

The Cottage That Rufus Watched

By Paul Brown



In the St. Andrew's-Sewanee campus, just past the stone-columned entrance, trees line the left side of Quintard Road. After a hundred yards or so, the trees clear back to reveal a dark creek line cutting through the property, and beyond it, a little red-shingled cottage with tan siding.

Formerly known as the Stroup cottage, it was built around 1910 of uninsulated tongue-in-groove walls, beadboard ceiling, and one-inch wood flooring, its few small rooms heated by a coal stove. Since then, the house has been remodeled more than once. By the late 1940s, the structure's north end was extended to add a fireplace, built-in bookshelves, and Craftsman accents. A more recent addition juts out as a gabled room to the left of the porch. Despite these changes, the front entrance remains the same, and the central dining room retains much of its original wood.

If you say there isn't anything remarkable about the humble dwelling, you would be correct, architecturally speaking. But the house played a significant part in the development of a writer who lived here in adolescence, between ages nine and 14. Perhaps you've heard of him—he is arguably the most famous of St. Andrew's-Sewanee's alumni. This is the last of his Tennessee homes that is still standing.

To be fair, the bright but sensitive boy, Rufus, did not live in this cottage full time. He spent two summers vacationing here with his mother and sister. When he entered St. Andrew's as a student in fall of 1919, his mother insisted that he stay in a dormitory

with the other boys. Despite the move, Rufus routinely ran back to the cottage for motherly comfort. Classmates teased him for being a mama's boy, and the student council disciplined him for leaving campus without permission.

Rufus was fatherless. A hundred years ago this May, along a dark and narrow road outside Knoxville, his father died when his Model T struck an embankment and overturned. Rufus, who almost idolized his father, was suddenly without a strong male presence in his life. To compensate, his mother moved the family to St. Andrew's, hoping that Rufus might make friends and gain an academic and spiritual mentor.

He found that mentor in Father James Flye, a history teacher hired the previous fall. What began as a teacher-student relationship developed into a friendship that lasted long after Rufus left St. Andrew's, and throughout the varied writing career that introduced Rufus to the world as James Agee—groundbreaking journalist of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, lyricist of “Knoxville:



Summer of 1915,” influential film critic for *Time* and *The Nation*, Oscar-nominated screenwriter of *The African Queen*, and Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *A Death in the Family*.

In 1951, Agee published a novella, *The Morning Watch*, based on his experiences as a St. Andrew's student during the Holy Week vigil. Parts of campus are described in great detail, notably the 1914 Spanish Mission-style chapel. Also depicted is the “Sand Cut” swimming hole, a once-abandoned silica mine one mile east of campus, now owned by Sequatchie Concrete Service. And in another passage, the main character, Richard, watches a small cottage through the trees, hoping to catch his mother's attention.

This book, and Agee's posthumously published letters to Flye, cemented the reputations of both men and their connections to St. Andrew's. The school honored Agee in 1972 when it opened the James Agee Memorial Library. And, 10 years ago, the school relocated—rather than demolished—Father Flye's 1915 bungalow to make way for McCrory Hall for the Performing Arts. That house, where Agee visited Father and Mrs. Flye many times, is now a short walk from the old campus cemetery, where Agee's mother, Laura Wright, is buried beside her second husband.

Today, people on campus associate the Agee cottage with Tom and Burki Gladstone, its current residents of almost 11 years, who have worked at St. Andrew's for more than two decades. The Gladstones knew of Agee's connection to the school and house before they moved in and consider it “a privilege” to live there. “As a history teacher, I feel the spirit of those people, like Agee's mom and sister, who lived here before we did,” Burki says. “When gardening, I often find shards of pottery and refuse that they left behind!” Those artifacts might be older than she thinks: a campus map, hand-drawn by the Rev. Robert Campbell in 1940 and archived in Agee Library, suggests that the cottage was built on a former Native American settlement, as “many Indian relics” had been found nearby.

Look for this little-known literary landmark next time you're driving by, and think of Rufus Agee—the boy-turned-writer who once sought refuge here.

Paul Brown teaches music in East Tennessee and, in his spare time, researches local history. His book, Rufus: James Agee's East Tennessee Roots, will be published later this year.

PHOTO 1: The Agee cottage near St. Andrew's campus, circa 1920. Photo: Hugh Tyler Collection, McClung Historical Collection. **PHOTO 2:** The cottage as it appears today. Photo by Paul Brown.