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INTRODUCTION: Out of Hell Hole Swamp

Robert Evander McNair grew up on the large family farm, Ballsdam, near Jamestown in the Hell Hole Swamp of Berkeley County. He was born at the home of an aunt at Cades, South Carolina, on December 14, 1923, to Daniel Evander and Claudia Crawford McNair.

In 1942, McNair joined the U.S. Naval Reserve as a Lieutenant (j.g.) and served until his discharge in 1946. His war service included twenty-two months with the 7th Amphibious Forces in the Pacific Theater. McNair was awarded the Bronze Star for rescuing sailors from a burning ship that had been hit by a Japanese kamikaze attack while managing to keep his own vessel and crew safe in the midst of battle in the Philippines.

On May 30, 1944, he married Josephine Robinson of Allendale, S.C. At left, the couple celebrates McNair's election to a full term as governor in 1966.

Like many returning war veterans who chose to attend college, McNair enrolled at the University of South Carolina and earned an A.B. in 1947. He continued on to the School of Law, where he was awarded an LL.B. in 1948, and he was admitted that same year to the South Carolina Bar.

The McNairs moved from Moncks Corner in Berkeley County, to Allendale, where McNair joined with fellow attorney Thomas O. Lawton to form the McNair and Lawton law firm. Upon his elevation to the governorship in 1965, McNair resigned from the firm, which by that time had become McNair, Lawton & Myrick.

In 1950, McNair was elected to represent Allendale County in the South Carolina House of Representatives. He served in that capacity through 1962. While in the House, McNair served as chairman of the Labor, Commerce and Industry Committee (1953-1955) and the Judiciary Committee (1955-1963).

In 1962, he was elected Lieutenant Governor and began serving under Donald S. Russell in 1963. Following the unexpected death of U.S. Senator Olin D. Johnston in 1965, McNair succeeded Russell to the governorship and appointed the former governor to the empty senatorial seat.
A GOVERNOR OF THE NEW SOUTH

Upon the resignation of Governor Donald S. Russell in 1965, Lt. Governor Robert McNair acceded to the governorship. At right, he is sworn in for a full term in January 1967. As the state's top executive he encountered the full brunt of the challenges as well as the opportunities inherent in such tumultuous times. His overarching interest was the advancement of South Carolina in all areas of his responsibility such as education, industrial development, promotion of tourism, and the improvement of the quality of life for all in the state. Many of his challenges were related to the civil rights movement, which he faced resolutely and with a moderate tone.

McNair developed great expertise in education issues. He chaired the Executive Committee of the Education Commission of the States from 1968 to 1969 and served on its Steering Committee in 1970. At left, he attends the 1967 meeting of the Commission at Hilton Head. The Commission’s objectives included bringing together the political and educational leadership to further the understanding of the problems and opportunities facing education. During the time McNair chaired the Commission, some forty-one states and territories were members. McNair also served as Chairman of the Southern Regional Education Board, which was founded in 1948 at the request of Southern leaders in business, education and government.
It was the nation’s first compact for education, created to improve every aspect of education.

The “Moody Report,” officially titled *Opportunity and Growth in South Carolina, 1968-1985*, was compiled at McNair’s request to analyze the status of education, transportation, health care and other areas affected by government and make specific recommendations on how best to advance South Carolina over the coming decades. Published in 1968 and over 440 pages in length, the report provided a level of analysis and financial data never before available to the state’s leaders and challenged some long-held assumptions. As the Walt Lardner cartoon at right suggests, the Governor came up against some opposition to the report, led principally by Speaker of the House Sol Blatt.

In the same spirit of improvement, McNair created by executive order the Planning and Grants Division, whose purpose was to bring all state agencies and departments together in an effort to plan for and make the best use of federal grants and assistance. According to McNair’s news secretary, Wayne Seal, “This unit is a pioneer effort to make meaningful and comprehensive evaluations of our future needs and to program for the future.”

The Governor and his staff worked diligently to develop a cordial and beneficial relationship with the federal government. McNair believed such a relationship was critical to the future of the state since South Carolinians must deal with leaders in Washington, and the best way to do that was to make sure state and federal representatives understood each other. His office maintained a full-time federal-state coordinator, Robert Alexander, whose main task was to keep tabs on federal developments that in some way affected South Carolina. Other states looked to McNair’s administration for guidance in establishing similar offices.
THE CHALLENGE OF CIVIL RIGHTS

McNair faced a multitude of challenges during his term as governor, many of which stemmed from civil rights issues and particularly the integration of public schools. Desegregation in South Carolina was accomplished relatively peacefully, with McNair a voice of moderation and compromise in contrast to the more adamant states’ rights views of most other Southern governors. Still, his term in office was not immune to crises.

