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TOP STORY

## Scientist who had falling-out with College of Charleston works from home at a snail's pace

By Paul Bowers [pbowers@postandcourier.com](mailto:pbowers@postandcourier.com) Feb 26, 2018



Biologist Robert Dillon, formerly an associate professor at the College of Charleston, sets up his laboratory in the kitchen at his home in West Ashley Wednesday December 13, 2017 as he continues his study of freshwater snails.

Grace Beahm Alford/Staff

By Grace Beahm Alford [gbeahm@postandcourier.com](mailto:gbeahm@postandcourier.com)

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After waging a protracted battle with his former bosses at the College of Charleston in 2016, biology professor Robert Dillon cleaned out his lab and carted the contents home to West Ashley.

The files and the vials full of limpets and snails became a sort of invasive species in the Dillon family's home environment.

"You take a scientist and take away his lab, this is what you get," said Dillon's wife, Shary, standing in their kitchen. "It's in a storage unit, it's downstairs, it's behind the couch, and it's sometimes here on the bar."

Dillon reached a settlement agreement with the college in October 2017 after an employment dispute that lasted 21 months.

It started with a few words on his spring 2016 genetics lab syllabus. The college had wanted him to include a list of "student learning outcomes," in keeping with accreditation standards.

Feeling that such a list would cheapen the profession, Dillon instead included an 1896 quote from Woodrow Wilson about imparting "the right thought of the world" on students.

The dispute escalated into a showdown between Dillon and Provost Brian McGee. The college soon barred Dillon from his classroom in the spring of 2016 and suspended him without pay in the fall. After 34 years at the college, Dillon retired in August 2016 and sued the school claiming it had defamed him and denied him due process.

Dillon said he hoped to have a day in court but accepted a settlement on the advice of his attorney, Nancy Bloodgood. He also collects retirement as a former state employee, a fact that made it easier for him to take his stand.

One downside to working from home: He can't secure grants for his research, which involves cataloging the freshwater snails of North America.

Still, he's planning a trip to Wyoming in March to collect field samples. He's self-publishing a book, "The Freshwater Gastropods of North America: Vol. I," although he admits he has no idea who might buy it.

"I have many weaknesses, and one of them is that I've gotten so strange, I just don't know what other people want or like," Dillon said.

For now, it's a winter Wednesday morning at the Dillon home laboratory. Coffee is on. Rambo the quiet orange cat is sniffing house guests.

Dillon snatches up a vial of brown specks suspended in alcohol.

"These snails have sat in a stream in North Georgia for 300 million years, not moving or even evolving," Dillon said, sussing one out into a dish beneath his microscope to observe the fine striae in its shell.

The snails are *Pleurocera proxima*, the subject of his doctoral dissertation. His research indicates they are practically unchanged since the days dinosaurs roamed the earth.

"If you step out of the land and you step knee-deep in a stream in the Southern Appalachians, you go back millions of years," Dillon said. "I can see that, but who else can? I'm not sure."

A bit like the subjects of his research, Dillon is not known for changing his ways. Whether in his public battles against creationist educators, his stark Presbyterian view of eternity, or his Socratic classroom demeanor ("enjoys being obtuse," reads one of the milder critiques on Rate My Professor), he was never one to cave to pressure.

Wading out in the streams and rivers, he's still curious but steadfast.

"I am universally baffled — there it is — universally baffled by everything I see, and so don't get a special sense of wonder by anything I see," Dillon said. "Isn't that weird?"

The College of Charleston declined to comment on Dillon's case.

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Reach Paul Bowers at 843-937-5546. Follow him on Twitter @paul\_bowers.

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**Paul Bowers**