

## **Sydnor, Charles Sackett** <sup>[1]</sup>

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by Robert H. Woody, 1994

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Charles Sackett Sydnor, historian and university administrator, was born in Augusta, Ga., the oldest of five children of Evelyn Aiken Sackett and Giles Granville Sydnor, pastor of the Green Street Presbyterian Church. Both parents were natives of Virginia and were descended from early American settlers of English origin. From 1901 to 1915 Charles lived with his parents in Rome, Ga., where he was admitted to the recently established Darlington School <sup>[2]</sup> near age eleven. He was remembered as "strikingly good looking, with cheeks as pink as a girl's." As a result, some of the "boys gave him a rough time," but he took it in good humor and went on to demonstrate his manhood by playing guard on the football team, where he was lighter than any opposing player. He entered Hampden-Sydney College in 1915 and was graduated in three years with a degree in classical studies.

In 1919, after serving briefly in the military and teaching in the Rome high school, he became a teacher of mathematics in the McCallie School <sup>[3]</sup> at Chattanooga, Tenn. Under the influence of James R. McCain, founder of the Darlington School and later president of Agnes Scott College, Sydnor entered the graduate school of Johns Hopkins University in 1920. In good part he supported himself, partly by summer work with a construction gang on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. At Hopkins his major interest was medieval and English history; his unpublished dissertation was on the English Tudors. He received a Ph.D. degree in 1923 and then became professor of history and political science at Hampden-Sydney, the sole teacher, he said, in those departments.

On 12 June 1924 he married Betty Brown, a native of Chattanooga and a former student at Agnes Scott College. They became the parents of two boys, Charles Sackett, Jr., and Victor Brown.

In 1925 he went to the University of Mississippi as chairman of the history department. He had declined an offer to teach at Agnes Scott, possibly because he did not wish to teach only women or because he thought research opportunities would be limited. After teaching for two summers at Duke University <sup>[4]</sup>, he was invited to join that faculty as associate professor in 1936. He was made a full professor in 1938 and chairman of the department in 1952, when he also was appointed dean of the graduate school. In 1953 he was named James B. Duke Professor, the highest academic appointment.

His first book was a school history of Mississippi written with Claude Bennett. Sydnor was the author of four other books, all carefully researched and all illustrating the ability to write with clarity and distinction. He had the ability to view familiar events with a sharpened perspective. He never thought that history was an exact science, but he insisted that historians should try to shed their prejudice and avoid the propaganda uses of history. He was convinced, however, that an understanding of the past was relevant to succeeding eras. Within the field of southern history he published widely; he contributed twenty-three sketches to the Dictionary of American Biography <sup>[5]</sup>.

His first book, Slavery in Mississippi <sup>[6]</sup> (1933), was long considered the most significant of the several studies of slavery that followed the pioneer work of U. B. Phillips. Carter G. Woodson, a Black editor and historian, admitted in an unsigned review, after questioning whether whites could write about Black people without bias, that the author "apparently endeavored to write with restraint and care." Professor J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton <sup>[7]</sup> considered it "the most complete picture that has so far emerged for any state," and, he added, "it is absorbingly interesting."

Sydnor's next book, A Gentleman of the Old Natchez Region: Benjamin L. C. Wailes <sup>[8]</sup> (1938), was a biography of a versatile Mississippian whose voluminous diaries and letters were used to illustrate plantation life and slavery, travel, movements for agricultural reform, early educational institutions, and the activities of organized social and intellectual societies reminiscent of the seaboard states. The focus was not on politics but on the evolution of a frontier society.