On February 8, 1968, a confrontation between police and black students demonstrating at South Carolina State College in Orangeburg resulted in the deaths of three students and injury to at least twenty-five others. The initial protest was a call to desegregate a bowling alley and other local businesses. When emotions escalated, students began throwing objects at state highway patrolmen, who eventually opened fire. Quickly following the incident, S.C. National Guardsmen were sent to Orangeburg to keep the peace. (Photo by Bill Barley) Nine patrolmen were tried and, after pleading self-defense, acquitted. The leader of the protesting students, Cleveland Sellers, was arrested, tried, and convicted for rioting and inciting to riot.

On March 20, 1969, black hospital workers at the Medical College of South Carolina in Charleston went on strike to protest the firing of twelve employees and to call for higher wages and union recognition. (Photo at left by Bill Barley) McNair, citing state law, refused to recognize the attempts to unionize. The strike attracted national attention when Southern Christian Leadership Conference leader, Ralph Abernathy, marched with the striking workers. Tensions were further heightened on April 28, when armed black protestors took over two buildings at Voorhees College in Denmark, S.C. A standoff between the police and the protestors lasted one day before the protestors surrendered and were arrested. McNair said of the incident, “Whatever the cause, there will be no negotiation at gunpoint in our state.” The strike lasted until June 27, when the workers and hospital administrators reached an agreement. Some of the workers’ demands were met, but their union was not recognized.

In January 1970, federal courts ordered the integration of the Greenville and Darlington County public schools by February 9. McNair provided strong leadership, urging South Carolinians to accept the order and move forward. In a speech broadcast on television on January 28, McNair counseled, “We’ve run out of courts, and we’ve run out of time, and we must adjust to new circumstances.... [The issue facing us] is too important to get drawn into political chicanery and political hypocrisy, and I think it is time for everyone to be honest and sincere to the people of South Carolina and quit holding out false hopes....”
On the ABC network news, commentator Howard K. Smith stated, “Now is the time for all good men to praise Governor Robert McNair of South Carolina. With emotions at a peak over school integration in the South, he said yesterday things it took courage for a Southern Governor to say: stop defiance, accept law, comply. There are no rewards for saying that. Segregationists trying to make water flow uphill will scathe him. Blacks, getting some, but not getting all they want, won’t be happy.... Governor McNair’s words were those of a statesman.”

James Batten, of the Detroit Free Press, wrote, “For the first time in nearly a decade, angry roars of defiance echoed throughout the South last week as Dixie braced for another spasm of massive school desegregation. More than 35 school districts accounting for 700,000 students in eight southern states are scheduled to switch to total integration in the next few days. The bristling rhetoric pouring out of Deep South governors’ offices recalled earlier showdowns between state and federal authority.... A notable exception to the pattern came in South Carolina, where Gov. Robert E. McNair dramatically counseled his people to avoid defiance and bow gracefully to the inevitable.” In response to McNair’s speech, Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy wrote on January 28, “I hope some of us can be so courageous in the North.”

On March 3, 1970, in Lamar, S.C., school buses carrying black children were met by a mob of 100 to 200 men and women who stopped and overturned the buses, which were being used to implement a new program integrating the Lamar public schools. The shocking event drew national attention to the state and, along with the subsequent trial of those arrested, brought a flood of mail addressed to the governor from across South Carolina and the nation. These letters represented a cross-section of public opinion, such as these two telegrams, which arrived within minutes of one another — “Demand you stop persecuting people of Darlington County who are fighting tyrants,” and “Prosecute Lamar rioters to full extent of law.”
Even considering these crises, South Carolina's schools were integrated with a minimum of such intense confrontations when compared with other Southern states at the time. This was accomplished largely as a result of the conciliatory efforts of Governor McNair.

Left, a cartoon by Eugene Payne, who inscribed along the bottom: "With great admiration for a governor who 'held the door open.'"
ATTRACTING INDUSTRY & TOURISM

McNair brought great energy and creativity to his efforts to boost industrial development and diversification. He was considered the “top salesman” in attracting new businesses and industries to South Carolina and frequently joined industry-hunting groups when they visited top executives.

At right, the Governor celebrates the 1965 groundbreaking for Marvel Mills, Inc., at Bishopville.

Marvel Mills was just one among many corporations and plants, including other textile companies, chemical facilities, food processing plants, and a wide variety of other businesses, wooed to the state by the McNair administration.

