

Porch Sittin'

February 23, 2022
Millarville, Alberta

After two years of travel restrictions, and countless hours spent talking about where we would go first when Covid ends, you would think we would have developed a well-defined, post-pandemic travel plan. Not so.

Me: *Travel restrictions are lifting, of all the places we have researched, which do you want to see first?*

Bear: *We never talked about it, but I just read an article about Charleston, it looks interesting. Lyle Lovett is playing there next Wednesday.*

Me: *Ok, can we leave tomorrow?*

Bear: *Sure. I'll book some tickets.*



Come along to South Carolina with us, we are fixin' to do some ...

... porch sittin'.

Pineapples to Prove It

February 25, 2022

Charleston, South Carolina

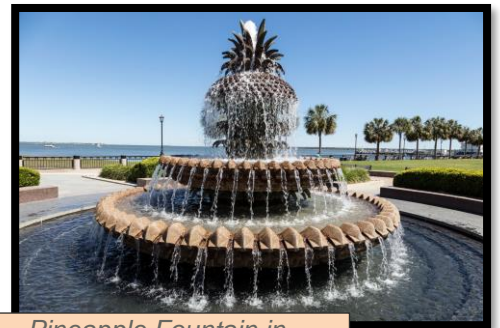


We weren't in Charleston for five minutes before we started noticing pineapples, they were popping up everywhere.

Pineapples aren't native to South Carolina. In colonial times, the only way to get one was from South America, by way of Barbados.

Sailors returning home from the Caribbean would

pack the exotic fruit with them. The journey could take weeks but if the pineapples were properly packed in sugar, they could survive the journey. The fruit was so rare and so coveted that wealthy Charlestonians were willing to pay the equivalent of \$8,000 for one pineapple! In 17th century Charleston, if you served your guests a pineapple, you were a big deal.



Pineapple Fountain in Charleston's Waterfront Park

The pineapple became Charleston's symbol of hospitality. Every store, hotel, and residence has one, usually located near the entrance to welcome guests. Like the one pictured above left, hanging in our Airbnb.

Charleston is a gracious host, and they have ...

... pineapples to prove it.



In true southern style, the pineapple emblem can also be used as a polite reminder that it is time to leave. If your host is tired, or tired of your company, the pineapple may disappear or have its back turned on you.

What Does It Mean?

February 26, 2022

Charleston, South Carolina

Charleston was founded in 1670; it is one of the oldest cities in America.

The literacy rate was about 40% at that time, so visual references were important if you wanted to be understood, or to advertise your products and services. There are wonderful old signs and symbols all over Charleston, a throwback to colonial times.

If you needed a place to stay for the night in old Charleston, you would look for a house or tavern with a moon cut into the shutters. The “night” sign signified that rooms were for rent.

If you wanted some female companionship in the evening, you could find an establishment with a heart shape in the shutters. (According to retired history professor and tour guide, Cooper.)



These buildings, located across from one another on Tradd Street, are private homes today. The original shutters demonstrate that the residences were once part of Charleston’s colonial hospitality industry.



This strange character has adorned a building on the corner of Broad and Church streets since the late 1800s. His features were created using sixteen different hat styles once sold at *Plenge Haberdashery*, which occupied the building.

This sign is new, but it is as old as the Second Amendment. It shows up everywhere in Charleston.



George Washington once gave a pre-revolutionary speech from the steps on the right. I would love to ask George if the gun sign is what he had in mind when he and John Hancock put their *John Hancock's* on the Constitution.



This is an award plaque, attached to historical buildings restored to the original condition of their time. There is one on our Airbnb on Kracke Street.



These signs outside *Mr. B's Private Club*, just up the street from us, establish a dress code.

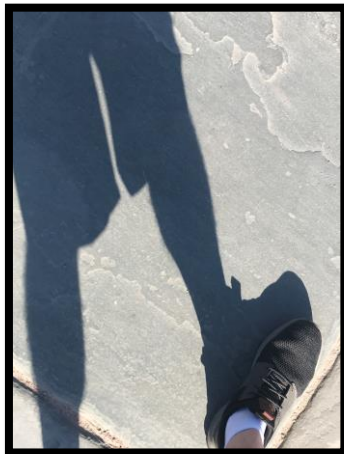


They do not however, demonstrate what activities take place at Mr. B's.



To find out what goes on at this run-down establishment, "you will need a key, or the permission of Mr. B."

