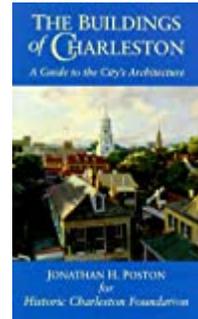


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Jonathan H. Poston.** *The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City's Architecture.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997. 717 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-202-8.



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## Historic Charleston On Display

While it is generally known that Charleston, South Carolina is one of the better preserved cities in the United States, until now there has been no comprehensive visitor's guide to its historic buildings. Jonathan H. Poston's *The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City's Architecture* is an attempt to fill that void. The author notes in his preface that the intent of this book is "to offer the interested traveler a comprehensive sourcebook when planning a trip to Charleston and when walking its streets" (p. 9).

Opening with brief introductory essays describing the city's ironwork (by John M. Vlach), the Charleston "single house" (by Bernard Herman), and burial grounds (by Jonathan Poston), the book then takes the reader through the city's eighteenth and nineteenth century expansions, and also describes the suburbs that were later incorporated into the city. Using a street-by-street approach, each page contains several text entries that describe the historic buildings located there. Text entries are generally accompanied by contemporary or modern photographs, or "plats, drawings, or measured plans that serve to offer significant understanding or interest to the

text" (p. 15). Icons on certain entries indicate the inclusion of a building on the National Register of Historic Places or one designated as a National Historic Landmark.

The primary strength in this work lies in its attempt to include every significant historic building in Charleston—which is no small undertaking. At least 940 specific addresses are described, with construction and rehabilitation/restoration information and, with most, a photograph. Often the names of the architect, builder, original and subsequent owners, and preservationists are included, accompanied by a brief historical note. Certain noted properties, such as the Miles Brewton house or the Samuel Wilson houses, are described in greater detail. A secondary strength is that the book helps to dispel the myth of the Anglo-Huguenot foundations of Charleston, and notes frequently when the builders or owners of these historic buildings were African-American, German, or Irish.

Despite these strengths, there are a few weaknesses which are readily apparent to both historians and "interested travelers." First, there is not one single compre-

hensive map of the city included in the book. There are sectional reproductions of various historical maps of the city, but these are too small to be both readable or useful. There is no clear way for the reader or visitor—unfamiliar with Charleston—to grasp the city as a “whole.” True, there are illustrations at the beginning of each chapter offering a “bird’s-eye view,” but the reader gets no sense, for example, of the locational relationship between Ansonborough and Wraggborough, or the Battery and the Village of Harleston. Second, there are no citations for the introductory essays, chapter essays, or any of the text entries. There is, therefore, no way for the reader to further investigate or verify these entries. Third, it would have been helpful to list illustration credits first by entry or page, rather than by source. The method used makes it very difficult to locate the source of a specific illustration.

As noted in the “Acknowledgments,” the “production of this book has been an overwhelmingly collaborative effort” (p. 11). This “collaborative” nature is readily found in the lack of balance in some of the text entries. Many of these are quite good, but occasional lapses of vital information are evident. For one clear example, when describing the Blake Tenements, 4 Courthouse Square (a building listed on the National Register of Historic Places), the text notes “Daniel Blake inherited this portion of the original Archdale Square, a site that had been reserved for an early Quaker governor on the old town plan” (p. 180). It would have been helpful to have the name of the “early Quaker governor.” Another problem occurs when describing the ethnicity of some of the builders and owners. While relatively minor figures (for example, John Henry Bullwinkle and John Ficken, et. al.) are noted to be either German immigrants or of German descent, major German ethnic figures, such as J. C. H. Claussen, David Sailer [Saylor], and Jacob Williman are not. The entry for the Roper-Melchers Building, 167 East Bay Street, does not include that it was the site of the editorial and publishing offices of the “*Deutsche Zeitung*,” Charleston’s pro-secessionist and pro-slavery German-language newspaper (p. 113-14). It was the only antebellum German-language newspaper published between Richmond and New Orleans, and the only known pro-slavery German-language newspaper in the United States.

Finally, there are some clear errors in the text.

Charles Hamilton’s painting “Charleston Square” is incorrectly captioned (p. 339). Hamilton’s painting shows the market area in 1872—not 1865 as the caption states. The listing for St. Johannes Lutheran Church, 48 Hasell Street, contains historical errors—especially that it was constructed in 1842 for a German congregation that broke away from Saint John’s Lutheran Church when German-language services were “dropped” (p. 445-46). The number and frequency of German-language services at Saint John’s had been declining since about 1810, and finally ceased in the early 1830s. The new congregation (Saint Matthew’s) building the church at the corner of Hasell and Anson Streets resulted from a desire by post-Civil War mayor John A. Wagener to weld all German Christians—even Catholics—into a single German-language congregation during a period of increasing German immigration in Charleston.[1] Among other minor errors, Theodore Dehon Wagner (among other Wagners) is correctly listed in the text (pp. 636-37), but not in the index, where his name is spelled “Wagener.”

Even with these errors and problems, this book clearly supersedes previous works on Charleston’s architecture. Both “interested travelers” and historians will find this a useful, if occasionally incomplete, description of Charleston’s historic buildings and neighborhoods. Visitors will find a wealth of information that is available in a convenient volume, which will help them discover the wonders of Charleston’s unique history. Historians will gain a new perspective on the development of one of the United States’ most important colonial and antebellum cities. A note of caution, however, should be sounded in regard to the absolute historical accuracy of all of the entries. Subsequent editions should include a clearly readable and detailed map, as well as specific citations for the source material of individual text entries.

#### Notes:

[1]. Michael Everette Bell, “‘Hurrah fuer dies suesse, dies sonnige Leben’: The Anomaly of Charleston, South Carolina’s Antebellum German-America” (Ph.D. diss., University of South Carolina, 1996) 78, 90-91.

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