

**December 20, 2025**

**Pat Conroy**

Over the past couple of days we have posted about the first teacher at Mary Fields school and its construction, so we'll continue the discussion with one more person that everyone on Daufuskie will have heard of, Pat Conroy.

As Billie Burn describes it, in 1969 desegregation was being enforced, and with Frances Jones retiring, the decision made was to hire a white teacher to replace her since there were no white children on the island to integrate the school. Pat Conroy was hired and became not only the first white teacher, but the first male teacher since Mary Fields school opened in 1934. Mrs. Julia Johnson was the principal and taught grades one through four, and Pat taught five through eight.

The story of Pat's one year teaching on Daufuskie is pretty well known, as it became the basis for his novel *The Water is Wide*, which became the basis for the movie *Conrack* and a Hallmark TV movie. He was dismissed at the beginning of his second year for taking an unauthorized leave of absence, which ironically, he did to take a consulting assignment so he could raise money to take the kids on a field trip to Washington, D.C., after Beaufort Co. Board of Education refused to provide the money.

It was a testimony to his popularity that there was a boycott of the school over his firing. His approach to teaching was unique. He didn't assign homework (no wonder he was popular with the kids), and he took the students to the beach or the woods when they became unruly. He played ball with the kids and introduced them to classical music. And, in a move that horrified Mrs. Johnson, he tacked Pablo Picasso paintings of naked women on the wall of his classroom. He also brought in artists and musicians to introduce the kids to the beauty of the world around them, about which they knew very little. And yes, the students did call him "Conrack".

Pat Conroy's first, and only, graduating class of May, 1970 consisted of four students: Johnnie Mae Holmes, Jackie Robinson, Alfred Smith and Margarite Washington. His book, *The Water is Wide*, was published in June, 1972.