The three images below are signs that this writer has the photography skills of a nat.



I don't know why images of my foot keep showing up among my iPhone photos.

The word *sign* is derived from *ensign*, or flag. We watched as the star-spangled ensign was raised over Fort Sumpter.

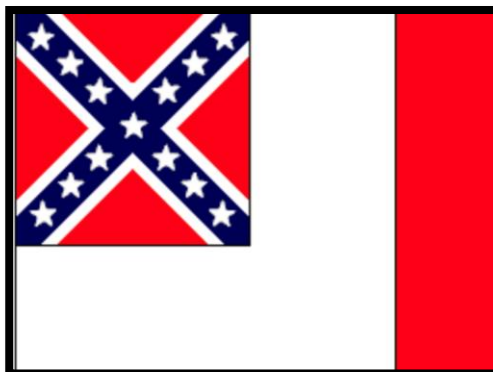
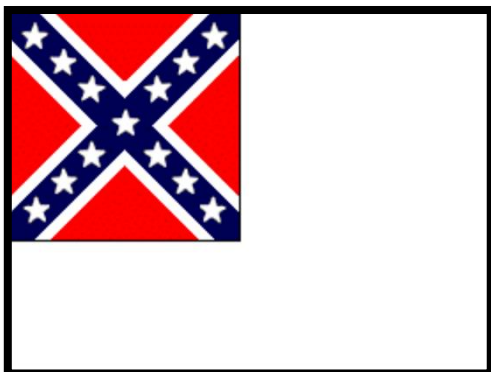
There were only 33 stars on the American Flag when the first shots of the Civil War were fired at Fort Sumpter.



Of course, the flag that flew over Fort Sumpter on April 12, 1861 would not have been the Union flag, the Confederate banner would have been raised here. That flag bears connotations of support for slavery, so it is never flown.

I have placed images of the Confederate flag in this article for historical context only. No offence is intended.

The original Confederate flag was the familiar “stars-and-bars” banner, on a white background. When there was no wind and the flag was at rest, only the white portion was visible. It could be mistaken for the sign of “surrender”. The Confederates wanted nothing to do with surrender, so they placed a red stripe on the end of the flag. The new flag wasn’t much of an improvement, so they abandoned the white background altogether.



We found some symbols in our neighbourhood that are in common use everywhere.



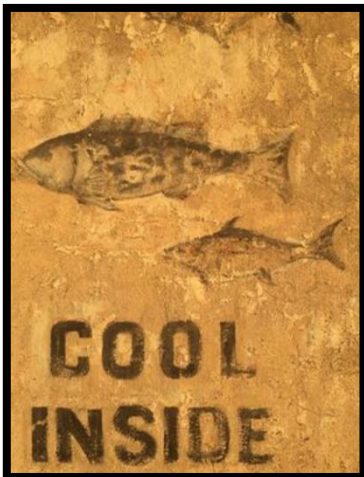
Ed's Barber Shop has the traditional blood and bandages pole motif.



Mega Pawn has the three spheres of the Medici Family merchants of Renaissance Italy, on display. The pawnshop sign is missing an "M".

True Story: The sign on the bank in the town I grew up in was missing a "T". Until I was about nine years old, I thought our family dealt at *He Royal Bank of Canada*.

Barber Shop and Pawn Shop signs are common everywhere, but Charleston has some signs that are unique to this part of the world.



In most places space is advertised as "air-conditioned". In Charleston it is "Cool Inside".



This unpretentious sign advertises "Seafood".

What it doesn't say is that the shrimp boats dock on the wharf out back, and Hank serves seafood so fresh the tails are still wiggling.

I will stop talking about signs for now, five pages is a long story for me, but I will leave you with a mystery. This little sign is propped up in the window of the house next door. It has been there the whole time we have been in Charleston.

"Wrong Day, Go Back" ...

... What Does It Mean?



House A

February 24, 2022

Charleston, South Carolina

Antebellum - one of those words that has been hijacked for a specific group's personal use, this one twice.

Literally, antebellum means "before the war", and it relates to a period prior to *any* war, as in *Hitler's antebellum Germany*. Americans started referring to the years leading up to the American Civil War as the *Antebellum Period*, and it stuck. *Antebellum* is now used almost exclusively in the US, as a descriptive for the years between 1812 and 1861.

