's creatures. This is a measure of character as well as heart."

"Too many of us, while adhering to the conduct and practices of faith, charity and good will, fail in our responsibilities as individual citizens either through neglect or apathy."



Sarah reviews her notes before speaking to students in the spring 2016 class of Modjeska Simkins School, an organizing institute for South Carolina social activists.

She stayed just off campus, in an apartment of a university professor on sabbatical. “It overlooked the river and the windows had no screens,” she said. “One day I came home and there was a bird sitting on my bed.”

During that summer in New York, she learned how to do advanced research, and made important contacts that would serve her well the rest of her career. The experience was invaluable to her work at USC, where she taught legal writing, helped students and practicing lawyers do research, and kept the library’s resources current—no small task in the pre-digital age. “So much of law is a continuing thing,” she said. “Everything in a law library is constantly changing. It’s like having a magazine subscription that never runs out.”

Sarah also oversaw moving the law library—twice. “Planning a new law school and planning the library was really a job,” she said. Not only did they have to adapt to a new physical environment—moving books, furniture, and shelving—the library staff had to accommodate and use to its best advantage an ever-evolving technical universe.

South Carolina’s social landscape also was evolving as court orders forced a reluctant power structure to accommodate

the new racial realignment. Some of the fallout fell to Sarah directly. After the “separate but equal” decision required the state to provide black students an education equitable to that of white students, she was charged with setting up a law library at S.C. State, the all-black college in Orangeburg.

Ten years later, USC was forced to integrate, making all the work Sarah and her colleagues had done “a waste of time, a waste of money.”

The experience left her with a lingering sense of complicity. To make amends for her part in maintaining the racial divide, she nominated for an award Charleston judge Waties Waring, who wrote the *Briggs v. Elliott* decision adopted by the Supreme Court as the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* case mandating the integration of America’s schools.

“I said to myself, ‘Sarah, you were weak-kneed enough to go there to set up a segregated library. You ought to do something about it now.’ So I said, ‘It’s time that we honor Waties Waring for his courage.’

She nominated Judge Waring and wrote his memorial for the Memory Hold the Door honor, where lawyers recognize the passing of their own. The judge had

been dead for many years, and had been passed over by his colleagues for this recognition, a wrong Sarah decided to right.

While she was becoming increasingly aware of racial discrimination, she continued to feel the sting of sexism in the workplace. “My experience [at USC] was the same old thing,” she said. She wasn’t paid equitably, and was denied faculty status for 15 years, until fellow teachers protested.

Pay aside, she loved her years at the law library, where she developed personal and often lasting relationships with students who would go on to become some of the state’s leading lawyers, judges, and politicians.

“Dick Riley, Costa Pleiconas (S.C. Supreme Court chief justice), Fritz Hollings, Sol Blatt,” she said, rattling off some of the most notable names. “Bob McNair and John West (former governors), Jean Toal (first woman to serve as chief justice of the S.C. Supreme Court), I.S. Leevy Johnson (a prominent Columbia attorney and the first African-American to serve as president of the S.C. Bar). The pleasure of it now,” she said, “is I’m constantly running into people I knew in those days.”

“Do not let anyone tell us we can’t make a difference. In truth we are the difference in our democratic society, but only if you care to be.”

“There is value in looking at our history. The way for all of us was opened by those who walked before us.”

“Women must become a more active player in the world today in order to bring our state and nation to its full potential and to ensure a more stable world for the future of our children.”

“I strongly urge this General Assembly to address the subject of clean elections, a system of public financing of elections. The rapidly increasing fusion of money into the election process has become a major problem for aspiring candidates and elected public officials, as well as for the citizens of South Carolina.”

Judge Toal was among the few women Sarah taught at USC. “Sarah was never a gal to have a pity party about anything,” Toal told *The State* in a 2016 profile. “You just worked harder and created that opportunity. That positive attitude was a tremendous inspiration to the small group of young women like myself in law school at that time.”

The story also quoted Johnson, the only black student in the class of 1968, and one of the first blacks to graduate from the law school since Reconstruction. “Ms. Leverette reached out to me and gave me a comfort level as a student,” he said. “It’s hard to describe the apprehension I had going into the unknown. It was comforting to have

someone there who you always knew was there to support you and was always in your corner.”

