

"Porch"
Athenaeum
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April 6, 2017

Good Evening Mr. President, Mr. Secretary, our other Presenter Mr. Coursey and Distinguished members. This evening I will tell you about something that has not only become important to me, but to generations of families. Not a fine antique, not an heirloom, but more of a treasured place that brings to mind so many remembrances from childhood. Porches can serve so much more than places to store an umbrella, a place to stand for protection from the rain to find your keys, or a place to hang ferns in the summer. They have a true purpose and functionality that brings back so many memories of childhood for me. A purpose that seems to have slowly been lost over the years. A shared place for dear friends, family or even strangers to come together for meetings, business transactions, gossip or just tea containing just a bit too much sugar.

Porches served the same function as living rooms and dens did in later years. As these family spaces became popular post World War II, outside areas became a less important space. Before central air conditioning became common, the only way to keep cool was to find a porch with a constant breeze, though the breeze may be heavy with humidity, it was better than nothing. Many things could be attributed to the decline of a porch.

Every time I see a lightning bug (I don't mind if you call them fireflies, they are lightening bugs to me and always will be) I think of my grandparents. On any given sultry summer night, millions (maybe only hundreds of thousands...you know children exaggerate on occasion) could

be seen around their home on Highway 272 toward Julien. Not only the place where my brother and I grew up, but also, where my father and grandfather were raised. (My grandfather lived in the same house for his entire 87 years.) It was the porches that were present at the time of my grandfather's birth, the year the farm, including the house, garage, stable, chicken house, a pig barn and a smokehouse, were purchased in 1919 by his parents Robert Henry (b. Oct. 10, 1892 d. Feb. 26, 1938) and Jennie Anna Louise Steger Cato (b. Dec. 14, 1888 d. Dec. 21, 1977) for a cost of \$10,000. (From this point on I will refer to my Great Grandmother, Jeannie Anne Louise Steger Cato, as "Mrs. Cato", though her name just rolls off the tongue.) The farm was purchased from the Coburn family, 3 of which are interred in the garden near the house. Mr. William Coburn died in 1907 at the age of 108. At one time, he was a well-known stone mason in the area. Two of the last remaining stone carved chimneys that he created are still standing on each side of the house, though slightly leaning. A search of William Coburn, does uncover a few interesting facts. He was born in Scotland in 1799, during the Civil War, He first enlisted in the Union Army, then later in the Confederate Army and stayed there until the war was over. Also, he was a heavy drinker and would break rock for the county by the edge of his yard. With all that is known about Mr. Coburn, I know for a fact, his exact burial location is an unknown; just a general location of his final resting spot is given in Meacham's History of Christian County, which states "He is buried in the corner of the yard where he had lived for many years." This is likely true as at that time families were buried near their home place. I will pause here to say, I never knew "Mrs. Cato", but from the stories I've been told, we are definitely related. The original burial location "in the corner of the yard" just happened to be smack dab in the middle of where my great-grandmother wanted to start her garden. As there

were no headstones, and just a few rocks to mark the area surrounding the three graves, she simply moved the rocks to a more "convenient" location...for her. When family members returned after many years, and asked to build a small stone wall to commemorate their relatives, they were immediately directed to the "new" cemetery location. They did slightly question the placement, thinking the plots were within view of the front porch that was so loved by their ancestor Mr. Coburn; however, it had been a few years, and they did not press the issue. The stone wall around the "alternatively placed" cemetery did however prove to be slightly in the way in later years as it has been run over many times by plows and tractors, but the outline is still definitely recognizable. There is also one very rich section of the garden where flowers have always done really well, within direct view of the front porch, near the earlier mentioned corner of the yard. I think I'll just leave that alone, however. I tell this story for two reasons. One of which is the fact that Mr. Coburn loved his porch so much, he wanted to be buried within view of it for all eternity. Secondly, I want to give you an a little insight into the personality of who "Mrs. Cato" was. I only know her through stories, but somehow the ones I do know revolve around porches.

When I mention porches, the first that comes to many minds would be the front porch. Though important as a social gathering place for afternoon visiting company to drop by for the afternoon or more formal company, side and back porches were many time more important to the daily life of the home's inhabitants. My grandparents' porches were no different. In addition to the front porch on the North side of the house, there was an East porch and a West porch. The east porch, nearest to the drive, served many purposes. One of which was a store room for a time in the 30's and 40's. The shelves were filled with a few sundry items including,

quilt pieces, lamp wicks, and bluing for the washing of clothes (there are still a few wooden bluing containers left on the old storeroom shelves with remnants of the substance... (Apparently blue iron power will make white appear "whiter" ...who knew?). Also various garden vegetables, chickens, eggs and plants were offered, and about anything else that people were willing to buy. My great grandmother would be known to sell stuff from the house, if the price was right, including china, furniture, heirlooms.... Having a porch storeroom would not have been an uncommon practice at that time as income was difficult to come by, and helped supplement many a family. This created even further community interaction as a time when "going to town" more than once a week or month would have been considered a luxury. This porch also had another reason that was a little less common than a storeroom. There would always be a chair found on the East porch for a very important reason. In the later years, it's where "Mrs. Cato's" caretakers would sit and wait for someone to let them in after they had been tricked into running to the chicken house to gather eggs, and were then locked out of the house. "Mrs. Cato" would have them specifically look for brown eggs as she knew it would take longer and would give her enough time to latch all the windows and doors throughout her home. The occurrences were so common and expected, the chair that was left out would always be comfortable and have a cushion...not by her doing of course.... (Anyone that knows me, will agree, this will likely be me in a few more years....). On a rainy or snowing day, I'm sure no porch could have been more appreciated.