The second time the word got hijacked is more recent - a result of identity politics, part of the *woke* movement. *The Antebellum Period* refers to a time in America when slavery was prevalent. Some people have come to view *antebellum* as pejorative, they prefer that the word not be used at all.



Antebellum has gone from general use, to specific use, to vilification, and now potential obscurity.

The country music group *Lady Antebellum* felt obliged to change their name to *Lady A*.

I mention this because we are staying at this Airbnb while we are in Charleston this week. The style of the house is known as *Antebellum Architecture* – gabled roof, symmetrical façade, pillars, and porches.

It is a wonderful, creaky old place.

It would be a shame to change the name. This beautiful Antebellum House could be demoted, to simply ...

... House A



High Noon

February 26, 2022

Charleston, South Carolina



It was 11:15 when we found this sundial in a Charleston churchyard. The instrument, placed there in 1825, was reading 11:05.

The ancient timepiece has only lost three seconds per year over the past 200 years, and it never once needed a change of batteries.

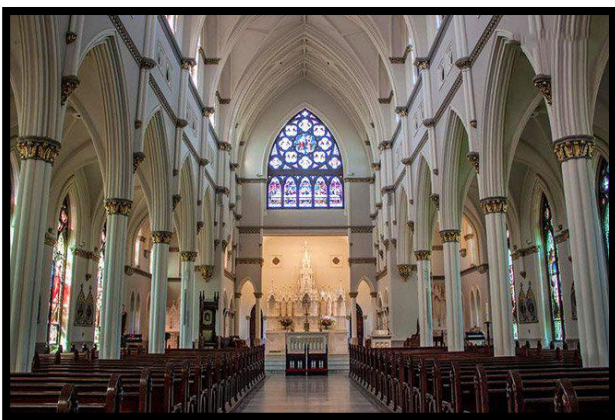
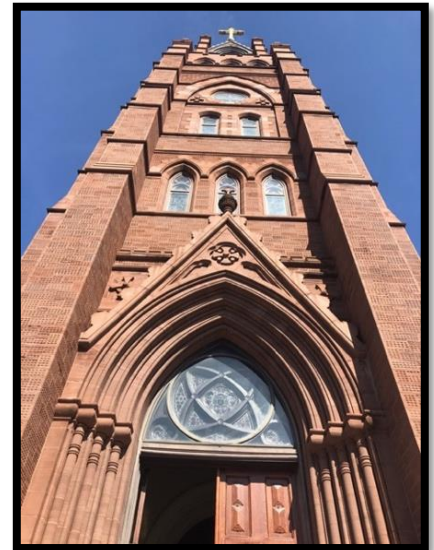
My watch only lasts two days without charging, but it is portable, and it has the advantage of working after dark.



I am always in awe when I visit a grand church, not so much for what they represent, as for the people who built them.

The Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Charleston is an example of Gothic Revival Architecture. It is a modest church, by Roman Catholic cathedral standards. Even so, the soaring arches and columns inspire wonder.

How were craftsmen able to take a drawing and a quarry of Connecticut brownstone, and turn it into this, long before tower cranes or power tools?



Bear and I sat on a bench in the churchyard cemetery to ponder these questions, and others.

We watched the shadow of the giant spire sweep an arc over the city, past ...

... high noon.

Haint Blue

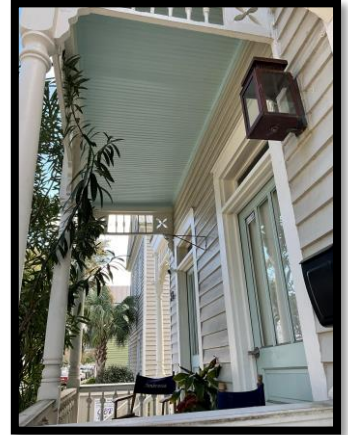
February 28, 2022

Charleston, South Carolina

There are no evil spirits at our Airbnb. The reason for this is *haint blue*.

Haint is a Southern variation of the word "haunt", it refers to ghosts or spirits. *Blue* represents water. Apparently, spirits can't traverse water, so southerner's paint their piazza ceilings, window trim, and sometimes doors a colour called *haint blue* to keep evil spirits from entering.

It works! We have been in this house, behind a haint blue door, under a haint blue ceiling, for almost a week and not one evil spirit has appeared.



Piazzas are a southern architectural phenomenon worth talking about.

