



LOCAL LEGEND

Iron Man

Master blacksmith Philip Simmons has made a lasting impression on Charleston through his nature-inspired wrought-iron gates.

BY LIDBY MCILLAV

There's only one man to thank for Charleston's abundance of beautiful wrought-iron gates: Philip Simmons. His 500 distinctive, handcrafted ironworks—found on gardens, homes, churches and more—grace the city from one end to the other.

Born in 1912 on nearby Daniel Island, Simmons moved to Charleston at the age of 8 and developed an early affinity for metalworking; he says he was drawn to the sound of the hammer striking the anvil. Simmons' first apprenticeship under a man named Peter Simmons (no relation) at 13, and he has maintained the same Quaker hot workshop used by his early mentor, who passed away more than 50 years ago.

Throughout his career, the 95-year-old blacksmith—restrained "The Gatekeeper"—has achieved national acclaim, earning a National Heritage Fellowship (the highest honor awarded by the US government to a traditional artist) in 1992. In addition, his works have been purchased by the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution and other museums nationwide.



While his awards are evidence of his astonishing talent, what does Simmons love most about his craft? With his voice barely above a whisper, he says, "I like satisfying my customers."

As you walk the streets of Charleston, look for signs of subtle line leaves, stars, moons, water, snakes, eggs and trees, which Simmons incorporates into his pieces. At 91 Avenue 5L, you'll find the heart's home and workshop, which were placed on the 2007 list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Simmons—with his deep sense of Southern hospitality—has always welcomed people to his workshop. It's not surprising, then, that he was the inspiration behind The American College of the Building Arts. He finds it "amazing" that he encouraged the creation of an entire school and says it is the people of Charleston who inspire him most.

For more info about Philip Simmons and the projects of the Philip Simmons Foundation, visit www.philipsimmons.us.

The American College of the Building Arts

After 1997's Hurricane Hugo severely damaged countless historic buildings in Charleston, it became painfully clear that there was a dearth of master craftsmen trained in preservation and traditional building arts. It was also evident that Philip Simmons belonged to a dwindling industry that had lost its luster and respect. The answer to these problems was The American College of the Building Arts (www.building.artscollege.us), which opened in 1998 as the School of Building Arts. It is the only college in the US that trains students in ironwork, stone-work and other such crafts. "Mr. Simmons not only inspired us with his incredible creations, but also with his teachings, drive, determination and genuine love for his craft. In both spirit and action, he was the 'inspirational Founder' of the college," says David A'Ratich, the college's original president. "Mr. Simmons' life has been dedicated to keeping the beauty of ironworking alive... not just as a decorative art, but as a vibrant and important trade."



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