It Took Two Men to Replace the Only Woman at the Table

When Sarah left the law library, she was tapped by Gov. John West to serve a six-year term on the Workers’ Compensation Commission. Of her appointment, he said, “Miss Leverette has distinguished herself as an outstanding legal scholar, and I know her service on the commission will bring great credit to herself and our state.”

It was the only time she was paid fairly, because state law mandated it. “There I was paid a salary equal to the male commissioners—only because the statute was gender-neutral,” she said. “The ice was thawing on women lawyers.” Even so, as the only woman on the commission, she was often mistaken for a secretary or a court room clerk at hearings.

The Workers Compensation Act that passed in 1935 required employees to be awarded monetarily for injuries suffered on the job. The new law kept the commission’s case load full.



Former S.C. Supreme Court Chief Justice Jean Toal (left) was one of just a handful of women Sarah taught at the law school, as they were a rarity during her 25 years there. Toal calls her a friend and her mentor.

The job was challenging and a good fit. “I think I enjoyed my work on the Workers’ Compensation Commission more than anything,” she said. “We rotated through the circuits, and were busy all the time.”

She was glad to finally “get into a real application of the law,” she said. “I’d been dealing in theory for so long.”

Besides bringing a gender perspective to the commission, she also tried to depoliticize the appointment. Because members were confirmed by the General Assembly, there was a temptation to align with the lawmakers appearing before them.

“I made it a point to try to be as objective as I could,” she said. “People always looked at it as a political job, and I always looked at the Workers Comp. agency and the law as an employees’ law.”

She served as chair from 1976–77, and left the commission after her term was up in 1978. Two new members were appointed to fill the vacant position, leading her to quip when she tells the story, “It took two men to replace me.”

She stayed at the commission as a consultant until 1985.

“High-minded Women in Low-heeled Shoes”

Staying true to the example her parents set for her, Sarah has always been committed to her community. She belongs to several civic and professional organizations, but shares a long and special relationship with the state League of Women Voters. The two also share a birthday, which Columbia members celebrate each year with a party.

While the League could hardly be called radical, it leans left enough to be called liberal by some conservative lawmakers. To that Sarah says simply, “The League is not liberal, we’re just 10 years ahead of our time.”

The writer E.B. White once called the League “high-minded women in low-heeled shoes,” a description Sarah likes enough to repeat in her speeches. It is true, after all. The League is made up of thoughtful, practical women.

It was the forward-thinking suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt who first proposed “a league of women voters to finish the fight and aid in the reconstruction of the nation.” An outgrowth of the suffrage movement, the League was designed to help women carry out their new duties as

“It appears to me that the mind of man was given to him to help him survive. But he was also given a heart to see that no human being or creature was harmed in that process. Too often, we see the mind for survival become the mind for power. It becomes mind over heart.”

“Learn all you can. Your world is only as large as you choose to make it.”

“Though the civil rights issue was belatedly and partially solved by legislative and judicial fiat, we are still fighting to complete the job that was begun with the case of *Briggs v. Elliott*. Would this not have been more quickly resolved had citizens participated, became involved? And are we not still fighting battles of racial and ethnic discrimination in our legislature and in our courts?”

voters. The organization made its official debut in Chicago on Feb. 14, 1920, a sort of Valentine to the country's fairer sex.

"No, I did not know Ms. Catt nor Mrs. Susan B. Anthony personally," Sarah said in a speech on her 85th birthday, "however, I really believe that they were around at my birth and said to each other, 'Tap this one for the League of Women Voters!'"

"Our forbearers were smart enough to know that if you get the vote, you need to know what you're doing."

The League's mission, Catt said, "is not to lure women from partisanship but to combine them in an effort for legislation which will protect coming movements which we cannot even foretell, from suffering the untoward conditions which have hindered for so long the coming of equal suffrage." She asked her newly enfranchised sisters, "Are the women of the United States big enough to see their opportunity?"

The jury is still out on that one. American women have made progress, to be sure, but have yet to be being fully integrated



Voter education, registration, and mobilization has always been central to the League's work. Here, Memphis members pose with their GOTV Oldsmobile and "Bossy" in 1959.

into positions of power in government, in business, in churches, even in their own homes.

That doesn't mean the League hasn't tried. And made some important gains over the years. It has made inroads in the S.C. General Assembly partly through its sheer longevity. Having been a serious and constant presence in the

State House lends the League credibility with lawmakers and community leaders. It is respect they work hard to maintain.

