

South Carolina Political Collections

The University of South Carolina

Solomon Blatt

(1895-1986)

Papers, 1918, 1921, 1938-1986

- Volume:** 20 linear feet, plus scrapbooks
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Biographical Note:

“Sol Blatt is one of those unique political leaders whose influence is based on forthrightness of purpose, personal probity, political courage, and deep personal loyalty. When issues become tense, many may wilt under pressures; but never Sol. You always know exactly where he stands. And when friends are involved and their course is right, they can be assured of Sol’s unswerving support.”

— *U.S. Senator Donald Russell, March 5, 1966*

One of the legends of twentieth-century South Carolina politics, Solomon Blatt was born on February 27, 1895, in Blackville, South Carolina. His father, Nathan Blatt, had emigrated to the United States from Russia in 1893, finding work as a traveling peddler in South Carolina. Shortly thereafter, he settled in Blackville, opened a store, and sent for his wife, Mollie, and their son, Jake. Solomon and his younger sister Rebecca (“Beck”) were born over the next several years.

Speaking of his childhood, Sol Blatt later told his biographer, John K. Cauthen, “[I]n some ways we didn’t share in community life. I suppose I suffered a good many boyhood disappointments because I wasn’t invited to parties. There were some people who mocked us because we were Jews from a foreign land, but the goodness of many others more than made up for such things. What with going to school, doing homework, clerking in the store and bringing in the wood for fires at home, I was pretty well occupied most of the time.”

Sol Blatt’s beginnings in a working-class Jewish immigrant family were to influence strongly his perspective and political career, particularly in his interest in public education, as his parents had no formal education. Blatt himself was able to attend the University of South Carolina, where he



began at the age of sixteen, and finished in 1917 with a law degree. He was to remain a lifelong and devoted supporter of the University, serving for a time on the Board of Trustees.

After his graduation, Blatt returned to his home county of Barnwell to enter law practice with future South Carolina governor Emile Harley. Although Blatt had been found physically unfit for military service in the World War, he appealed to then-Congressman James F. Byrnes for help in getting a waiver allowing him to serve. Blatt was eventually sent to France, where he remained with his regiment until early 1919.

Returning to Barnwell, Blatt married Ethel Green of Sumter in March 1920. Their only child, Solomon Blatt, Jr., was born the following year. Blatt Sr. continued his practice of law with Harley until 1934,

when he joined with Ira Fales to form the new firm of Blatt and Fales, which remained an active firm for the next fifty years.

Blatt's first bid for elective office, in 1930, was an unsuccessful race for the South Carolina House. In later years, Blatt pointed to his religion as a factor in his loss in this race, although he generally felt it was not a major handicap or issue in his career. Two years later, Blatt won election to the House in an unopposed race. He soon took a role in the House leadership, becoming Speaker pro tem in 1935 and Speaker in 1937.

During the election of 1946, Blatt had little difficulty securing re-election to his own seat from Barnwell County. However, gubernatorial candidate Strom Thurmond's campaign was based largely on denigrating Blatt, the Barnwell delegation, and the rule of the "Barnwell Ring," referring to the prominence of Barnwell County natives in state government. Blatt, physically ill and embittered by Thurmond's attacks, decided not to run for the Speakership in the ensuing session of the General Assembly. However, in 1950, he decided to seek the office again for the 1951 session, and was successful in winning it. He remained in the Speaker's chair for the next twenty-two years.



Blatt's approach as the presiding officer of the House was generally viewed as dignified, efficient, adherent to formal parliamentary procedure, and for the most part, impartial. His style of leadership was described by James F. Byrnes in 1963: "If in Mr. Blatt's opinion legislation on any subject is necessary for the public good, instead of introducing it himself, he will suggest its introduction by the member he believes most capable of pressing it to enactment, then he will give it his support." Blatt was also given to grooming and mentoring young legislators through the committee assignments he made. His skill at strategic legislative maneuvers, and his wide-ranging influence, led Governor Donald Russell to state that "[p]ractically every young political leader of this State, who has moved forward, has been a pupil in the Sol Blatt School of Political Education, and owes a large part of his success to the wise counsel and unfailing encouragement of Sol."

The years of Blatt's House leadership saw great changes in South Carolina. The state's economy became far more industrialized behind the efforts of a succession of development-minded governors, beginning with Ernest F. Hollings. Blatt's district was particularly affected by the arrival of the Savannah River Plant nuclear facility in the Barnwell area, as well as the later additions of the Chem-Nuclear waste site and the Allied General nuclear plant. Blatt remained active throughout his years in the legislature in attempting to bring still more industry to Barnwell County.

