

Letters from a Sandburg Docent

Complicated Legacy

March 2025

But first...

A Note from the Author! March 2025

Hi Friends,

When the Sandburgs moved to the segregated South in 1945, the irony—given the history of the farm’s past owners—wasn’t lost on Sandburg. He said that it was a “Hell of a *baronial* estate for an old Socialist like me!”

This month’s letter tells the story of Christopher Memminger and Ellison Smyth whose residence at the Flat Rock farm begins during the antebellum South and extends to the Second World War. Both made significant contributions to life in the South and had darker sides to their legacies as well.

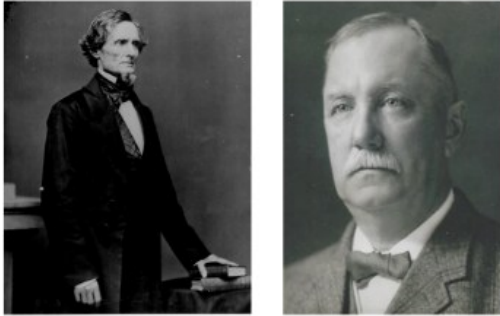
I contrast Memminger’s and Smyth’s views on social and racial equality, democracy, and the innate possibility of humanity with the ideals that Carl Sandburg held dear throughout his life.

Thanks for your interest in Carl Sandburg,

John Quinley

Letters from a Sandburg Docent

John W. Quinley



Original residents of Sandburg's North Carolina Farm:
Christopher Memminger (left) and Ellison Smyth (right)

Complicated Legacy

Dear Readers,

When the Sandburgs moved to the segregated South in 1945, the irony—given the history of the farm's past owners—wasn't lost on Sandburg. He said that it was a "Hell of a baronial estate for an old Socialist like me!"

Christopher Memminger and Ellison Smyth believed in rule by the few for the few (wealthy, white Protestants), not rule by the people for the people (all races, ethnicities, social classes, religions, and genders). Memminger and Smyth believed that Black peoples lacked the moral foundation, economic drive, and basic intelligence to succeed. Sandburg believed that everyone could prosper if given an equal playing field.

Like Sandburg, the former owners were famous during their lifetimes. They played important roles in the antebellum South and the Civil War; Reconstruction and

Redemption; and the New South. Both made significant contributions to life in the South and had darker sides to their legacies as well.

Enslaved and free labor built the main house for Memminger in 1838. He joined the movement of the wealthy planter society from South Carolina's Low Country that for decades sought summer retreats in places like Flat Rock, NC. The planter elites were seeking respite from the heat and diseases of their plantations as well as the threat of revolt in a region dominated by Black labor. They believed slavery to be a positive good—the natural order supported by their understanding of history and the Bible.

Memminger practiced law in Charleston, the heart of the Low Country and home of one of the largest slave auction systems in the country. He helped his planter neighbors hold hundreds of people in bondage. And the “peculiar institution” made them all extraordinarily rich.

Memminger served on the committee that wrote the Confederate Constitution. As the first Treasurer of the Confederacy, he oversaw the finances of the Southern Cause. After the South's defeat, he supported restoring life close to slavery through the restrictive Black Codes. He was re-elected to the South Carolina legislature in 1876—the year that marked the end of Reconstruction and the beginnings of the Jim Crow South.

Memminger was a crusader in the effort to build a diversified economy in the Southern states. He was president of the first Southern company to manufacture sulfuric acid and superphosphates. He advocated for a railroad connecting the southern seaboard with the navigable waters of the western Carolinas. And he promoted the development of the first public school system in Charleston for white children.

Memminger was buried a short distance from the future Sandburg home in the cemetery at St. John-in-the-Wilderness Episcopal Church. Ironically, a memorial service was held for Sandburg at the same church nearly eighty years later.

Ellison Smyth purchased the farm in 1900 and built the barn and most of the other buildings. As a young soldier, he witnessed the first shots fired on Fort Sumter. After the war, he helped drive out newly freed people from the government, economy, and the public sphere. Wade Hampton, a notorious South Carolina politician and member of the often-violent Red Shirts, bestowed on Smyth the moniker of “Captain.” Smyth won a seat in the new “Redeemed” state congress that year.

Known as the “Dean of the Textile Men.” Smyth pioneered the use of incandescent lights and electric motors in his factories. He was also heavily involved with publishing and banking and served on numerous corporate boards.

Smyth’s parental style of capitalism trapped mill village white families in a cycle of exploitation, including their young children. In his poem, “Mill-Doors,” Sandburg writes about child labor:

You never come back.
I say good-by when I see you going in the doors,
The hopeless open doors that call and wait
And take you then for how many cents a day?
How many cents for the sleepy eyes and fingers?

In contrast to the former owners of his Connemara home, Sandburg believed in the innate possibility of good in all humanity. In *Remembrance Rock*, he writes

Some sacred seed lurks deep in each human personality, no matter how lowly its arrival on earth. To give any such seed the deepest possible roots and the highest possible flowering is the vision and hope of those ideas of freedom and discipline that constitute the American Dream.

Thanks for reading,

John Quinley is the author of the book, *Discovering Carl Sandburg: The Eclectic Life of an American Icon*, the play, *Everything, Everywhere, All the Time: The Many Lives of Carl Sandburg*, and the print series, *Letters from a Sandburg Docent*. He is a former docent at the Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site in Flat Rock, North Carolina. You may contact John at jwquinley@gmail.com.