The League's members do not arrive lightly at their policy positions. "We select an issue, study the issue, come to conclusions, and get consensus," Sarah said. "Before we ever publicly present on an issue, it has been given a good going-over. We always educate before we advocate."

One of the League's first campaigns in South Carolina was to change the law to allow

women to serve on juries. In a classic display of paternalism dressed up as chivalry, women were denied one of the most basic civic responsibilities because, men argued, the rough language used in court might damage the ladies' delicate sensibilities. For good measure, they used a now-familiar ploy: bathrooms. With no ladies facilities in court houses, how could they possibly serve?

In keeping with its habit of resisting social change, South Carolina fought 10 years to keep women from sitting on juries, finally relenting in 1967. Only Mississippi took longer to do so. The League was instrumental in that campaign, demonstrating in the process the group's discipline and doggedness.

Sarah has much to do with maintaining that focused approach. Longtime League member and former president Laurel Suggs said, "She reminds us of continuing responsibilities, she reminds us that we have got to stay on task and don't let the next issue take you away from the things you need to build on. We tend to be reactive, especially in South Carolina, where we are always putting out fires."

Sarah provides a steadying influence and the institutional memory so often missing in volunteer-driven organizations. "They don't have that long-term understanding of what happened before," Suggs said. The old adage "to know where you're going, you have to know where you've been" holds true for nonprofits.

Suggs said Sarah and her mother, Barbara Moxon, were leaders in the League in the 1970s, which she describes as its heyday in South Carolina. "We had our highest membership then. Sarah was a frequent



This portrait of Sarah was made by her friend Candy Waites, a former president of the Columbia League of Women Voters who also served on Richland County Council and in the House. The framed picture was part of a silent auction to benefit the S.C. Women Lawyers Association, but when Sarah went to bid on it was told it had already been sold. She was disappointed—until it was presented to her as a gift from friends on her birthday.

"There was an air of civility in the practice that I don't see today. I don't think it's peculiar to the legal professions, it's peculiar to the society as a whole."

"True success in life is not measured in dollars. Acquiring money is an appropriate goal but not a guarantee of a happy and complete life."

"We should not forget that whether our talents are many or few, whether our time is free or limited, each one of us is an integral part of the political and human equation. Each of us is a necessary element in a viable democracy."

"I believe that history is the greatest teacher known to mankind. If we block the lessons of history, we have lost our way."



Sarah shared a panel at the 2011 S.C. Women's Lawyers Association conference with the two Glorias, leading feminist activists Steinem (left) and Feldt.

visitor to our house, where she and mother would work on things. And they traveled a lot together.

“She and my mother were both petite ladies,” Suggs said. “They used their stature to their advantage. I think they kind of surprised people who thought they were sweet little ladies who would not say much. But both of them were tigers. They went after things and weren’t afraid to speak their minds and buttonhole anybody they could. I don’t think they were afraid of speaking out—ever.”

That’s the way Travis Medlock remembers it. “When I was in the legislature, Sarah worked with the League of Women Voters and told us what to do on serious policy matters—and we did it. And it turned out well.”

John Crangle, who recently retired after 30 years with the state chapter of Common Cause, has worked with Sarah for many years. She has served on the group’s board for

more than a decade, and was chair for three years. “The most amazing thing about Sarah,” he said, “is that even though she’s 96, her mind is remarkably clear. She has an unusually good memory, and she has a wealth of experience. She knows what’s happened in the legal system, knows what’s happened in the political system,” he said, pausing to do the math, “in the last 70 years!”

“Sarah was someone I could talk to about issues and she always had reasonable, fact-based points to bring to the table.

She has a wealth of knowledge about issues Common Cause is concerned with, and she’s been an asset to the board.”

Sarah has been a mentor to the state League’s emerging and core leaders. Lynn Teague is one of them. “She has been a phenomenal help to me since I first started representing the League at the State House,” she said. “She has a sense of balance and integrity, and a clear vision for what’s right. Yet she has pragmatism, too. She’s been around the block, and she has given me wonderful advice.”

Teague recounts going with Sarah to meet with Sen. Larry Martin to talk about judicial reform. Before getting down to business, he and Sarah first had to talk about people they knew in common. It is that sort of personal connection that greases wheels in South Carolina politics. “They had a lovely little chat about early life in Pickens County. I remember her charm and intelligence really helped so much.”