Shown below, Governor McNair enjoys one of the first Swanson fried chicken dinners produced at the Campbell Soup Company's then new Swanson frozen foods plant located in Sumter. Plant manager Geryl L. Gardner stands near holding the TV dinner box and anxiously awaiting the verdict.

Not all attempts at industrial expansion worked out for the administration, however. The proposed location of the German Badische Anilin und Soda Fabrik (BASF) chemical plant near Hilton Head resulted in a storm of opposition from late 1969 through 1970. Included in the flood of letters to the Governor’s office was one from future president Jimmy Carter in Plains, Georgia. He wrote: “I am intensely interested personally in the strictest protection of our estuarine areas, and hope that you will do everything in your power to prevent any possibility of damage, even to the extent of relocation of the plant if necessary.”

Others, however, were very concerned about maintaining the positive image South Carolina was developing among domestic and foreign investors, and called for caution before summarily rejecting BASF. Speaker of the House Sol Blatt sent McNair a copy of Blatt’s response to a concerned citizen (26 Dec. 1969): “Before we stop the investment of hundreds of millions of dollars in South Carolina by some foreign corporation because of pollution, we must be certain of our position or otherwise our state will begin to lose industry which we so badly need.” According to a memorandum, McNair’s office had received approximately 350 letters on the subject by March 6, 1970, and mail continued to pour in until at least October.

The plant was not built. However, in general, the Governor's industrial record proves him to have been adept at attracting new and diverse businesses to South Carolina.
Tourism held great potential for growth, and as a central part of his development plans for the state, McNair was diligent in promoting its historic charm, leisure opportunities, and natural beauty.

In 1966 he and his family traveled to Toronto to publicize the attractions of "Semi-Tropical South Carolina" at the Canadian National Exhibition, right.

Following up on a proposal by the Governor, the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism was created in 1967 specifically to further develop and promote state attractions. To facilitate the travels of anticipated visitors, the department made a priority of creating a state-wide system of rest stops and welcome centers along interstate highways.
1962: Lieutenant Governor

Robert McNair began his political career by serving ten years as representative for Allendale County in the General Assembly. In 1961 he set his sights on South Carolina's executive offices.

In the summer of 1961 McNair announced he would run for lieutenant governor in 1962. Two other Democratic hopefuls threw their hats into the ring: Oconee County Senator Marshall J. Parker and Greenville County Representative Rex Carter. Early in 1962 Carter withdrew from the campaign.

At an Allendale fund-raises in April 1962, McNair declared, "It is my sincere desire to serve wherever I can in South Carolina. If I am given the opportunity to serve in a high office, I shall do everything I can to deserve that office." Explaining his interest in the office, Parker stated, "I believe this office affords one of the highest opportunities to be of service to our state. The decisions and appointments by the Lt. Governor, as presiding officer of the Senate, can very well determine the future course of South Carolina."

The race for lieutenant governor was particularly hard-fought that year, as both candidates were popular. According to the Anderson Daily Mail: "For the first time in the memory of political observers, the lieutenant governor's contest has been waged on a large scale — with billboards, pretty campaign girls, well-staffed offices and the other expensive devices usually reserved for well-financed governor and U.S. Senate races." Once the dust settled on primary night in June, McNair had won with 155,000 votes to Parker's 115,000. He was unopposed in the general election.

1966: Governor

Following the sudden death of U.S. Senator Olin D. Johnston in 1965, Governor Donald Russell resigned as South Carolina's chief executive. McNair succeeded Russell to the office and appointed the former governor to the empty senatorial seat. In 1966, having served a partial term, McNair campaigned for a full term.
He was unopposed for the Democratic nomination, so he focused his attention on the general election and his opponent, Clarendon County Representative Joseph O. Rogers, Jr. (*right*), who switched to the Republican Party just before announcing his gubernatorial candidacy. At the announcement Rogers stated, "My political philosophy is close to Sen. [Strom] Thurmond's and has been for many years."

The campaign was tough, and many harsh accusations were hurled between Republicans and Democrats. At a press conference Rogers described the unusual circumstances of McNair's rise to the governorship as "arranging a double promotion" in collusion with Russell. According to an article in *The State* newspaper, McNair responded to the charge by saying "he has no apologies to anyone for appointing Russell to the U.S. Senate." He also "advised his Republican opponent and the GOP state chairman to take a lesson in constitutional government."

While parrying the verbal thrusts of his opponent, McNair continued to make appearances around the state, meeting his constituents and outlining his platform. At left, he confers with a voter at the West Virginia Pulp and Paper Company in North Charleston.