Another important change for the state was the restructuring of state and local government. When Blatt first came to office, South Carolina's districting for the General Assembly included at-large voting for House representatives within each county. In addition, generally speaking, each county elected one Senator—the exception being the most populous counties, which were assigned more seats in the Senate. The U.S. Supreme Court, in the 1960s, struck down such arrangements in favor of single-member districts for both House and Senate. House districts, including Blatt's, were realigned in the early 1970s in accordance with this ruling. At the same time, under the 1975 Home Rule Act, local and county governments, elected by county residents, largely took control over local issues. This was a change from the previous arrangement, in which a county's legislative delegation dictated the governance, appointments, and budget for that county. The net result was the weakening of the power of the county delegations, including Barnwell's. The Barnwell Ring, if it had ever existed—Blatt insisted it was a myth—could not have flourished under the new system.



Blatt insisted this was the only 'Barnwell Ring' he knew about

In 1973, Blatt announced that he would voluntarily step down from the Speakership at the age of 78. Upon so doing, he was promptly designated "Speaker Emeritus" by the House membership, a title he held until his death.



Blatt's later years were marred by the long illness of his wife Ethel, who suffered from Alzheimer's disease for several years before her death in 1985, and his own declining health, which eventually left him dependent upon a walker or wheelchair. However, he continued his work in his legal offices as well as in the legislature. At the time of his death on May 14, 1986, he was planning, with the encouragement of many friends and colleagues, to seek yet another term in the House.

Scope and Content Note:

Public Papers chiefly relate to Blatt's role as a member of the South Carolina House of Representatives from Barnwell County, 1933-1986, and as Speaker, 1935-1946 and 1951-1973. The series includes general files, recommendations, and topical files. Recommendations include letters from Blatt on behalf of friends and constituents seeking jobs, state government appointments, and entry into USC and other schools.

Topical files cover the bulk of Blatt's General Assembly work. Files on Barnwell County reflect the changing structure of local and county government over the years, as power shifted from the legislative delegation of Sol Blatt and Edgar Brown to local entities. A file on the "Barnwell Ring" documents gubernatorial candidate Strom Thurmond's attacks on Blatt and Brown. After House redistricting in the 1970s, Blatt's district included, at various times, portions of Allendale and Bamberg Counties as well as Barnwell County. Folders on these

counties and their governance are also present in this series. Of particular interest is a file relating to the influx of Savannah River Plant employees and their families into Barnwell County, and the effects on Barnwell's public school system. Additional material on Barnwell's nuclear facilities is located under "Energy, Nuclear."



Materials on the General Assembly include correspondence with colleagues, schedules, and records relating to Blatt's administration of committee, page, and staff appointments, honors accorded Blatt by the legislature, the various races for Speaker of the House. Blatt's vote-counting and relentless push for written commitments from House members are particularly well documented in the files relating to the 1950-1951 race for the Speakership.

Personal Papers consist of General files, papers relating to Mrs. Ethel Blatt, Campaigns, Charitable Donations, Condolences, Legal files, and Topical. General files consist largely of correspondence, mostly from friends and family. Mrs. Blatt's papers include correspondence to her and information on her care during her lengthy illness. Campaign materials span

from 1940 until 1986, including financial forms, correspondence, and information on campaign publicity. Legal files document the administration of Blatt's law firm, Blatt and Fales, and include correspondence relating to several significant cases that Blatt was involved in, including his controversial defense of accused child molester Billy Joe Stewart.

Topical files include information on awards and honors given Blatt, his association with various groups and the Democratic Party, as well as extensive files on his involvement with and interest in the University of South Carolina outside of his role as a legislator. (*Papers pertaining to his legislative work on behalf of the university are found in Public Papers.*) Persons files include materials on Congressman Mendel Rivers, Governor James F. Byrnes, and Judge Julius B. Ness, all close friends of Blatt.



Invitations cover nearly Blatt's entire career in the General Assembly, spanning from 1937 to 1986. **Speeches** consist mostly of complete speech texts; see attached speech list. The **Clippings** and **Photographs** series are complemented by 41 scrapbooks, most kept by Ethel Blatt. The **Scrapbooks** contain newspaper clippings, photographs, letters, and memorabilia, relating to both Blatt's career and his personal and family life, with many annotations by Mrs. Blatt.