The first time Teague appeared in an important hearing on behalf of the League, a blue ribbon commission on ethics reform chaired by former attorneys general Henry McMaster and Medlock, Sarah was in the front row “cheering me on and giving me confidence.

“At the end, McMaster said they can’t adjourn without giving Sarah a standing ovation, saying she taught him in law school. Then Travis Medlock said, ‘And she taught me how to read law.’ Everyone stood and applauded Sarah.”

Her relationships are wide and deep in the State House and in court houses across the Palmetto State. She not only knows everybody, she also knows everybody’s daddy. You can’t buy power like that.

“She’s extremely an kind person,” Teague said. “She doesn’t speak rudely about

people. But she has said to me more than once, ‘I knew So and So’s father, and I don’t know how he turned out like that.’”

Teague said that Sarah, while lamenting cases when second-generation lawyers and lawmakers fail to live up to their family name, she generally makes it a habit to believe the best in people, even those with whom she disagrees.

“She is disappointed in people at times,” Teague said, “but she really believes in what people are capable of. She often brings out their best.”

Sarah has collaborated with the S.C. Progressive Network on several issues over the years, beginning with nuclear energy. She was ahead of her time on the matter. At a national convention in the 1960s, the League split over whether to oppose nuclear energy. Like the teacher she is, Sarah took the microphone to tell the assembled that if they were going to debate it they should at least learn how to pronounce



Sarah Leverette

Beverly Boyer, with whom Sarah shared a home for 46 years, walks Lucy, their beloved Bassett Hound.

“We may be retired from a business or a profession; we are not retired from being active citizens.”

“We need to realize that we have duties and we have rights, but they don’t exist without the other. If you have a right then there is a corresponding responsibility. And when those two work together, then the common good is served.”

“Democracy is, by its very nature, dependent upon the citizen’s acceptance of his civic responsibility and his duty to participate in the process of government.”

“Retirement from our work—our trade, our profession—does not give us the right to retire from the human race. It only gives us a more flexible lifestyle in which to continue our work for the common good.”

THEY SAID

“I tell her, ‘I want to grow up and be just like you.’”

Jean Toal, former chief justice of S.C. Supreme Court

“She is brilliant, she knows the law, and she supports social justice. She is and has been a superb role model for women lawyers for many years.”

Harriet Hancock, attorney

“She is still a lifelong learner, still as involved today as she would be as a young woman, and it’s really inspirational to be around her.”

Herbert Hartsook, director of Special Collections at USC

“She certainly is a beacon of credibility and knowledge.”

Costa Pleicones, S.C. Supreme Court Chief Justice

it. “It’s nuclear,” she admonished, “not nuclear.”

Looking back, she said they were right to be concerned. “We’re still dealing with the expensive fallout at the Savannah River Site,” she said. “It’s become an issue again because of nuclear waste.”

Sarah also worked with the Network on a years-long campaign for publicly financed elections, a system advocated by slain Sen. Clementa Pinckney, who sponsored the Clean Elections bill. In a 2001 *Netnews* she said, “Buying the elections back from the special interests is a good deal for the taxpayers.”

Other legislative campaigns the Network has shared with the state League include buying voting machines with the capacity to provide a paper trail, opposition to the photo ID law, and ethics reform. After a long battle, state lawmakers finally passed in the 2016 legislative session a weakened ethics bill that the League argues is at least a step in the right direction.

“Like a good lawyer, Sarah is pragmatic and cautious with her opinions,” said Network Director Brett Bursey. “But she is consistent and considered, and once she forms an opinion she is not in the least shy about sharing it. I appreciate

that she’s not one to waste or mince words.

“For decades, Sarah has been a trustworthy voice for good government and better citizens. South Carolina is lucky to have her.”

Group Therapy

“I don’t think any history of mine would be complete without acknowledging the influence of my friends,” Sarah said. Over the years, she has cultivated a tight circle of them, people she has met through the law school, the League, the Women Lawyers Association, the American Association of University Women, and the other groups she has worked with over the years.

She keeps a busy schedule, seeing friends and colleagues at professional association meetings, her Monday lunch bunch, and her “cussin’ and discussin’” group. Sarah takes her commitment to family and friends seriously, and that dedication seems to be returned in kind. She shares a genuine sisterhood with the women in her life, bonds forged to sustain them in a sometimes hostile professional environment.

