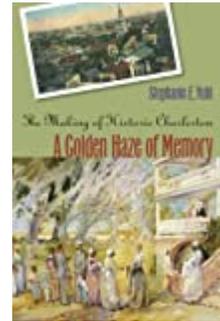




Stephanie E. Yuhl. *A Golden Haze of Memory: The Making of Historic Charleston.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xii + 285 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2936-3; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5599-7.



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Published on H-Urban (April, 2006)

Nostalgia and Progress in Historic Charleston

You need not know and love Charleston, South Carolina, to enjoy this very fine book. If you are not already familiar with this distinctive American city, Stephanie Yuhl provides an excellent introduction. She dissects a sustained collective effort by business leaders and social elites who fashioned an urban persona that stood in opposition to the typical American obsessions with urban growth and progress. Civic leaders built a public image around the ideals of traditionalism, nostalgia, and conservatism, values that most American cities try to silence in a steady drumbeat of boosterism.

During the 1920s Sinclair Lewis's *George Babbitt* was extolling the virtues of progress in Zenith, Ohio, whose go-ahead spirit was producing "a new type of civilization," evident in the "extraordinary, growing, and sane standardization of stores, offices, streets, hotels, clothes, and newspapers throughout the United States."^[1] During the 1920s, if not before, Charleston took a deliberate turn away from American Babbitt and embraced tradition and preservation instead. Or so it may seem on the surface.

Yuhl, however, shows that the origins of historic

Charleston were firmly rooted in modern economic aspirations for urban redevelopment. Her book profiles Susan Pringle Frost, the leader of the modern historic preservation movement in Charleston, who was in most respects an archetypal Progressive Era woman. An ardent feminist, Frost organized in support of South Carolina's drive for women's suffrage. She began as a stenographer and later became a professional real estate agent who supported herself and her unmarried sisters. Frost's worries about the impact of encroaching poor black neighborhoods on real estate values in the Charleston peninsula no doubt informed her ardent determination to preserve the extraordinary richness of the city's architectural heritage. She became the main driving force behind the Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings (SPOD) founded in 1920 by her small group of mostly elite white women.

The cause that gave birth to this movement was the drive to save the magnificent Manigault mansion, a federal-style architectural jewel surrounded by slums and threatened with destruction to make room for a parking garage. Along with the deterioration of the neighbor-

hoods, it was the automobile and the trend toward reorganizing cities around the automobile—with bridges and highways, garages and service stations—that seemed to galvanize Frost and her group of preservationists.

The main threat to Charleston's rich architectural heritage for decades had been the economic stagnation of the city and the incapacity of many of its old elite to maintain the beautiful mansions their ancestors had built. "Too poor to paint, too proud to whitewash," was the legendary lament of old Charleston as it slid into genteel poverty. Once the resort of the Low Country's wealthy rice planters, Charleston had been one of the richest cities in antebellum America. The mansions that lined the Battery and Meeting Street were showcases of the planter aristocracy's wealth and ostentation. But the city had gone into a long slow decline even before the Civil War brought years of blockade, siege, bombing, and destruction. After the war Charleston found itself in competition with several rising railroad and industrial centers in the South's interior. The city's business leadership did not sit on its hands, but efforts to respond to the challenges of the new order of things met with skepticism and frustration as the urban residential core continued to decay. Many of the old mansions were broken up into low-rent apartments, while others were selling off iron work, mantles, and chandeliers to antique dealers to pay other expenses. Beginning with the Spanish American War and continuing through World War I, however, Charleston experienced a surge of economic growth, much of it thanks to federal spending on the harbor and Naval Yard. World War I brought rapid growth and no doubt exacerbated the overcrowding and deterioration of the urban core.

Yuhl quotes from the historian David Lowenthal's book *The Heritage Crusade*, which suggested that "dis-may at massive change stokes demands for heritage," and so it was in Charleston where the old social elite embraced preservation in reaction to impending growth and change (p. 190). But as Frost made clear to the city's business leaders, the preservation of the city's architecture was not intended as a challenge to progress; she presented it as the city's most valuable asset in the coming age of tourism. The second meeting of the SPOD met strategically at the Chamber of Commerce where, as Yuhl puts it, she "articulated an ideal of preservation that embraced commercial, generational, and aesthetic concerns" that were business-friendly (p. 26).

The SPOD's program of preservation was in many ways of a piece with numerous other Progressive Era

movements led by civic-minded women in cities across America. Dedicated to city beautification, slum clearance, city parks, school reform, and numerous other reforms, all these movements in some way enlarged woman's traditional dispensation within the domestic sphere into what Jane Addams deftly labeled "civic housekeeping." What distinguished the Charleston version of this Progressive reformist impulse, however, was the concerted effort to encase the city within a fundamentally conservative self-image, one that seemed to idealize the past, reject modernity, and spurn progress.

