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PW Explores a Caldecott Connection in Florida

By Patricia J. Murphy | Mar 28, 2022

If you happen to visit St. Augustine, Fla.—the oldest city in the United States—you'll want to take in its Spanish architecture, rich history (dating back to 1565), and 223 days of sunshine. You might also want to take time to learn about one of the past residents, English artist and illustrator Randolph Caldecott (yes, that Caldecott!), and maybe even pay your respects at his final resting place.

That's exactly what the late Gwen Reichert, a former teacher, principal, and supervisor of the Title I reading program in St. John County school district did more than 50 years ago when she first discovered that Randolph Caldecott spent a short time in her hometown, during the winter of 1885–1886. Caldecott came with his wife, Marian, to sketch Americans for a magazine assignment and to escape the cold of an English winter that often worsened Caldecott's health issues.

Sadly, Caldecott's health deteriorated due to the effects of the long voyage to the U.S. and the cold snap that hit the East Coast and Northeast Florida during his stay. He died on February 13, 1886, five weeks and two days before his 40th birthday, and was buried at Evergreen Cemetery in St. Augustine.

Reichert's discovery of Caldecott's ties to St. Augustine, and her subsequent study of Caldecott's work, which began in a children's literature class at Jacksonville University, fueled a deep admiration that turned into a lifelong passion to honor Caldecott's legacy as the forefather of the picture book. This passion led Reichert to become an expert on Caldecott's life and work, speaking at an International Reading Association (now known as the ILA) conference and to teachers, librarians, and school groups, and creating the Randolph Caldecott Society of America in 1983. She also co-hosted an RCSA-sponsored literary tour to England, and presented to the U.K. Caldecott Society.

"Gwen always loved Caldecott's books and papers—and the Caldecott Award titles, too," Allan C. Reichert, Gwen's husband and co-founder and past treasurer of the RCSA, which is now defunct. "I believe that she must have lived another life in the 1800s herself. I still have the large collection of books published in the 1880s that she enjoyed collecting. This love was the spark to creating the society—and to making it a fantastic organization."

From 1983–2014, the society and Reichert's mission were one and the same: "to bring together those people who are dedicated to the remembrance, appreciation, and promotion of English illustrator, Randolph Caldecott, and his art."

With the help of its equally passionate members, including teachers, librarians, and even distant relatives of Caldecott, the society fulfilled its mission in a variety of ways, from serving as lay caretaker of Caldecott's grave, maintaining a floral tribute on the grave, and donating funds to purchase the annual Caldecott Medal winner and Honor books for St. Augustine's library, to producing a brochure about Caldecott, publishing a biannual newsletter, and giving presentations on Caldecott's life. The society also donated funds to a scholarship for a local high school senior majoring in art given by the First Coast Pilot Club, and awarded honorary society memberships to people who have shown support for the society and promote or collect the works of Randolph Caldecott.



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English artist and illustrator Randolph Caldecott died on February 13, 1886, in St. Augustine, Fla. Missing paperwork at the time of his death is believed to be the reason for the erroneous date on the gravestone (February 12).



© Gili Lochner, St. Augustine Record

Gwen Reichert, president of the Randolph Caldecott Society of America, and Michael Rouse, director of the Library System, at the dedication for the Caldecott Room at the St. Johns County Library in 1991.



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Caldecott's gravesite was designated a Literary Landmark by the Friends of the Library USA in 2005. A plaque at the foot of Caldecott's grave offers details of his life, legacy, and this honor.

and Caldecott's illustrated titles. Next to these books are framed photos of Caldecott, his birthplace, and gravestone, as well as copies of a brochure entitled "Randolph Who? From Where? What Did He Do?" for visitors who want to learn more about Caldecott's life's work and legacy, his connection to the Caldecott Medal, and his ties to St. Augustine.

And while the plaque, the room's name, and all things Caldecott serve as reminders of Reichert and the RCSA's mission, it's the dedicated library employees who are "called forward," said Andy Calvert, the library's youth services librarian, to keep it alive through their own work of bringing books and programs to the kids of STA and its surrounding areas.

As part of overseeing the children's room, Calvert orders copies of the Caldecott Medal and Honor books and ensures that the library has all of the Caldecott Medal and Honor books dating back to the year 1938, when the American Library Association started awarding the Caldecott Medal "to the illustrator of the most distinguished American picture book published in the United States the preceding year." Caldecott's name was chosen for the medal because of his "joyfulness of picture books and their beauty."

Calvert said, "It is my personal mission to have one of each of the copies of these titles so if someone is interested in researching the books, they can find them here." He added, "It's quite an extensive collection because I collect *all* of the medal books and the honors, too. It takes me some time to go back through the list to make sure that we have them, or if we have to reorder them, and to verify the collection."