On Sarah’s 90th birthday, her friends at the S.C. Women Lawyers Association

SC lawyer, teacher, mentor, ground breaker

made her a big scrapbook filled with photos, mementos, news clips, and pages upon pages of well wishes.

Women of a certain age and experience know they owe Sarah a great deal. To their credit, they often tell her so.

“Generations of South Carolina lawyers have learned the techniques of high quality legal research under your guidance,” former Chief Justice Toal wrote. “From the time I entered college as a freshman law student, you have been my friend, my mentor and my inspiration.

You’re a great lawyer, a great teacher, a great judge and a great human being.”

“Each of us aspires to emulate your devotion to the goal of promoting women’s equality in the practice of law and in all aspect of society,” wrote S.C. Administrative Law Judge Carolyn Matthews. “Thank you for demonstrating that perseverance and fortitude can transform our society to make it better for everyone.”

Laura Callaway Hart recalled meeting Sarah 20 years ago during a workers

compensation case. “Little did I know when I picked up that file for the first time that I would have the privilege of working with a legend. You were so knowledgeable, gracious, and professional, and to a young woman lawyer surrounded every day by male lawyers, you were a valuable model of how I should act toward my clients and colleagues in the law.”

“You came to symbolize more than that later, when I benefited from your support and friendship during the *Abbeville* education funding litigation,” Hart wrote.



Sarah (front row in blue suit) poses with members of the S.C. Women Lawyers Association in 2005

“The fact that she’s lived a long time has really enabled her to do so much for many people and causes. She’s trying to help people and not herself. She wants to make the state better.”

Dick Riley, former S.C. governor and U.S. secretary of education

“My awesome and amazing godmother, Sarah Leverette, taught me how to eat butter beans with a toothpick and to appreciate a really good and cold beer.”

Marie Elmgren Talbert

“On behalf of all past, present, and future women attorneys in South Carolina, I thank you for blazing the trail for our current successes. Your contribution to the legal profession and to advancing the rights of women in South Carolina cannot be overstated.”

S.C. Rep. Jenny A. Horne

“While many people were interested in our case for the poor school districts, few had the depth of understanding that you did of the history and consequences of our State’s legislative decisions on the children in our schools.”

While Sarah has inspired generations of women, her own mentor was Beverly Lovejoy Boyer, her longtime assistant and dear friend. They shared a home for 46 years, until Boyer died of cancer in 2009. “I still miss her,” Sarah said.

“She taught me the importance of speaking up for others who can’t speak up for themselves.”

Boyle was working at McKissick Library on the USC campus, and Sarah was struggling with the work load at the law library. “I took her on as assistant librarian and she was a major help. I couldn’t have done it without her.”

They shared a love of books—Boyle had a master’s in library science—and a passion for social justice, especially advocating for children, the poor, and the elderly. “She spent much of her time devoted to these causes,” Sarah said.

“Beverly was one of the most principled and compassionate persons I’ve ever known,” Sarah said. “Her parents were

like mine. Her father was an attorney and her mother was an advocate of community service.” She said their families adopted each other, becoming a sort of extended clan.

Redefining Retirement

Turns out that Sarah is good at many things, but retirement isn’t one of them. At least not the way it is often practiced in America.

When she left the Workers Compensation Commission in 1978, she planned to leave her professional life to spend extended time at her beach house. “I had been in government for over 30 years, and I figured it was about time to quit.”

She was bored to tears at the beach. “After awhile I decided I retired from work,” she said, “I did not retire from life.” She found herself spending less time on the coast, and becoming more active in her volunteer work.

But even that was not enough. “I thought I needed something regular to do,” she said. “I wanted to get up in the morning and go somewhere. I don’t see how anybody works for 30 years and then just stops.”

She decided to get a real estate license so she could have a flexible schedule. Since the early 1980s, she has worked with Columbia Realtors Russell and Jeffcoat. She still keeps regular hours.

Although she's been asked to do so more than once, Sarah never considered running for office, believing she could be more effective "on the outside than on the inside." She wishes more women would run, though, citing the lack of women in elected office in South Carolina. In 2016, they held only 24 seats in the legislature, just 14 percent of that body.