This book is about much more than the movement to preserve the city's built environment. In separate chapters Yuhl skillfully shows the connections between this and simultaneous, parallel movements in Charleston's art, literature, poetry, drama, and music scenes. With a few exceptions, all of these cultural productions emanated from the city's venerable old families and from a common impulse aimed at creating a historical image of Charleston. No one will be surprised to learn that the version of history these elites invented for their city was romanticized, selective, flattering, self-serving, and exclusive. Alice Ravenel Huger Smith and Elizabeth O'Neill Verner served up nostalgic paintings that depicted "an artistic illusion of Charleston as a world where all the whites were aristocrats and all the blacks were servants"—content and loyal in their servility, it should be added (p. 57). The "literary packaging" of Charleston was headed up by the Poetry Society of South Carolina, founded in 1920, a body of mostly local white elites who formed in response to H. L. Mencken's ridicule of the "Sahara for the Bozart."^[2] The most celebrated product of Charleston's literary renaissance was DuBose Heyward's *Porgy*, an exploration of the netherworld of Catfish Row, a black tenement south of Broad Street. The novel became the basis for George Gershwin's famous opera, "Porgy and Bess."

The most astonishing cultural production of this white elite was the Society for the Preservation of Negro Spirituals (SPS) founded by a similar group of elite white Charlestonians in 1922 and devoted to preserving the music and folkways of the Gullah people. Like other products of this culture of nostalgic memory, it was performed as much for external as local audiences. Yuhl opens the chapter on the SPS with a remarkable description of its performance in Boston, on a stage illuminated as if by moonlight and an oak draped with Spanish moss, and some forty white Charlestonians—"the menfolk wore tuxedos and broad bow ties of the cavalier days, and the women, Southern belles who lived up to the southern

tradition of beauty, in crinoline dresses”—clapping their hands and singing “Ef yuh wan tuh git tuh Heben, Jus’ come en go wid me” (p. 127). Such vignettes present easy targets for ridicule, but one has to admire Yuhl for avoiding condescension and instead trying to get us inside the minds of these Charleston elites to understand their purpose and their view of the world. Yuhl is unusually good at analyzing literature and art without detaching culture from its historical context.

By her account, all the participants in the production of culture seem to be in agreement in their intentions and interpretation of the past, but I wonder if there was always such harmony. One of the more interesting figures in this story is DuBose Heyward, who is a quintessential representative of the Charleston white aristocracy yet seems at times able to view race and class with some degree of distance from the Charleston mindset that pervades all the cultural enterprises described in this book. Yuhl interprets the story of *Porgy* as falling in with the standard racist party line about degenerate blacks. But Heyward seems more nuanced and more complex than that. Even some contemporaries mistook Heyward for a black writer, a knowing witness of his people’s ways. At one university where he went to lecture he was billed as “not only a member of Harlem’s intellectual colony, but also a Southern Negro of the old tradition” (p. 121). Heyward’s less well-known novel, *Mamba’s Daughters* (1929), is a much richer social novel than *Porgy*. It plays on familiar racial stereotypes but also celebrates the aspirations of the “New Negro” and the Harlem Renaissance, and offers humorous critical views of Charleston’s white society in the process.

A Golden Haze of Memory points us toward promising new directions in urban history in the way it treats culture as part of a strategy for urban development (or preservation, which is a kind of development). Perhaps because she is on the leading edge of a new approach with few comparable studies as models, Yuhl’s study rarely steps back from Charleston to examine how it fits into a broader pattern of such strategies as cities in America and elsewhere sought new ways to define and market their urban identity. This became especially important beginning in the 1920s when the tourist and convention industries made the aesthetics of urban planning so much more important than before. Anthony Stanonis’s forthcoming book on New Orleans, *Creating the Big Easy*, will provide a similar study of a very different city’s campaign

to transform a tawdry image of vice and decadence into a tourist-friendly public identity.[3] This approach feeds into a growing interest in tourism, consumerism, and the production of culture, which promises to enrich the history of urban life in countless ways.

As Yuhl explains, the end product of what seems at first to have been a reactionary resistance to progress in “historic Charleston” was also allied to a strategy of building a tourist industry. It was a long time before Charleston’s aspirations for tourism would bear fruit, but it has been enormously successful of late. Thirty years ago I first visited Charleston. The local chamber of commerce had devised a campaign to promote what it coyly referred to as “America’s best-kept secret”—a secret that local boosters clearly wanted the world to learn about. In those days even an assistant professor doing research at the South Carolina Historical Society and Charleston Library Society could stay in a downtown hotel for weeks without straining the budget. At night there were few restaurants open for visitors and the streets were wonderfully quiet any time after seven in the evening.

These days the city is swarming day and night with tourists and college students coming and going through streets lined with expensive shops that thrive in a sea of tourist dollars and retirement funds that have flooded Charleston during the past twenty years. The locals complain about the influx of wealthy outlanders raising the prices of real estate and about the droppings from the horses that plod through the streets of Old Charleston pulling carriages full of wide-eyed tourists. The guides dress in Confederate caps and speak in exaggerated drawls, telling no less exaggerated tales of Charleston’s past, stories that tourists seem to want to hear about a past they think they long for. They are for the most part the same stories Stephanie Yuhl has so cleverly analyzed in this book.

Notes

[1]. Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (1922), ch. 14; online at Bartleby.com <http://www.bartleby.com/162/14.html>.

[2]. H. L. Mencken, “The Sahara of the Bozart,” *Prejudices: Second Series* (New York: Knopf, 1920).

[3]. Anthony Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006).

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Citation: Don H. Doyle. Review of Yuhl, Stephanie E., *A Golden Haze of Memory: The Making of Historic Charleston*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.

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