Calvert completes an inventory of the Caldecott titles every few years. He said that many of the books are in circulation, and the older titles are stored in the back office, but are available to view upon request. For Calvert, it's an honor and a privilege to keep and to share the collection. "Because Caldecott was in this town—our town—and his final resting place is here in St. Augustine, it's extra special for me to help keep his legacy alive by maintaining the collection," Calvert said. "So, if anyone wanted to make a pilgrimage to see his grave, and was interested in seeing the Caldecott Medal and Honor books through the years—for example, how the illustration styles have changed—I'd like to make the books available to them."



But Reichert and the society didn't stop there. She rallied her society members including esteemed library employees, Valerie Peischel Mull, the Main Library's current branch manager, and Mary Jane Little, the Director of St. Johns County Public Libraries at the time, to initiate an application to have Caldecott's grave designated as a Literary Landmark. The request was approved in 2005. And, if that wasn't enough, Reichert also worked with Michael Rouse, then director of the library system, and the St. Johns County Board of County Commissioners to have the Main Library's children's room named the Randolph Caldecott Room.

Today, a wooden plaque announcing the Randolph Caldecott Room hangs high above the children's department, along with two framed prints of Caldecott's illustrations. Down below, a lively wall display of the past three years' Caldecott Medal titles and Honor books (and a sign honoring Gwen Reichert) serves as the focal point for an ever-changing selection of the award-winning books,



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The Randolph Caldecott Room allows patrons and visitors to learn about all things Caldecott—his life, his work, his legacy—and read titles that bear the Caldecott Medal in his honor.



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Marcia Daniels, program coordinator in the Caldecott Reading Room, shares Calvert's enthusiasm for Randolph Caldecott and his life's work. She loves sharing the variety of Caldecott titles with children, and updating the Caldecott Medal and Honor display's colorful backdrop each year. "I think the display helps draw attention to these books,"



© Peter Willott, St. Augustine Record

Randolph Caldecott Society of America members Sharon Green (l.) and Gwen Reichert (r.) placing flowers on Caldecott's grave in March 2010.

Daniels said, "and encourages questions if patrons and/or visitors want to know more about the books and who Randolph Caldecott was."

And when there are questions, Daniels is ready with answers, book suggestions, as well as detailed directions to Caldecott's gravesite (an eight-minute drive from the library). In fact, she and Lisa Calvert, another library employee (and Andy's wife), even drove a special visitor, Caldecott Medalist Brian Floca, to see the gravesite and a few other places in the seaside town. (Floca and Jerry Pinkney are the only Caldecott Medalists who have made

the journey thus far.)

Floca made a special side trip to the city while in the Sunshine State for the ALA annual conference in Orlando back in 2016. "I and some other friends of Sophie Blackall's went to ALA to help celebrate her first Caldecott Medal win. I had a free afternoon, I knew Caldecott was buried only a couple of hours away, and I'd already done Space Mountain," Floca said. "How could I not go?"

And so Floca did go, out of curiosity and reverence to the fellow illustrator whose name is engraved on the Caldecott Medal he won for *Locomotive* in 2014. Standing in front of Caldecott's grave, Floca found it to be an emotional and reflective experience. "It was moving not only because all of us in the field owe Caldecott so much—he did so much to inject rhythm and life into the language of the picture book—but also, because I associate him so strongly with England, and the Victorian era in which he lived, and the Queen Anne era he loved to draw. It's just so incongruous, then, to find his final resting place two hours from Orlando, under a Cypress tree, in the Florida heat and in the Florida sandy soil. He feels very far from home to me. And gone at such an early age—not quite 40 years old," Floca said. "It's a lovely spot, but a very poignant one, too."

Floca hopes others will find their way to this same spot to celebrate this literary legend and his contribution to the world of picture books. "However far from home Caldecott was when he died, his legacy has certainly gone beyond belonging to any one place or time," he said. "I think even illustrators who don't know his work have been enabled by the qualities he introduced to the picture book back when it was new and its form and possibilities were still being figured out. I think you see this honored in the Randolph Caldecott Library Room today, and in the work of those who are making Caldecott's story—and its significance—accessible to those who visit; and I hope more people do."



© Lisa Calvert

Caldecott Medalist Brian Floca pays his respects at Caldecott's grave in 2016.

Author's note: Upon learning about this Caldecott connection in my current town, I have thought about trying to resurrect the Randolph Caldecott Society of America—or starting a new one. Anyone interested in joining me or learning more can contact me through my website.

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