While the power of women in South Carolina remains limited, change is afoot nationally. "I'm very encouraged to see a woman run for president," Sarah said. "It's my feeling that before I am gone I want to see this happen."

In her long life, Sarah has witnessed great change. She has also helped make it. For that—and for showing us all how to live with grace and purpose—her friends, allies, and admirers are grateful.

"It was lonely at the bottom 60 years ago," she told friends at a recent birthday party, "but surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses none of us are lonely anymore. It has been a long and wonderful experience, and I have enjoyed every minute of it." ❖



Sarah leads class at Modjeska Simkins School.

On Being 96

To lend some perspective, when Sarah was admitted to the S.C. Bar she had to swear that she had not engaged in a duel "either as principal or second."

Now 96, she is busier than most people half her age. Her secret? "Number One, I had good genes. Number Two, I never got married. That adds years to your life."

She also credits good eating. "When I grew up the food we ate didn't come from a fast food restaurant; our diet was good. We had a garden, we were surrounded by farms. You could get good food in those days; now you don't know what you're eating."

It's clear that she is also sustained by a keen interest in the world around her and the people who inhabit it.

"There are so many people my age whose health is not good," she said, "but I'm blessed. The main thing, I think—I don't know whether you call it intellectual curiosity—but just wanting to keep up with what's going on.

"I just can't stand to sit on the sidelines and comment about things if I'm not going to try to do something about them. That, to me, is one of the biggest failings that we have in this country.

"We always talk about things and we fuss about them but we don't do anything about them. There are so many opportunities to do things. Its non-productive to complain unless we seek solutions to the problem.

"When you're retired, you have an opportunity to do a lot of these things that you didn't have before. Really, it seems that I'm busy almost more than I was being in a nine-to-five job." ❖

“I have loved and admired Sarah for many years. Her knowledge of South Carolina history and culture is comparable to the well-known historians and authors of our state. She has keen insight into Southern politics, and understand the uniqueness and quiriness of S.C. politicians. In any serious discussion of the issues, Sarah provides historical context, and always reminds us of how far we have come and how much we have yet to accomplish. Thank you, Sarah, for your words of wisdom, for breaking down barriers, and for keeping the ladder steady for a generation of women like me.”

Darra Cothran, attorney

“I see Sarah as one of the most outstanding citizens of South Carolina.”

Travis Medlock, former state lawmaker and attorney general

Sufferin' Suffragettes! Know Your Herstory

Sadly, too many women don't know their own history—largely because it isn't widely taught except in colleges as elective study. How else to explain why women would choose to not vote, squandering the right our foremothers fought so long and hard to secure?

It took a federal constitutional amendment to force the Palmetto State to grant women the right to vote, and another 50 years for a reluctant legislature to make it official by passing the Susan B. Anthony amendment in 1969.

Anthony, who some know only as the face on the ill-fated silver dollar, was a feminist revolutionary who played a leading role in the American suffrage movement. In 1872, she was arrested for trying to vote in her hometown of Rochester, N.Y.,

and later refusing to pay the fine. Her audacity drew attention to the cause—as well as public derision.

Suffragists were viciously and relentlessly attacked, their intentions and their very womanhood questioned on their long, rough road to full enfranchisement.

In South Carolina, the first woman's organizing meeting was held in Greenville in 1890, initiated by Virginia Duran Young. Two years later, Sen. Robert Hemphill introduced a resolution to enfranchise women through an amendment to the state constitution. Some 200 women were on hand to hear the debate.

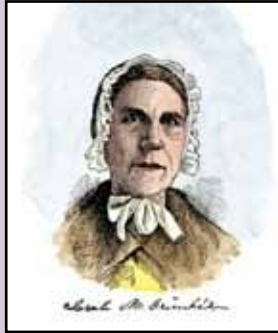
A.T. Smythe spoke for the opposition by claiming women's position “too high,



Vintage postcard

S.C.'s Grimké sisters: abolitionists, feminists, outcasts

Angelina and Sarah Grimké were sisters born at the turn of the century into a wealthy and prominent slave-holding family in Charleston. As they matured, they developed deeply held abolitionist values, and set about speaking out against slavery.



Sarah Grimké

Their outspokenness defied the social dictate that women remain silent when outside their homes. Their message made them all the more radical for the times.

In 1836, Angelina wrote *An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, considered so socially dangerous that copies were destroyed by Southern postmasters.

