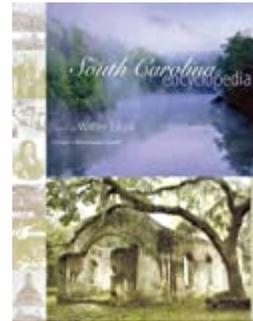




Walter Edgar, ed. *The South Carolina Encyclopedia*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006. xxi+1077 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-598-2.



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The Palmetto State from A to Z

State and regional encyclopedias are very much in vogue these days, and nowhere more so than in the South. Every southern state but one—to this reviewer’s knowledge—has produced or is producing comprehensive reference works on their history, culture, and geography, either in print, on-line, or both. Texas’s massive and long-running *Handbook* project was in a class by itself, with its multiple volumes and editions, the latest in print appearing in 1996. Kentucky marked its bicentennial with a single volume in 1992, followed by Tennessee (1998), and Maryland (1999). Georgia’s on-line encyclopedia appeared in 2004; Arkansas’s debuted in 2006, and both Texas and Tennessee now have electronic editions of their print volumes on-line. In 2006 alone, print encyclopedias on North and South Carolina and West Virginia appeared, as did *The Encyclopedia of Appalachia*, mostly focused on its southern component. Not to be left behind, the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, first published as a single volume in 1989, has taken on a new life with a series of topically focused volumes that will be rolled out over the next few years. Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Virginia all have either print or electronic encyclopedias at various stages of development.

South Carolina’s project began in 1998, under the oversight of editor-in-chief Walter Edgar, one of the most prolific and widely regarded historians of the state, and an editorial staff that included nineteen “associate editors,” assembled for their specific and varied areas of expertise. The final product boasts 1,927 entries by 598 authors, laid out in a traditional alphabetical format. It is an extremely attractive volume, both inside and out, moderately well illustrated, and enhanced by a striking full-color insert of paintings and photographs. While physically smaller than most other southern states, South Carolina’s past is as rich, diverse, and complex as any, and maybe more volatile than most. James Louis Petigru once noted of his native state that it “is too small to be a republic, and too large to be an insane asylum,” and the encyclopedia manages to capture both elements—the state’s significance and its quiriness—as only this most collaborative and cumulative of genres can do. There are various means of assessing encyclopedia content. One revealing indicator is the caliber of contributors, and by that standard, Edgar and staff have done themselves proud. Bernard Powers on African Americans, Vernon Burton on civil rights, Tracy Power on the Civil War, Edgar him-

self on the Revolutionary War, Peter Coclanis on rice, Cleveland Sellers on segregation, Jon Wakelyn on secession, and Daniel Littlefield on slavery are all leading scholars in those fields and demonstrate their mastery with full, but succinct overviews of these massive topics. By the same token, the foremost expertise has been recruited for biographical entries on key historical figures such as John C. Calhoun by Lacy Ford, William Gilmore Simms by John McCardell, Strom Thurmond by Nadine Cohodas, Ben Tillman by Stephen Kantrowitz, and Denmark Vesey by Doug Egerton. Another common assessment tactic is to search out randomly selected topics to test breadth of coverage. My list of thirty some subjects again demonstrated thorough coverage, with only a very few omissions. I missed entries on the Susan Smith case, George Gershwin's Charleston-based opera, *Porgy and Bess* (1935), and most surprisingly, the Depression (though there is a solid article on the New Deal.) While there are entries on the coastal plain, the Sandhills, the Piedmont, the Blue Ridge Mountains, and even the continental shelf, I'd like to have seen an entry defining the Low Country and the Upcountry, the geographic terms most commonly applied to the state. Various ethnic and racial groups with a major presence in the state—from Germans, Greeks, and Gullahs to Jews, Hispanics, Irish and Scots—all rate informative entries, though notably absent is any coverage of the Scots-Irish, arguably the Upcountry's most significant immigrant population base.

Much of the satisfaction in browsing this or any other encyclopedia are the off-beat, entertaining, or unexpected topics covered, which in this case include such entries as: "Asparagus," a significant cash crop in the early twentieth century; "Swamp Angel," a single cannon that shelled Charleston relentlessly in August 1863 until it exploded; "Punches," primarily rum-based and a mainstay of plantation entertaining; "Beacon Drive-In," a Spartanburg restaurant known for its chili cheeseburgers and Easter sunrise services; "She-Crab Soup"—to Charleston cuisine what cheese steaks are to Philadelphia and deep-dish pizza is to Chicago; "Carolina Mantid," or

"praying mantis," dubbed the state insect in 1988; "Beauty Pageants," which comes close to claiming that South Carolina women are more beautiful than any others; and "Shag," "Beach Music," "Venus Flytrap," "Cockfighting," "Lintheads," "Petroglyphs," and "Fish Camps."

Recent controversy is embraced head-on in entries on the Confederate flag debate, the PTL Club and more briefly, Shannon Faulkner's admission to the Citadel (mentioned only in the article on the Citadel; Faulkner gets no article to herself). I cannot resist noting one earlier controversy that is not addressed here: the entry on Andrew Jackson makes no reference to the question of which side of the North Carolina-South Carolina border he may have been born on, stating categorically that he was a South Carolina native, while *The Encyclopedia of North Carolina* devotes an entire article to the debate, but without making a definitive claim either way. A few other quibbles: Each of the state's counties rates an individual entry and map, but nowhere was I able to find the number of current counties or even a list of them. An entry on "Counties, Districts, and Parishes" includes three maps, but they are of parishes and election districts for 1775, 1776, and 1790. Finding aids are relatively few, though one could argue that they are not as vital for a book with so basic an alphabetical format. Still, it is curious to find no cross-references from one article to others, and only a perfunctory index that is little more than an article list, and thus nearly redundant.

All of this is merely the nitpicking that any reference work of this scale invites and to which all are vulnerable. The bottom line is that *The South Carolina Encyclopedia* is a most impressive example of what a state encyclopedia can and should be. Not only South Carolinians, but all of us interested in southern history and culture, owe a tremendous debt to Edgar, his associate editors, and staff for making so much information so easily accessible, and for having produced as thoughtful, as thorough, as attractive, and as entertaining a reference work as any of the many with which it now finds itself competing.

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