The West Porch was used to ripen tomatoes and other vegetables and also contained the cellar door. I only recall the porch being a glassed in breezeway, but at one time it was an open porch that wrapped around the side and back of the original house with 4 doors giving

access to the inside. As the story goes, this stayed an open porch until the mid-50's, while my grandmother was expecting my father. You see, this particular porch was very much used by her. Let me explain. The home is what I consider a slight variation of a "Dogtrot" house, many of which were log cabins (this one was clapboard with log floor joists and beams), with a central hall, two large rooms on either side in the front, then two more rooms on one side behind a front main room. (I will not get into architectural styles, as I know there are many here that will be able to educate me on that subject and I welcome it.) My grandparents' room was on the right side of the house, the side with the lone room. "Mrs. Cato's" room was on the opposite side of the hall that connected to the dining room and kitchen. After the installation of a bathroom in the late 40's, access to the rest of the house was blocked off from the end of the front hall, said for a door from my grandparent's room to the open back porch. The only internal access was through "Mrs. Cato's" bedroom, and No one would be allowed to enter that room while the hall door was closed, yet she expected breakfast to be waiting when she arose. Spring, summer, fall and winter, my grandmother used the east porch for access to the kitchen. "Mrs. Cato" only relenting to enclose the porch, with a short wall and screen, when my grandmother was "in the family way." It would only take another year for louvered glass to be installed as it was too cold for a baby to be taken out in the cold winter months to the kitchen....through an open porch.

Porches seem to be thought of as an antiquated part of the past, but that couldn't be further from the actuality. I can still hear the screen door slamming shut, I can smell supper cooking on the stove as the smell wafts through the house with the slightest breeze. The porch was a vital part of early American life. When driving down Main Street in any downtown

historic district or past historic farmhouses, almost every home has (or had at one time) a front porch. During the warmer months, porches were a refuge from the stifling heat of summer, and to keep away the heavy swarms of mosquitos, you had the luxury of screen. If there wasn't moving air, a front porch swing made the perfect addition to any home.

My Grandmother was interviewed in an Article in the New Era entitled "Windstorm hits Part of County: Small Buildings, Roofs, Trees are damaged." In the fourth Paragraph is a small excerpt: "The Lightning struck and killed a mule on the Mrs. Steger Cato Farm on Julien road yesterday. The animal was reported standing under a tree." All I can say is...Poor Mule... The Tornado that struck on May 12th, 1978 was an F3 tornado. She and the reporter were unable to sit on the swing as the porch was crushed by the numerous historic trees that lined the front yard. The swing was somehow spared, with only a panel missing from one interior side. As a side note, though not in the article, a peacock was also sadly lost, not from the wind, but was knocked out and untimely pass away after roosting on top of the smokehouse after being struck by a large piece of hail... Poor peacock...

The swing has only been moved to one other porch in its time. The house where the swing now resides on South Main also has a few stories of its own, including being the site of one of the first brick garages built for a still uncommon convenience in Hopkinsville, the automobile. Owned by Dr. F. Preston Thomas, whom some of you may have known, the house was built in 1906 by the Forbes Company. Dr. Thomas coincidently was a very early member of the Athenaeum Society. His home alone would be enough for fill a paper, however not solely due to his life and good works. There is even a good porch story. I may contemplate that paper

while sitting on the front porch watching lighting bugs, drinking tea that is a little too sweet, during the upcoming summer months.

There were many nights my brother and I would sleep on the porch when we were hot as "turning on the window AC unit would just serve to make you hotter in the heat of the next day" or so we were told. I wouldn't have minded giving it a try at least. If nothing else, we were never far from the bathroom as the front door was never locked, and remained wide open all summer. That's one tradition I don't believe I will be following these days. It really did seem like an adventure sleeping on the front porch and nothing is more soothing than on a cool summer evening to hear the sounds come alive as night sets in. Nothing is also more comforting than the fact we could run directly into the house if some crazy animal came on the prowl...

There are many times in my own home, I am reminded of the importance of a porch. One specific night was the occasion of my mother's birthday. The porch that sits lonely and unoccupied more days than it should ended with a flurry of who would occupy the coveted porch swing (Of course, being her birthday, Mother won...but she was reminded she may have a fight for Thanksgiving).

It's where my brother and I would sit with our grandmother shelling beans (occasionally/mostly dropping a full bowl of them onto the porch floor) and singing "You Are My Sunshine" off key. It's where my father growing up would sit waiting for the bus. My grandfather always loved resting there after walking home from the one room Walnut Grove

School House before starting chores. The school house is still very much visible today from the house, being only about 500 feet away, up-hill both ways I'm sure.

All my life, family dinners, parties, birthdays and even simple sultry, summer afternoons revolved around a porch. It is a place that has become such a vital part of my family's highs and lows.

It can gather people together, as it has for many years, or can give quiet solitude for one to sit and contemplate. Moments like that, seem so insignificant and increasingly rare, yet they can become such lasting new memories in someone's history. I've meet many dear neighbors and friends by simply reading the paper or a good book, and people don't seem to mind waving back or saying a quick "hello." A porch takes us back to a simpler time, a time without television that would draw families inside to gather around TV trays with a microwave dinner, without central air condition so a shaded spots were no longer as important. We are taken to a time when conversation and sharing ideas took effort. And hospitality was a main focus.

Not sure I will be sleeping outside anytime soon, but I do and always will love a porch...