On election night, 1966, McNair's perseverance paid off with a decisive victory. He had been elected to a full term with 255,854 votes to Rogers' 184,088. In the pictures below, he celebrates the exciting results with his wife Josephine and eldest daughter Robin.

In the wake of McNair's election, an editorial in *The Greenville News* explained, "His 'low-key' method of operation is deceptive to many, but those close to state government know he has handled both crises and routine problems...and has started revamping internal administrative operations in a most effective
manner." The editor continued by declaring McNair's victory "a personal one. He ran his own campaign in his own way and his sincerity and dedication came through to the voters."
THE WAR IN VIETNAM

In the 1960s and 1970s the war in Vietnam occupied the hearts and minds of most Americans, and they responded to the turbulence in a variety of ways.

Many South Carolinians sponsored chapters of the Rally Support for Vietnam Personnel (RSVP) program in an effort to support U.S. troops fighting in Southeast Asia. Over one hundred civic clubs, church groups and other organizations in the Columbia area “adopted” units of the 1st Cavalry Airmobile Division as part of the morale-boosting program. At right and below, some fruits of the RSVP program - a soldier of the 1st Cavalry marks a piece of equipment as he and fellow troops join with the South Vietnamese to build a school house in An Khe.

Governor McNair urged South Carolinians to support the war effort. Speaking at the 43rd Annual "Singing on the Mountain" at Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina, McNair said, "We would urge Americans to stand together and let our men in Vietnam know that we are behind them 100 percent." He also believed that the American people "are still dedicated to the great principles on which this country was founded."

U.S. Army Chief of Staff, and native South Carolinian, General William C. Westmoreland was feted in Columbia with a dinner in his honor on November 11, 1968. The evening was a generally light-hearted affair, but according to The Columbia Record one "punctuated sharply at times with poignant reminders of the Vietnam War." The guest list included Senators Hollings and Thurmond and comedian Bob Hope, whose wife Dolores sits chatting with McNair and the General in the picture at right.
In 1970 President Richard Nixon assembled a thirteen-member fact-finding task force on the Indo-China War comprised of U.S. governors, senators and congressmen. Governor McNair (left) and other members of the group embarked on an inspection tour of U.S. operations in South Vietnam and Cambodia in June of that year. As part of the tour, they visited a center for Communist defectors in the Mekong Delta and questioned village officials in Huu Thanh about the success of the pacification program, before crossing the border to visit the Cambodian district capital of Kompong Trach.

In something of a reciprocal visit, a group of officers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam arrived at Fort Jackson to begin a four-day stay in Columbia in September of 1970. The purpose of their visit was to learn about the training programs and overall mission of the Fort. Their itinerary also included tours of the Governor's Mansion, the Capitol, the farmers' market, and the Tricentennial Exposition Center.
The year 1970 marked the 300th anniversary of the 1670 founding of Charles Town (Charleston), the first permanent settlement in the colony of South Carolina. The Tricentennial was an opportunity for all South Carolinians to celebrate their heritage and the rich history and traditions of their state.

Governor McNair created the Tricentennial Commission in 1966 to coordinate and oversee official preparations for statewide events and projects in observance of the historic milestone.

From June 27th to July 5th of 1970, Governor and Mrs. McNair traveled with a small party to London as part of a tour of European industries that had investments in South Carolina. While in London, the McNairs socialized with the Queen Mother and other dignitaries, and invited members of the royal family to visit South Carolina during the Tricentennial. The Queen Mother expressed interest in fielding entries in the first annual international steeplechase event, which was to be held in Camden as a major feature of the state’s 300th anniversary.

The royal family had already arranged to make artifacts of the colonial and revolutionary period available for display in South Carolina during the Tricentennial observance. These included a Francis Marion battle flag that was captured by the British at Savannah and a flintlock rifle that had once belonged to an upcountry South Carolina patriot. In September several British dignitaries visited the state to attend the Camden steeplechase and other Tricentennial events.
Throughout 1970 the McNairs found themselves traveling to towns around the state to attend local commemorative celebrations and ceremonies. At left, they take part in Tricentennial events in Charleston (front row of grandstand, 2nd and 3rd from left).

In April of that year, the Governor declared: "From its humble beginning on the banks of the Ashley River, near the present city of Charleston, South Carolina has matured through its three centuries of development to one of the most progressive states in America. ...[W]hile we pause to reflect upon our great heritage and appreciate the sacrifice of the great men and women who have molded South Carolina into what it is today, we look also to the next century with a renewed enthusiasm and determination to bring about an even greater degree of prosperity and happiness to our citizens."