The Development of Southern Sectionalism, 1818–1848 <sup>[9]</sup> (1948)—the fifth volume in *The History of the South*, edited by E. Merton Coulter and Wendell H. Stephenson—was broader in scope than anything he had previously written. Both the cotton kingdom and the tobacco kingdom were in a difficult transitional period, when economic problems, internal improvements, population shifts, and issues touching on slavery were about to exceed the grasp of the politicians. Sydnor found that the complexities of politics had to be related to personalities, but that much of the motivation was of economic origin. Southern sectionalism, he wrote, was "essentially dictated by self-interest," and the "wall of constitutional arguments" raised by John C. Calhoun and others merely furnished "the righteous garb of legality and high principle." The more intense the political excitement, the more certain it was that the social reforms that the South might have undertaken would be rejected; the promise of enlightened progress seen in the rise of colleges and the evangelical churches gave way to "intellectual provincialism," which characterized almost every phase of southern life. This book was widely acclaimed. *American Literature* called it "the best study of the ante-bellum South in print." Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., wrote

of "its pervading quality of thoughtful and dispassionate judgment." Similar comments came from other distinguished historians. For this book Sydnor received the Mayflower Cup <sup>[10]</sup> for the best book of the year by a resident of North Carolina.

He was disturbed by the failure of modern democracy to produce statesmen of a high order, and, in keeping with his notion that history was a useful depository of knowledge, he studied the political system of eighteenth-century Virginia. In Gentlemen Freeholders: Political Practices in Washington's Virginia <sup>[11]</sup> (1952), he found that the contending forces of aristocracy and democracy coexisted in general harmony. The members of the House of Burgesses, the proving ground for political leaders, were chosen in such a way that they were "more or less acceptable both to the leaders and to the rank and file of the voters." They had been doubly screened, "first by the gentry and then by the freeholders." It was this selective process that seemed to hold the secret of leadership. In this book the emphasis was not so much on new information as on a fresh interpretation.

Professor Sydnor received honorary degrees from Washington and Lee University, Davidson College <sup>[12]</sup>, Princeton University, and Oxford University. He was a visiting professor at leading universities, including The University of North Carolina <sup>[13]</sup>, Cornell, and Harvard, and held the Harold Vyvyan Harmsworth professorship of American history at Oxford (1950–51), the first southerner to do so. He also lectured at the Salzburg Seminar of American Studies in Austria (1951). Sydnor was president of the Southern Historical Association (1939), the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association <sup>[14]</sup> (1949), and the Historical Society of North Carolina (1949). He was a member of the executive committee of the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools and a member of the Council of the Institute of Early American History and Culture (chairman, 1953) and of the advisory committee of the Office of the Chief of Military History, U.S. Department of the Army. In addition, he sat on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Southern History* (1935–38) and the *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1947–54). He was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, Omicron Delta Kappa, and Kappa Sigma.

Sydnor was a meticulous scholar who knew the effort that went into the writing of good history. His personal qualities, however, did not so much suggest the dedicated scholar as the complete gentleman: unfailing courtesy, good humor, and a relaxed manner. The informality of his classroom discussions did not obscure the fact that he was probing for the reality below the surface. His graduate students were apt to find that conferences with him were enlightening experiences rather than times of dull faultfinding. These same gentlemanly qualities helped to make him an efficient administrator. He got along with people because he had a way of dissipating any point of friction.

Remaining true to his Presbyterian heritage, Sydnor was steadfastly active in the work of his church. He was a trustee of Davidson College <sup>[12]</sup>, a Presbyterian school (1942–46). He had addressed the Mississippi Historical Society at Biloxi before he was admitted to a local hospital and died of a heart attack. He had been scheduled to give the Walter L. Fleming Lectures in Southern History at Louisiana State University on 1–2 Mar. 1954. In 1955 the Southern Historical Association established the Charles S. Sydnor award of \$500 to be given in even-numbered years for the best book on southern history. After a funeral service at the First Presbyterian Church, Durham, he was buried in the Forest Hills Cemetery, Chattanooga, Tenn.

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## Subjects:

Biographies <sup>[16]</sup>

Historians <sup>[17]</sup>

## Authors:

Woody, Robert H. <sup>[18]</sup>

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Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press. <sup>[19]</sup>

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