Unwelcome in South Carolina, the sisters moved to Philadelphia and joined the Society of Friends. There they were met with yet more resistance, condemned by the elders in their church for speaking in public to “promiscuous” audiences, gatherings of both men and women.

They began to realize how circumscribed their abolitionist work was because of their gender. In her *Letters on the*

Equality of Sexes and the Condition of Women, Sarah famously wrote, “**I ask no favors for my sex. All I ask of our brethren is that they will take their feet from off our necks and permit us to stand upright on the ground which God has deigned us to occupy.**”

Angelina, knowing the value of Southern voices in the abolitionist movement, expressed frustration that her gender was being used to silence her. She raised the matter in a letter she wrote in 1837 after being admonished for speaking outside a “woman’s sphere.”

“How can we expect to be able to hold meetings much longer when people are so diligently taught to despise us for thus stepping out of the sphere of woman!

They are springing a deep mine beneath our feet, and we shall very soon be compelled to retreat for we shall have no ground to stand on.

If we surrender the right to speak to the public this year, we must surrender the right to petition next year and the right to write the year after, and so on. What then can woman do for the slave when she is herself under the feet of man and shunned into silence?

And can you not see that women could do and would do a hundred times more for the slave if she were not fettered? Silence is our province, submission our duty.”

The Grimkés helped pave the way for the women’s rights advocates who would follow. Their story provides an important historical reminder of the intersection—and occasional tension—between the movements for racial justice and gender equality in America.

In 1868, after the sisters discovered that their brother had fathered two children with an enslaved woman, they welcomed their nephews into the family and into their home. Archibald and Francis Grimké would go on to graduate from Harvard and Princeton. ❖



Angelina Grimké

“We think of her as our inspiration, our friend and our sister in the law.”

Alex Sanders, former appeals court judge and former president at the College of Charleston

“Ms. Leverette is a dear friend to the Law School and to its faculty, alumni and students. She remains a familiar presence at every major law school event, and her continuing energy and commitment to service for the people of South Carolina are infectious to all who meet her.”

Dean Robert M. Wilcox,
USC School of Law

“Sarah has a sense of balance and integrity, and a clear vision for what’s right, and yet she has pragmatism too. She’s been around the block, and she has given me wonderful advice.”

Lynn Teague, S.C. League of
Women Voters

noble and elevated to be brought down to the level of the ward politician,” and contending most women weren’t interested in voting, anyway.

The State newspaper in an editorial called Sen. Hemphill “a little ahead of his time” and claimed surprise that the motion had received 14 favorable votes. The Pickens *Sentinal* expressed regret that lawmakers had wasted time on such “foolishness.”

In 1893, Young petitioned the General Assembly, asserting that she was native-born, over 21, of sane mind, and literate, but because of her gender was taxed without representation and governed

without consent, forced to suffer “the injustice and humiliation of being classed with the insane, criminals and idiots.”

In 1895, South Carolina was crafting a new constitution. Among its primary objectives was retaining white power. Proponents of women’s suffrage saw an opportunity, hoping to gain at least partial enfranchisement through political forces desperate to maintain white control.

It wasn’t a secret strategy. In his pamphlet “A Solution of the Southern Race Problem,” Henry Blackwell of Boston advocated suffrage with an education qualification, banking on the



illiteracy of black women to make them fail to meet the requirements.

The State newspaper endorsed the idea of enfranchising women who were “intelligent and property-owning,” writing that this strategy would help maintain “white supremacy.” That same year, a group of women activists toured South Carolina. Laura Clay of Kentucky was among them, one of only a handful of Southern women suffragists in the national spotlight.

Clay was one of three suffragists to address the S.C. constitutional convention in 1895, calling women’s suffrage a “noble service to the whole nation.” Her group lobbied for several days, but to no avail; the Committee on Suffrage decided to recommend that voting remain reserved for men only.

“The South Carolina campaign of 1895 failed for several reasons,” Antoinette Taylor writes in an article tracing the early history of the movement published in *S.C. Historical Magazine* in 1976. “The suffragists had based their hopes on



the dual-appeal of justice and expediency. Since their philosophy lacked widespread support, they could not realistically expect to gain the vote as a matter of simple justice.