Also included in the collection are papers of Sol Blatt's son, Solomon Blatt, Jr. Blatt Jr. served on the Board of Trustees at the University of South Carolina after Blatt Sr. was asked to step down due to a dual office-holding controversy. Blatt Jr. also practiced law in his father's firm from 1946 until 1971, when he became a U.S. District Court Judge in Charleston. Blatt Jr.'s papers consist largely of correspondence with family, colleagues, business associates, and friends, as well as a file of judicial opinions.



Series List:

- Public Papers:
 - General
 - Recommendations
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 - General
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 - Campaign
 - Charitable Donations
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1938, Radio speech on behalf of Sen. Edgar Brown, U.S. Senate Democratic primary

1939, Jan., Upon election as Speaker, House floor

c. 1939, State government, Charleston

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c. 1939, State government, Sumter

c. 1939, State government [4 different versions]

c. 1940, Public welfare from the viewpoint of the legislator

1941, Jan. 14, Upon election as Speaker, House floor

c. 1941:

Eulogy for Judge Thomas J. Mauldin, 13th Judicial Circuit

Reply to Governor Burnet Maybank's radio speech

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c. 1939-1941, "Some time ago I was introduced..." [status of state]

1943, Jan., Upon election as Speaker, House floor

c. 1943, "Williston Baptist Church—World War II—Memorial Day"

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Feb. 21, Rotary Club, Columbia; reused for Spartanburg Lions Club, no date [economic future of SC]

Mar. 18, Adjournment of 85th General Assembly, House floor

Apr. 14, "Our Flag," Blackville School

June 5, Graduation, Turbeville High School

Oct. 2, Lions Club, Spartanburg

1945, Upon election as Speaker, House floor

c. 1941-1945, Augusta Rotary Club

1946, Mar. 30, Adjournment of 86th General Assembly, House floor

c. 1952, USC Founders' Day Banquet

1953:

Oct. 10, Statement declining candidacy for Supreme Court vacancy

Nov., "Affairs of the State of South Carolina and Its Progress," South Carolina State Chamber of Commerce

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Feb. 24, Amerotron Day, Barnwell County

Apr. 10, Upon presentation of plaque by House members, House floor

1957:

Jan. 8, Blatt portrait unveiling, House of Representatives

Apr. 14, Latta Rotary Club

Oct. 10, "Speech for Laurens County"

1958:

Jan. 13, Upon election as Speaker, House floor
Feb. 11, Unveiling of portrait of Edgar Brown, SC Senate
May, Dedication of the Julius Ness Memorial Bridge

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Apr. 6, 175th Anniversary, Hebrew Benevolent Society of Charleston
c. Oct., Opening of First Governor's Conference on Education

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Jan., "Radio, Bwell Jan. 1961" [state and county government]

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Dec. 8, Naming of Blatt Gymnasium, Barnwell

1964, Jan. 6, Presentation of Certificate to Heyward McDonald, Columbia Jewish Center

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Apr. 6, Unveiling of Portrait of Poet Laureate Archibald Rutledge, State House
Sept. 8, Dinner for Judge Robert W. Hemphill, Columbia
Oct. 27, 8th Annual Governor's Conference on Education

1967:

Jan. 10, Upon election as Speaker, House floor
Oct. 16, "Memorial Exercises for Fred Buzhardt Court House, McCormick County"
Nov. 21, "Presenting My Chair, Robe, Etc. to the University Library," USC

1968:

June 23, "Receiving the Disabled American Veterans' Distinguished Service Award," Barnwell
Sept. 25, "Ceremonies Attending the Establishing of the Gene Barwick Scholarship in the Name of Solomon Blatt," USC, Columbia
Nov. 14, "On the Occasion of Awarding the University of South Carolina Solomon Blatt Scholarship by John Ducate," Columbia

1969:

Oct. 30, Opening of 11th Annual Governor's Conference on Education
Nov. 10, Introduction, Gen. James F. Hollingsworth, Barnwell

1970:

Jan. 17, Sertoma Club, Williston
Feb. 12, Founders' Day, Anderson College
July:
8, Dedication, James H. Hammond Museum, Blackville
11, Edgar Brown Day, Barnwell [introduction of Mendel Rivers]

Oct.:
13, Statement on Governor's and Lieutenant Governor's Race [endorses John West and Earle Morris]
29, 12th Annual Governor's Conference on Education

1971:

