Donald S. Russell was the right man at the right time for the University of South Carolina. In 1952, the University was still shaking off the post-World War II doldrums and transitioning back into a peacetime institution. When Russell took the helm as Carolina’s twenty-first president, he ushered in what has been described as a Carolina renaissance.

Born in Mississippi on February 22, 1906, Russell moved with his family to his mother’s hometown of Chester, South Carolina, when he was eight years old. He entered the University of South Carolina at the age of 15, earning the Bachelor of Arts degree in 1925 and the Bachelor of Laws degree in 1928. He is described in the 1925 Garnet and Black as “the morning star of the class of ’25.”

Russell joined the prestigious Spartanburg law firm of Nicholls, Wyche and Byrnes in 1930, quickly becoming the protégé of James F. Byrnes, and following him to Washington, D.C., during World War II. Russell held several key government posts before going on active duty with the U.S. Army in Europe. Upon his return to Washington, he served as Byrnes’ assistant secretary of state for administration under President Harry Truman in 1945. Two years later, Russell resumed his law practice in Spartanburg, and served on the University’s Board of Trustees until he was tapped for the Carolina presidency.

The youthful, vigorous, and intellectually gifted Russell brought a “sharp mind, gentlemanly manner, and quiet confidence” to the campus. He immediately set forth his vision of what he wanted Carolina to become – “a great university.” To do that, Russell focused on academics, faculty, and the campus. His efforts revitalized the University’s academic departments, including engineering, biology, education, physics, and liberal arts, eliminated some other programs, and created new departments, notably the Institute of International Studies, one of the first of its kind in the nation. Russell’s service in the U.S. State Department and the onset of the Cold War had convinced him that foreign policy and international studies should have increased emphasis in the nation’s educational institutions.
Russell also recruited outstanding new faculty members, pushed for the development of a faculty research program, and established an impressive program of visiting lecturers and professorships that drew eminent scholars from around the world. Russell also brought nationally prominent figures to the campus, including a young rising star in the Democratic Party who gave the 1957 USC commencement address – Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts.

The first USC regional campuses were established during the Russell administration. The University had sporadically operated an Extension Division since 1915, which offered “field” courses for people who were unable to attend college in Columbia or go to school full-time. Russell wanted to expand higher education opportunities throughout the state. The establishment of system of regional campuses across the state was originally intended to enable students to obtain two years of university-quality education in their home communities before transferring to the Columbia campus. In 1957 USC-Florence (now Francis Marion University) became the first regional campus. Within the next five years, four other campuses joined the system: Aiken, Lancaster, Beaufort, and Conway (now Coastal Carolina University).

When Russell became president in 1952, the University campus consisted of the Horseshoe and the buildings bounded by Pendleton, Pickens, and Greene streets. Russell instigated an unprecedented expansion of the campus as a result of the Tuition Bond Act, which he had proposed to the state legislature as a way of financing needed construction. The new law allowed a portion of tuition fees to be designated for the support of bond indebtedness; it was so successful that it was copied by other state-supported schools. New land was acquired and a building boom began, which included the construction of LeConte, Callcott, and McClintock Colleges, Sumwalt Engineering building, the McBryde Quadrangle, and a new student union building, named for Russell and his wife, Virginia. Other projects began under the Russell administration and completed under his successor, Robert L. Sumwalt, include the initial structure of Thomas Cooper Library and the second Wade Hampton dormitory (replacing the original 1924 structure).

The University benefited from Russell’s personal generosity as well. He refused to accept a salary, personally funded several scholarships and endowed professorships, and paid for the renovation that transformed a former faculty duplex on the Horseshoe into today’s President’s House. The Russells frequently entertained faculty and students in the elegant home, and invited every Carolina senior to dinner there at least once during his or her final year.
Much to the sadness of the University community, Russell resigned on December 1, 1957, in order to run for governor in 1958. Rutledge L. Osborne, chairman of the Board of Trustees, stated, “It is doubtful that the University has ever sustained a greater loss in the one hundred and fifty-five years of its existence. No man ever accomplished so much in so short a time as Donald Russell.”

**Russell After USC**

1957 – Resigned as president to run for governor. First attempt unsuccessful

1962 – Elected governor. Opened his inaugural reception and barbecue to all South Carolinians and personally greeting many black and white well-wishers who attended the event – the first integrated political event held in South Carolina since Reconstruction.

1963 – One of the first challenges Russell faced as governor was the court-ordered integration of Clemson College. Russell received high praise when he refused the offer of federal troops from U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy. As reported in *The State* newspaper, he assured Kennedy “South Carolina was ‘perfectly capable’ itself of maintaining law and order ‘and we are not going to have any violence’” (25 Jan. 1963).

1965 – Upon the death of U.S. Senator Olin Johnston, Russell stepped down as governor. He was succeeded by his Lieutenant Governor, Robert McNair, who appointed Russell to serve as South Carolina’s senator until such time as a special election could be held. Russell was praised for his acumen and activities as senator but was defeated by Fritz Hollings in the 1966 special election.

1967 – President Lyndon Johnson appointed Russell a U.S. District Court judge.

1971 – Russell was appointed to the U.S. 4th Circuit Court of Appeals. He served as an appellate court judge until the time of his death, in 1998, on his 92nd birthday. He never took senior status or lightened his case load.

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