“They thought that their potential usefulness in achieving white supremacy might furnish an entering wedge. But there were other means of ensuring white supremacy, and the convention preferred them to votes-for-women.”

The defeat deflated interest in women’s suffrage in the years after the constitutional convention. Young and a handful of others kept the crusade alive, but it was a lonely battle. In 1903,

she attended the annual convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in New Orleans, where she delivered a speech titled “From the Most Conservative State.”

It would be Young’s last convention. When she died in 1906, so did the first phase of South Carolina’s women’s movement.

Women have made tremendous gains since securing the right to vote. Still, they have a long way to go toward full participation in Palmetto State politics.

Sarah is disappointed in those who abdicate their responsibilities as citizens and voters. “It bothers me a great deal. We have people who are not informed, we have people who vote against their best interests, we have people who don’t vote.

“If you’re going to put people in charge of your city or your state, and you don’t pay enough attention to who you’re putting in there, what they stand for, then you pay the consequence. To make democracy work, it’s going to require the work of all of us.” ❖

Author's note

This booklet is a companion to two earlier ones that profiled human rights activist **Modjeska Monteith Simkins** and gay rights advocate **Harriet Hancock**. While I didn't set out to write a trilogy, the booklets evolved into a package that now seems perfectly timed. Besides telling the stories of three phenomenal South Carolina women, they offer a chance to explore racism, sexism, and homophobia—problems continuing to fester in the nation's addled psyche.

The booklet about Modjeska, whose grandparents were enslaved, reminds us of South Carolina's grim past, and how it haunts us still. The booklet about Harriet went to press just days before the massacre in Orlando that left 49 people dead and 53 maimed in a gay nightclub.

And this booklet about Sarah, who was born on the eve of women's suffrage in America, comes out as the nation deliberates whether to vote for its first woman president. This historic election has come with the sad reminder in certain news outlets and on social media that misogyny is alive and well.

While the booklets provide no easy answers to the vexing problems we face, they give some historical context to help

understand the current social and political climate in America and here at home. And they show the power a single citizen can have, given enough passion and commitment.

My hope is that these booklets will make their way into the hands of girls and young women who will be as moved and impressed as I have been by Modjeska, Harriet, and Sarah. It has been a great privilege to share their stories.

The challenge was fitting their big lives into these thin volumes, as each of them deserves a full biography. (As part of the Modjeska School's ongoing oral history series, taped interviews conducted for



this project are archived online at the school's web site. See facing page.)

The many hours I spent reading about and listening to these strong, self-made women has been a joy I will treasure always. Their example has expanded my vision of life after 80, and has made me want to up my game.

I thank Modjeska, Harriet, and Sarah for making South Carolina a better place to live. I hope they inspire generations to come.

Finally, the SC Progressive Network thanks the Richland County Conservation Commission for funding this project, and for sharing our belief that history is our greatest teacher.

Becci Robbins
Communications Director
SC Progressive Network

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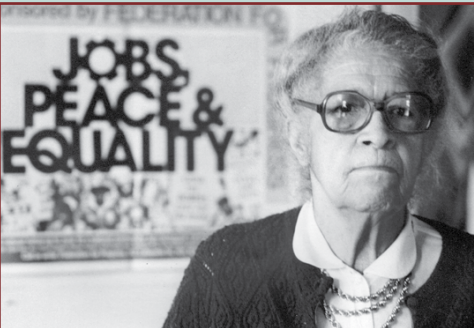
This booklet is a project of the **SC Progressive Network**, a statewide coalition of groups and individuals building a people's movement for social and economic justice. Now celebrating 20 years of grass roots organizing, the Network invites you to join us in promoting good government and healthy communities in the Palmetto State.

SC Progressive Network

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MODJESKA SIMKINS SCHOOL

We invite you to support the **Modjeska Simkins School**, a civic engagement institute for students of all ages launched in 2015 to grow a grass roots network of community leaders. Guided by Modjeska's fighting spirit, students learn a people's history of South Carolina and skills to address current issues of economic and social injustice. For details, see www.scpronet.com/modjeskaschool. Donations are tax-deductible.



Becci Robbins

On June 20, 2015, Sarah Leverette addressed a crowd of 2,000 who had gathered on to demand that lawmakers take down the Confederate flag. Its prominence on the State House grounds had become impossible to defend after nine were slain in Charleston's Mother Emanuel Church. The flag came down three weeks later.