Mar. 24, Unveiling of portrait of Mendel Rivers, SC House
Apr. 19, Dedication, Blatt Buildings for Handicapped, Barnwell State Park
July 14, Oath of Office administered to Sol Blatt, Jr., U.S. District Judge, Barnwell
Oct. 17, Dedication, Dawkins Hall, Denmark Area Technical Center
Nov. 3, Statement announcing retirement as Speaker as of 1 July 1973

1972:

Feb. 14, Friends and Alumni of North Greenville Junior College, Barnwell
Sept. 28, Welcome, National Society of State Legislators, Board of Governors Meeting, Hilton Head Island
Nov. 13, Dedication, McLaurin Science Building, Barnwell

1973:

Feb.:
8, Governor's Prayer Breakfast, Columbia
23, Trial Lawyers' Association Award Presentation to Judge Julius B. Ness, Columbia
May 2, "Speech by Solomon Blatt on the occasion of the dinner...in his honor," Wade Hampton Hotel, Columbia
June 6, Resignation as Speaker of the House and election as Speaker Emeritus
Oct. 27, Dedication, Blatt Physical Education Building, USC
No date, Dinner honoring the Honorable Lester L. Bates, Sr.

1974:

Apr. 30, Dedication, R.J. Aycock Building, SC Department of Health and Environmental Control
July 2, Radio advertisement, W.J. Bryan Dorn for governor
Sept. 10, Statement, Allied-General Nuclear Services hearing
Oct. 25, Radio speech, re-election campaign

1975:

Sept. 11, Statement in memory of William M. Sternmeyer, Barnwell Legionnaire
Nov.:
16, Bicentennial, Barnwell
21, National Honor Society Rally, Barnwell
Dec. 17, Introduction of Lt. Governor Brantley Harvey, Jr.

1976:

Apr. 7, Solomon Blatt Day, Barnwell
May 20, Statement on farewell speech of Clator Arrants
Aug.:
1, Dedication, Macedonia Baptist Church, Blackville
15, Dedication, Sol Blatt Administration Building, Denmark Tech
Nov.:
11, Unveiling of World Wars monument, Barnwell County
18, 2nd Annual Education Convocation, Denmark School District #2

1978:

June:
4, Dedication, Church of God, Williston
23, Dedication, Sol Blatt Hut, Barnwell State Park
Sept:

2, Non-sectarian wedding ceremony performed by Blatt
21, Invocation, Garden Clubs, Sweetwater Country Club
No date: Speeches to unidentified churches

1979:

May 9, Dedication, Solomon Blatt House Office Building
June 5, Speech upon returning to House after illness, House floor
July 23, Dedication, Solomon Blatt Avenue, Denmark Tech
Sept. 29, Eulogy, Rev. Aaron Bush, Elko
Nov. 6, Sertoma Club, Barnwell

1980:

Jan. 6, Dedication, Solomon Blatt Highway, Barnwell
May 28, Retirement dinner for Rex Carter
June 30, Oath of office administered to Cecil Sandifer, SC Employment Security Commission, Barnwell
July 24, Comments on Denmark Tech
Aug. 16, Naming of McMillan Road (Thomas and Clara McMillan)
Sept. 3, Oath of office and remarks, swearing-in of Ramon Schwartz, Jr. as Speaker of the House
Oct. 17, Unveiling of portrait of Julius B. Ness, Bamberg County Courthouse
Nov.:
17, Tribute to teachers, Barnwell Elementary School
17 [?], Last ten years in the legislature
29, Honoring Prof. S. A. Guinyard, Barnwell Middle School

1981:

Feb. 9, Barnwell Chamber of Commerce
Mar.:
1, Dedication, Cecil Sandifer Road, Westminster
6, Voorhees College Community Day, Denmark
Oct. 30, Dedication, McNair Complex, State House, Columbia
Nov. 10, remarks at Denmark Tech

1982:

Jan. 9, marriage service performed by Blatt
June 20, Commencement, Denmark Tech
No date, campaign speech
No date, announcement of non-candidacy for House in 1982 [Not used?]

1983:

July 13, Oath of office administered to Larry Inabinet, Barnwell Courthouse
Oct. 17, Acceptance of John K. Cauthen Award, Educational Resources Foundation

1984, May 31, "Presentation to the Court for Swearing In of Justice A. Lee Chandler"

c. 1986, "Statement of Solomon Blatt Announcing He Will Run Again for Re-Election to the House of Representatives in 1986"

No date:

Dedication, Barnwell Rescue Squad building
Remarks [on career coming to a close]
Remarks criticizing House schedule and filibusters
Dedication of Shuron Plant, Barnwell
Remarks on Ways and Means recommendations