Almost every house in Charleston has a porch or sun deck attached, which they call a piazza. On large homes the piazza may wrap around the entire house. On more modest homes, it is on the front and one side, usually the south, like ours.

Where lot space is limited, the piazza may be on the front of the dwelling.

An image of folks sitting on swings or rocking chairs, sipping iced tea in the shade is quintessential American South.





When summer heat indoors is unbearable, southerners might hang a suspended bed on the piazza and take a nap in the breeze.

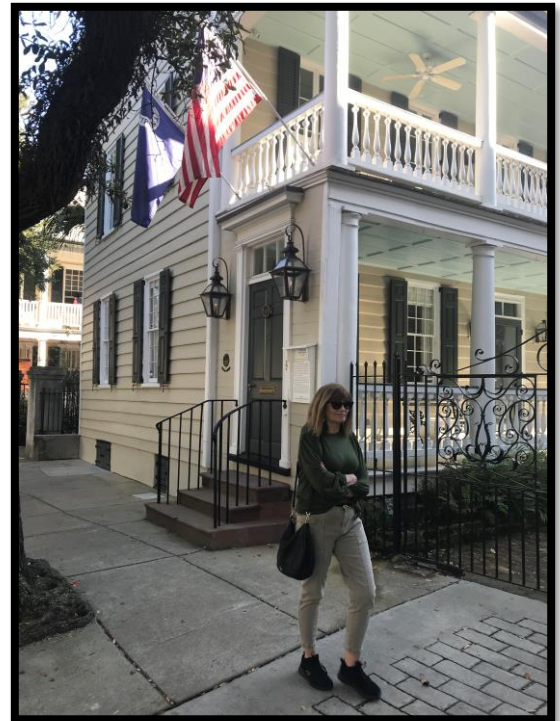
The habit of sleeping outdoors led to another quirky southern architectural feature, the door to nowhere.

Piazzas on the side of the house are wide open. There are no walls, shutters, or screens, so air

flows freely. But on the front of the house, facing the street, there is almost always a door to the piazza.

Southerners call it a *privacy door*, but it only blocks the view of the piazza from the front of the house, not the side. The doors seems pointless, yet they appear on many southern homes.

Note the haint blue ceiling, and the movie star walking by. Both quite common in Charleston.



Speaking of stars, this is the house Stephen Colbert grew up in. The grand home is located on the sea front, near Battery Park.

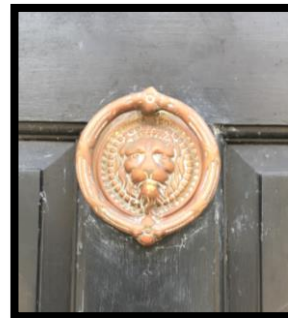
The Colbert house is an example of *Charleston Single* style architecture.

Another feature unique to southern homes is the rounded balcony railing, designed to accommodate a southern bell's hooped skirt.



Homes in downtown Charleston were built long before electricity, so a door knocker was essential. Homeowners chose knockers that reflected their personality. Some are interesting, others should be covered with a thick coat of ...

... Haint Blue



Angelic

February 27, 2022

John's Island, South Carolina

This tree sprouted about the time Charleston was founded, around 1663.



The 350-year-old Angel Oak on John's Island is the largest tree east of the Mississippi.

It shades an area of about 17,000 square feet, has a circumference at the base of 26 feet, and stands 65 feet tall.

We drove to John's Island early Sunday morning to get ahead of the 400,000 other tourists who visit the tree each year. Unfortunately, it is in a city park and the gates don't open until 1pm on Sundays. It really didn't matter; we could see the giant oak tree from the road. It is hard to miss.

While the tree's dimensions are stunning, the poetry and grace of its branches and foliage are what elevates it to the status of ...

...Angelic.

The Angel Oak is the only tree I know of that has its own website.

<https://www.charleston-sc.gov/153/Angel-Oak>

A Lasting Impression

March 1, 2022

Charleston, South Carolina

It is impossible to visit Charleston and explore its history without mentioning the elephant in the room – slavery. Charleston was the centre of the North American slave trade; the buildings we toured and admired were built with slave labour. The plantations that surround Charleston prospered at the expense of enslaved men, women, and children. The very ground we walked upon the past several days is saturated with the blood, sweat and tears of human beings, owned by other human beings.



We explored the historic slave market, a short walk from where we are staying. Another day we visited a plantation, where we walked in the footprints of slavery. We learned much about the history of the capture, trade and treatment of African slaves.

