

*The in Cemetery or archaeology with other articles on these caskets already in the file*

# JOHN C. CALHOUN'S CASKET

BY HUGH T. HARRINGTON

It is usually considered wise to get a dead body underground as soon as decency permits. However, when John C. Calhoun died in 1850, several problems presented themselves that required special consideration.

Calhoun, of course, was a celebrated politician. At the time of his death he was U.S. senator from South Carolina. In his long career he had been secretary of state, secretary of war, and vice president. It was obligatory that his body lie in state, to be followed by transport from Washington, D.C., to Charleston for burial. In the period before refrigeration and effective embalming techniques, delays in burial could be unpleasant and thus prompt burials were essential. The problems inherent in the management of the body of John C. Calhoun were solved through the use of a recently invented casket, the Fisk Metallic Burial Case.

In 1848, Almond Fisk of New York patented an airtight coffin which "consists of two shells, an upper and a lower, which join together in a horizontal line in the center, the two parts being of the same or nearly the same depth. The two shells are more or less curvilinear in nearly all their parts, and they may be made as thin as the running of the metal will admit, which they have more than sufficient strength to resist any pressure to which, in use, they are subjected." The two halves are "furnished with a flange or projecting rim for the reception of screws or rivets, the juncture being made tight by means of the well-known iron cement." to seal the halves air tight. A feature of the metal coffin was "a round plate of glass, cemented air-tight, over the face of the deceased." A metallic plate, held by one screw, covered the glass.

In Calhoun's case, it was of vital importance that "from a coffin of this description the air may be exhausted so completely as entirely to prevent the decay of the contained

body on principles well understood; or, if preferred, the coffin may be filled with any gas or fluid having the property of preventing putrefication." The Fisk casket was generally shaped to the body, with a head area, widening at the shoulders, narrowing to the feet, and a raised area for the toe end of the feet to extend vertically. Today people might refer to it as a "mummy case."

Calhoun died on Sunday, March 31, 1850, of tuberculosis. On Tuesday, April 2, his body lay in state in the Senate chamber of the Capitol building, allowing his colleagues to pay tribute to his memory. The face plate of the coffin was removed so the face of Calhoun could be viewed through the glass. A silver plate on the casket carried the inscription, "John C. Calhoun, born 18th March, 1782. Died 31st March, 1850." From the Senate chamber the casket was taken in procession to the Congressional Cemetery where it was placed in a vault to await transportation to Charleston. It was not until April 25 that the ship carrying the casket reached Charleston. After a

procession to City Hall where Calhoun lay in state, the casket was at last placed in a vault in the west cemetery of St. Philip's churchyard.

After little more than a decade, it became necessary to move Calhoun's remains for safekeeping. The Civil War was raging, and Charleston was in peril of capture by the Union army. Locals feared Calhoun's remains might be desecrated by enemy soldiers. As a precaution, on the evening of Sunday, April 15, 1863, the casket was removed from the cemetery, placed under the north gallery stairs, and covered to keep it from sight. The following night, the casket, enclosed in a wooden box, was buried next to the church. For added security, different workmen were used each night. Calhoun's remains were now safe from any depredations. The secret of the burial site was maintained

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*This undertaker's advertisement, printed in the Chicago Directory of 1855, offers a look at the sarcophagus-like Fisk Metallic Burial Case.*

*Illustration courtesy of the Museum of Funeral Customs.*



*"Battle of Newberry, 1864"*

*From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.*

under the command of Generals Butler, Hampton, and Wheeler. He wrote of that day, "The morning was fine and still. As I rode out (into the streets) the Dragoons were formed near Aunt Lizzie's (opposite the Charlotte depot)...I hoped to join them but was thought too young for the rear guard risk!" (In disagreement with those who thought him too young or "delicate" to begin his soldiering, Langdon later added this note: "Four years walking, hunting and woodcraft in the mountains, with war ever near, had hardened me.")

