

Canary Cottage

By Julia Whicker, Elon University

Charlotte Hawkins Brown's Canary Cottage stands like a hatbox, rooms faint with dust, boards smelling of dried sunlight. Old houses, like time, change me inside. I have grown up in old houses, these relics from the early 1900s or even before, always thinking of the parties held beneath their roofs, now too-silent. Their stately grace implies history, their quietness draws the awe from beneath my skin and I stand there, like in the parlor of Canary Cottage, wondering about the past.

Charlotte's house, like many in the immediate area, dates to the 1920s. The Twenties were like the Seventies -- decades of wretched excess -- and still these houses wait for us, like their age has taught them nothing and everything. Their backbones straight and secrets dying under wood floors, they hint at mystery with every creak of the boards. Canary Cottage, residence of Charlotte Hawkins Brown, is like the other houses I have been in, even the one I grew up in -- catching afternoon light before it dies into purple dusk and turning it, crystal-like, into each upstairs room, yellowing walls which are already yellow with age and laughter and tears. I imagine shadows might be burned into these walls -- in some radiant historical moment as potent as a nuclear bomb. Figures remain fixed in my mind -- Charlotte, her little nieces, perhaps braiding hair and laughing.

Old houses. Here in the South, they are their own breed, each style like its own novel character. Certainly, the presence of these relics is no surprise in New Orleans, Charleston, Savannah. Those houses are Greek Revival style, or antebellum mansions, roofed with dignity and tradition. Here, old-style planters lived -- they came from the islands and made their money in tobacco and sugarcane. This is the white-tipped, cavalier South out of storybooks.

Charlotte's home, Canary Cottage, is not like this. She finds no legendary grandeur in North Carolina when she steps off the train from Cambridge, Massachusetts, her childhood home. Instead, she is greeted by dusty ground and overbearing trees. Sedalia is a rural and undeveloped place, hot in the summer, cold in the winter, sparsely populated and broken-backed. But here she finds enough interest and aid to build Palmer Memorial Institute, a preparatory school for African-Americans, and, in the 1920s, her beloved Canary Cottage.

Canary Cottage is just that, a cottage. It stands like a present waiting to be given. Old houses like Charlotte's dot North Carolina, usually confined within neighborhoods of similar structures, all with those sweet-smelling floors and ultra-bright kitchens, all with birds screaming outside the windows during tawny June evenings, screened porches stretching miles long across their sides and fronts and backs, like distended arms covered in mosquito netting. She kept yellows canaries in her office, like the fashion, and I imagine their tiny throats vibrating all day as they hopped back and forth between perches.

Inside, it has all the character of an old house -- it smells of light and laughter and of the people who have slept there and their anger and frustration and disappointment, of their families and personal joys and tragedies, and even of their learning. The piano on the first floor reminds me of half-learned Chopin. The quiet here is the silence of a place which has once been loud. It retains a ghostly imprint of conversations past. Here, people spoke about everything, from saucapans and napkins to equality of the races, and possibly of Twentieth Century marvels, like the invention of flight or war-weapons that could kill millions. This house holds memories both good and bad, of the sublime and the lonely, so perhaps

Charlotte even, in a more melancholy moment, ponders days lost to her own choices -- all those sedentary years in Sedalia, all her nights without a husband or children of her own.

Charlotte's home stands alone, just as she did. Was this a place she felt lonely? Did she ever need a life more ordinary, not surrounded at all times by men and women of prestige and education, not roped in on three sides by the children of the elite? The Cottage was a lighthouse from which Charlotte could watch students, teachers, and skinny farm cats moving slowly across the grounds. At times it must have been lonely because she was the leader, at others, comforting to be among so many friends and loved ones. But her back was straight like the walls and corners of her cottage. She remains, like her campus.

These old houses change me. Inside them, I feel I walk through glass mirrors and see the world refracted and painted as it should be and not how it has so far been. Canary Cottage was a pinpoint on the map of Charlotte's dreams -- just an icing, really, a place for herself among the world she created for her students. Here, she did the right thing. The walls of Canary Cottage are yellow like happiness. The shadows against them are long and bluegray and sad and they rise up and down the walls, a juxtaposition of the joyous and the melancholy. Charlotte moved around her self-made world for a half a century, and saw the men and women she helped educate grow to lead a nation, and still Canary Cottage is nearly the same as she left it. The shadows still rise and fall on the yellow walls, the boards still creak underfoot and the sunlight still bends like through a prism into the bedrooms. And Charlotte would still be proud.