Hundreds of stories about human subjugation are worthy of being retold, but I will limit this piece to one, a story about this brick.

Most of the buildings in old Charleston are constructed of brick. The lowlands have abundant red clay ideal for making them. Manufacturing bricks was backbreaking work, the clay had to be mined, then transported to an open field. The clay was mulched with water by hand to a proper consistency, then formed into wet blocks. The blocks were laid out on the ground individually, to dry in the sun. As the bricks dried, they needed to be turned occasionally to expose all sides.

The work required little skill but a great deal of effort. Slaves with vocational training were not employed in the manufacture of bricks, their skills were needed elsewhere. The gruelling work of making bricks was forced upon children.

As bricks dry on the side exposed to the sun, they remain malleable on the edges. On the brick above you will see three small indentations. These are the imprints of the fingers of the enslaved child who stood in the hot sun and bent her back to lift and turn this brick - and a thousand, thousand more.

Charleston's history leaves ...

... a lasting impression.

Aging Eccentricity

March 2, 2022

Charleston, South Carolina

Lyle Lovett entertained us on our last night in Charleston. He played some favourites like, *North Dakota*, *If I Had a Boat*, and *She's No Lady*, but it was his ovation song I came to hear, *Bears*.



I regularly run into people who profess they don't like country music. What they are referring to is country music as described by the entertainment editor of *The Charleston Gazette-Mail* this morning:

"... there was very little that sounded like what country sounds like these days. The twang was there, but the aching dumbness of slick, generic country was absent. Nobody missed it."

If you don't like Lyle Lovett's brand of music, you just don't like music.

The Gazette went on to describe the show this way:

"... he seemed game for anything, and the modest crowd that came out to see him was happy to go wherever Lovett wanted. He and his band played a little country swing, some bluegrass, a little blues and even a few things that brushed up against jazz."

I don't know where the Gazette gets off calling the audience "modest". We were well-behaved, but modesty wasn't the dominant character trait. Maybe, ...

... Aging Eccentricity?

<https://youtu.be/T4SaNuxZO8>

Bears – Lyle Lovett

<https://youtu.be/4o3m1FwhusY>

She's No Lady – Lyle Lovett



Sankofa for President

March 2, 2022

Charleston, South Carolina

We found this bird in the same churchyard as the sundial. His name is Sankofa.

I never got my bearings clearly the whole time we were in Charleston. I am usually pretty good at orienting in a strange city, but Charleston had me baffled. North was never where it was supposed to be, nor any of the other compass points. We made several wrong turns and retraced our steps regularly as a result.



“Up” and “down” weren’t even a given in Charleston.

The one direction I was able to make total sense of was looking “backwards”. The history of this city is so vivid I was able to get a clear orientation in that direction. Which brings me back to Sankofa.

Sankofa is a West African symbol of a bird looking over its back. It means “*learning from the past in order to move forward*”. The world could take a lesson from this bird right now.

White supremacy, overlap of church and state authority, getting into wars we can’t get out of, and countless other bad ideas from our past are on display in Charleston’s history. There is abundant historical evidence in this city to clearly demonstrate that we should avoid these abominable ideas, at any cost. And yet, they keep popping up.

If our political leaders were obliged to take a history lesson, even a touristy walking tour of Charleston, they might not be in such a rush to repeat past mistakes.

... Sankofa for President!

Acres of Shade

March 3, 2022

Charleston, South Carolina

I don't usually pick favourites when we travel. Charleston has so many features that could qualify, but I am going to go out on a limb this time and say that the Angel Oak Tree took top billing. Here are a few contenders...



Cafés on King Street



Fascinating architecture – The Oldest Tavern – 1690



Interesting signs on Catfish Row, and everywhere.



<https://youtu.be/2sbJAMW7sWI> Lyle



The "Big House", and the Not-So-Big House.



But the clear winner for me ...



... Acres of Shade.



Two more tidbits before I go. Oak trees have two common parasite plants that grow on them, Spanish Moss and Resurrection Fern.

The moss hangs in long green beards from oak branches. It has a spongy consistency, which Colonial settlers found comfortable as mattress ticking.

Resurrection Fern is so-named because of its capacity to rejuvenate after a prolonged dry period. When we were in Charleston the ferns on the oak trees looked withered and brittle. It rained the last night we were there, but we were airborne before the resurrection.