Though Columbia was mainly populated by women, children, and old men, and had been formally surrendered by the mayor, eyewitnesses saw federal soldiers pillaging and setting fire to houses and other buildings, and by morning much of the city was in ashes. At the time, Langdon's aunt, Harriott Middleton, was living in Columbia with several other female members of the Middleton family, and in a letter to her cousin Susan Middleton, told how Langdon left to evacuate with the Confederate troops. "Off he went," she reported, "calm and quiet as usual." Things were not so calm and quiet for the Middleton ladies who remained in the city. In the same letter, Harriott wrote of a "night of horror":

*The soldiers rushed about with pots of turpentine in one hand and pine sticks in the other. Others had*

*bundles of straw and lightwood torches. They say that in the burnt district the scenes were fearful with the drunken soldiery and helpless women and children... The men we saw told us that it was the most appalling night in their experience of war. The better men and officers were ashamed of themselves before morning. They said, 'This is a perfect Hell!' 'What a fiendish piece of work' and such like expressions.*

Langdon later noted: "I left with Mr. Smith about ten a.m....about sunset I saw the glare of burning Columbia in the south. We camped that night in the main room of an inn a few miles south of Winnsboro...I scouted the country with a man named Hooper of Wheeler's command...went by outskirts of Lexington, nothing but burned chimneys." In another note he recorded that he returned to Columbia, then "soon after March 7 went to Abbeville and Virginia."

Accompanied by his cousin Allen Wardlaw, Langdon was on his way to join his regiment in Virginia when he heard that General Robert E. Lee was preparing to surrender. At Appomattox, Lee appointed Colonel Alexander C. Haskell to lead the cavalry to the place where they were to turn over their equipment to the federals. That same month, April 1865, Langdon and his cousins returned to South Carolina. ♦



*"Battle of Stone Ford, Cedar Run"*

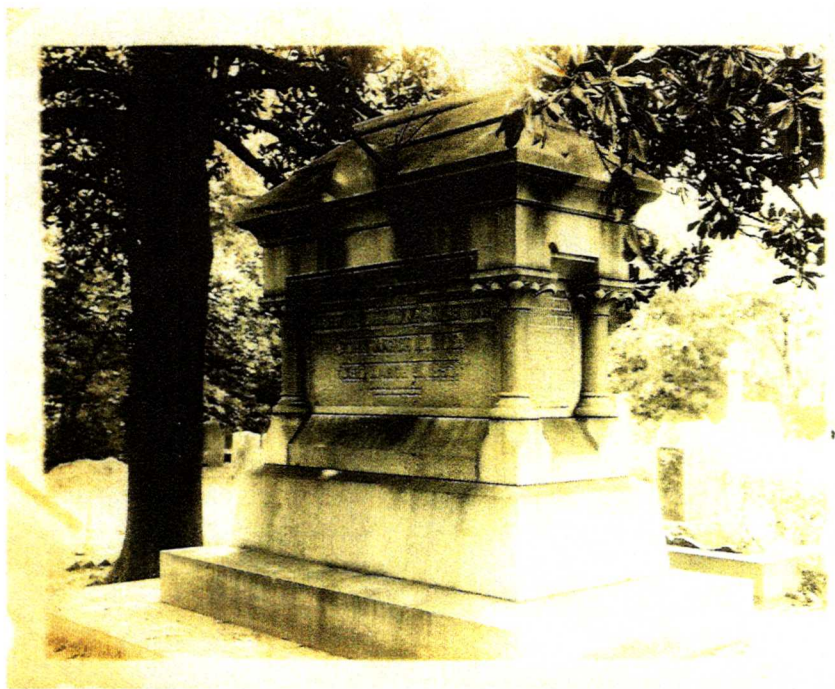
*From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.*

until 1871, when the casket was removed from its temporary grave and deposited in its original location. In 1884, the casket was unearthed once again and placed in its present position under an imposing monument.

If any casket other than the innovative Fisk Metallic Burial Case had been utilized, the remains of John C. Calhoun would likely have remained in Washington and never have been brought to Charleston. Due to decay, the removal of any traditional casket after a decade would have been impossible as well.

The story of Calhoun's casket does not end with its final burial. The casket was so well thought of that four days after the ceremony at the Capitol, a letter signed by twelve sitting United States senators was sent to the manufacturer. It stated:

*Gentlemen: We witnessed the utility of your ornamental 'Patent Metallic Burial Case' used to convey the remains of the late Hon. John C. Calhoun to the Congressional Cemetery, which impressed us with the belief that it is the best article known to us for transporting the dead to their final resting-place.*



*After it was moved to prevent desecration by Union soldiers during the Civil War, John C. Calhoun's casket was reinterred in its original grave in 1871. Today, his final resting place is marked by an impressive monument in the cemetery of St. Philip's Church in Charleston.*

*From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.*

The letter was signed by:

