

Charleston and Savannah: The Rise, Fall, and Reinvention of Two Rival Cities

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Review

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Wilson, Thomas D. *Charleston and Savannah: The Rise, Fall, and Reinvention of Two Rival Cities*. The University of Georgia Press, 2023. PAPERBACK. \$39.95 ISBN 9780820363196 pp. 348.

In *Charleston and Savannah*, planner and independent scholar Thomas D. Wilson builds upon ground laid by his earlier books to offer an insightful and comprehensive comparison of two of the Lowcountry's most historic cities. In *The Oglethorpe Plan* (2015) and *The Ashley Cooper Plan* (2016), Wilson highlights how seventeenth and eighteenth-century urban planning helped shape the politics, economics, and culture of Savannah and Charleston, respectively, as well as how these early foundations continue to influence the experiences of city residents and visitors in our contemporary moment. The present volume extends the contributions of the author's previous works, arguing that while Charleston and Savannah are cities with distinct origin stories and visions, their histories and, as Wilson contends, their present and futures, are very much entwined. It is only by recognizing this connectedness, Wilson suggests, that the two cities, once rivals, can work together towards a more sustainable future.

Wilson organizes his chapters into six distinct parts, the latter four detailing the "rise, fall, and reinvention" of each city promised in the book's subtitle. The first section offers an overview of the cities, including the culture and geography of each, both of which shaped and were shaped by Charleston and Savannah's early engagement with the transatlantic trade, most notably, the trade in enslaved people. Charleston, in particular, served as one of the largest markets of enslaved people in the United States prior to the abolition of slavery in 1865. The second section provides brief histories, what Wilson calls "biographies," of the two sites to better acquaint the

reader with the general chronology and pattern of the cities. Both Parts I and II receive an extended discussion in the book's companion site, which as the author's note suggests, offers a more in-depth and dynamic analysis of these topics and others than is possible within the pages of a published volume.

In Part III, Wilson hits his stride discussing the distinctive visions for the two colonial sites, the first comprehensively planned cities in British America. Charleston, the older of the two, emerged as the creation of First Earl of Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper and his protégé, John Locke, who would later become famous for his Enlightenment philosophies. Wilson argues that Carolina's Grand Model of planning arose out of this precise pre-Enlightenment moment, emphasizing earlier values which privileged the maintenance of strict political and economic hierarchies, and the preservation of property rights for the few, including the rights to hold other people in bondage. Though Locke's grid-like plan was never fully realized, resulting in irregular streets and alleyways that produce the somewhat "medieval" atmosphere of the city, Wilson maintains that the high accessibility and connectedness of the historic core reflects the aspirations of the earlier Grand Model.

Established over a half century later, Savannah, like Charleston, also emerged as a comprehensively planned city, one that drew upon and departed from its older sibling's example in its own quest to realize a more democratic society. Influenced by the then popular values of the Enlightenment, Savannah's planner James Edward Oglethorpe hoped to populate the Georgia colony with the English "worthy poor" who only needed access to land and opportunity to alleviate their conditions. Rather than employ a highly stratified disbursement of lands, Oglethorpe restricted the amount of land any single owner or entity could claim, thereby ensuring relative agrarian equality within the colony. Additionally, Oglethorpe's ward system,

regularly sized blocks, urban forest, and location of Savannah on a coastal ridge, all contributed to the walkability and healthfulness of the city, without losing the compactness that created the vibrant core so important to Charleston's success.

In Parts IV and V, Wilson notes that the differences between the two cities were not always well-received by each other, resulting in a relationship that was beneficial and tense at times. For example, the author emphasizes the ways in which Oglethorpe's Enlightenment principles initially outlawed the trade and practice of slavery in Georgia, a policy many Carolinians viewed as hostile to their economic future, a future rooted in enslaved people's rice production. By the 1750s, money and settlers from Charleston poured into Savannah in Oglethorpe's absence, flouting the law and later rescinding it. Charleston retained its position as one of the South's most prosperous cities into the antebellum era, largely through the profits gleaned from enslaved labor, but as Wilson suggests, it also remained vigilant to possible competition from its southern neighbor. By 1853, Savannah's embrace of industrialized transportation (e.g., steamboats and railroads) presented such a challenge to Charleston that the two agreed to fund a new rail line that would link both cities to markets in the North and West. Shortly after the railroad began operations, South Carolina, and later Georgia, would secede from the Union.

This relationship, marked by competition, collaboration, and shared experience, extended into the post-Reconstruction period, as both Charleston and Savannah attempted to recover from the economic, political, and cultural losses of the Civil War, as noted in Part VI. Wilson observes the stagnation of the traditional Southern economy until the mid-twentieth century, but places greater emphasis on changes in politics and culture in the decades following the removal of federal troops from the South. As so many historians have noted, the "Lost Cause" mythology

emerged in both cities, an ideology which attempted to root the cause of the war in Southern White heritage and states' rights over a desire to preserve slavery. The result was a reinstitution of antebellum racial politics in new forms, coming to a head in the wake of World War II, as the cities saw an exodus of monied Whites from the historic core, facilitated by both discriminatory policies of the GI Bill and the investment in suburban transportation and infrastructure, as well as urban "renewal" efforts that often-targeted Black communities.

By the 1960s, the author charges that Civil Rights advocates united with historic preservationists to mobilize the diversity of Charleston and Savannah's historic cores, bringing changes both to the built and cultural environments of the cities. With the election of racial and gender diverse mayoral candidates, grass-roots revitalization efforts, and the flocking of creative workers to these sites, Charleston and Savannah are part of a national trend in which cities, even cities in traditionally conservative states, have become more progressive. Additionally, these revitalization efforts have spurred investment from the outside, creating more robust opportunities for tourism, including that of a cultural nature, designed to bring visitors to Charleston and Savannah's robust high art and music scenes.

Wilson, however, is quick to remind readers that these cultural and economic advancements are not total nor without their limitations. The 2015 shooting at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston and the conflict over the flying of the Confederate flag on South Carolina state grounds highlight the ways that antebellum racial prejudice continues to manifest in new ways, further exacerbated by national events such as the tragic murder of George Floyd in 2020. Additionally, the author suggests, this push towards luxury tourism has proliferated in a spate of absentee homeowners and luxury short-term vacation rentals that threaten to push out working-class residents and change the tenor of the cities' historic cores.

In his concluding chapter and Afterword, Wilson offers culturally and community responsive city planning as an answer to the challenges facing Charleston and Savannah. In particular, he emphasizes that the futures of both cities will rely on their resilience and the sustainability of their initiatives with regard to addressing elitification, racial inequality, and climate change. He signals the utility of the earlier Oglethorpe Plan, in particular, as a guide for creating mixed-use spaces, a key component for healthy cities. Looking to past democratic planning principles, as well as the limitations of historically exclusionary and racist policies, Wilson intimates, can provide a route forward towards a “100% solution” that attempts to unite the values, goals, and motivations of the city’s most wealthy with the remaining 99% of the population, which will in turn create “inclusive, vibrant, and creative nucle[i] for the region in which all residents can take pride” (298-301).

While historians of the Civil War and Reconstruction eras might have hoped for an expanded historiography and historical analysis of the periods under discussion, that is perhaps too much to ask of what is already a temporally and geographically ambitious work. Wilson’s primary audiences, historically-minded urban planners and activists, as he well understands, need to look both backward and forward to analyze and meet the complex challenges facing these two prominent Lowcountry cities. In these thoughtful chapters, he shows them how to do so.

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