Henry Clay  
Daniel Webster  
Lewis Cass  
J.M. Berrien  
D.S. Dickinson  
Jefferson Davis  
James M. Mason  
W.R. King  
D.R. Atchison  
Henry Dodge  
A.C. Greene  
W.P. Mangum

The written endorsement of the Fisk Metallic Burial Case by the senators was an advertising opportunity not to be overlooked. The letter was published in newspapers as an advertising campaign by the manufacturer. ♦

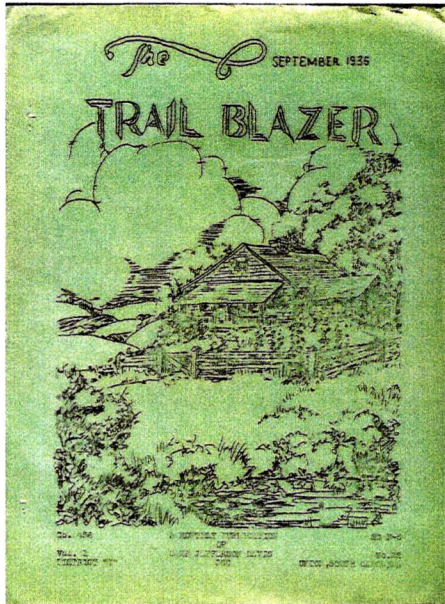
*Hugh T. Harrington is an independent researcher and the author of three books plus numerous articles. He lives in Milledgeville, Georgia.*

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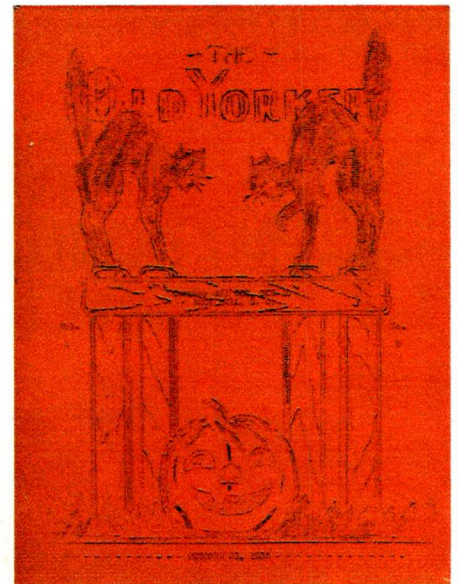
# Chronicles of Life in South Carolina's CCC Camps

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was formed in 1933, as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. This public work relief program, designed to combat high unemployment resulting from the Great Depression, created natural resource conservation programs across the country. Corp members lived in camps, eighteen of which were formed in South Carolina. Most of the camps produced newsletters for their local corps members. Housed in the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society are issues of newsletters from nearly a dozen state camps, including *The Old Yorker* (Rock Hill), *The Cherokeean* (Cheraw), *The Pinopolian* (Moncks Corner), *The Trail Blazer* (Union), *Poinsett Pointers* (Wedgefield), and *Hi-Land Hi-Lites* (Greer). Hand-illustrated and

typewritten, the newsletters include notices of activities and camp news, along with cartoons, jokes, poems, and sports updates. More importantly, they offer a humanizing—and often amusing—glimpse behind the scenes of the New Deal in South Carolina.

## Football

We are still wondering what happened to the Carolina football team last week when it met the fast and powerful team from the piedmont section of South Carolina. And we are surprised that the supporters of the Carolina team so suddenly became quiet around camp after the game. It was the writer's great pleasure to see this Clemson team with the great Joe Berry and all in action at the game. But after praising the Clemson team with their great team and team work, we wish to say that never in the face of greater opposition did the lighter team from South Carolina show more determination and never for a moment did the team slow up or give up that one great thing that is essential to any good team and that is the fight that the Carolina team showed throughout the game. It is to Carolina and their gameness that we are reminded of the great saying "It is not whether you won or lost but how you played the game". It is felt by the writer that Carolina should be very proud of the way that their team went through the game even though they were outclassed all afternoon.



For the amusement of all lets make a selection of a few teams for the games this week as to the out come and about what the scores will be. Our picks for the games of the week are as follows:

Furman 40	Citadel 0	Notre Dame 13	Ohio State 7
Clemson 26	Mercer 6	Duke 19	Tenn. 14
Carolina 19	V.P.I. 12	No. Carolina 13	N.C. State 0

—A.L. Pearce, "The Old Yorker," October 1935