
◆

The Preservation Post

The Quarterly Bulletin of The Southern Historic Preservation Society

ISSN 2025-0001

Number 16

Winter 2025

Mapping the Antebellum South

Cartographic Sources for Architectural Historians

by Dr. Catherine Montrose

Maps lie. Or rather, maps select — choosing what to show and what to omit, what to emphasize and what to diminish, in ways that reflect the purposes, prejudices, and limitations of their makers. For the architectural historian, this selectivity is both a challenge and an opportunity.

"Maps lie. Or rather, maps select — choosing what to show and what to omit in ways that reflect the purposes, prejudices, and limitations of their makers."

The antebellum South produced a remarkably rich cartographic record. From the detailed county atlases of the 1850s to the cadastral maps that accompanied land transactions, from the engineer's surveys of railroad routes to the Coast Survey's elegant harbor charts, the documentary landscape of the pre-war South is extensively — if unevenly — mapped.

For preservation researchers, these maps serve three critical functions. First, they document the existence and location of structures that have since been demolished or altered beyond recognition. Second, they reveal patterns of land use, settlement, and transportation that help explain why buildings were sited where they were. Third, and perhaps most importantly, they provide a basis for understanding the broader cultural landscape within which individual structures existed.

The most valuable cartographic sources for architectural historians fall into several categories. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, produced from 1867 onward, provide detailed building footprints, construction materials, and occupancy information for urban areas. While they postdate the antebellum period, early editions document many structures that were built before the Civil War.

County atlases, produced by commercial publishers in the 1850s and 1870s, offer bird's-eye views and property maps that show the relationship between buildings, agricultural lands, and transportation networks. The atlases produced by D.G. Beers & Co. are particularly valuable for their detailed representations of individual farmsteads and plantations.

Perhaps the most underutilized cartographic sources are the manuscript maps produced by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers during and immediately after the Civil War. These maps, many of which survive in the National Archives, document the built environment of the South with a precision born of military necessity. They show not only roads, bridges, and fortifications but also individual buildings, fences, orchards, and gardens.

The Society's Digital Archive Initiative has begun the process of georeferencing these historic maps — aligning them with modern geographic data so that researchers can overlay past and present, seeing at a glance what has survived and what has been lost. This work is painstaking but transformative, and we welcome volunteers with GIS experience to join the effort.

From the Director's Desk

by *Dr. Margaret Elliston*

Dear Members,

Winter is a season of planning, and at the Society, we have been planning ambitiously. This year will see the launch of our most significant initiative to date — the Digital Archive, which Dr. Montrose describes with characteristic eloquence in this issue's lead article.

But I also want to take this moment to reflect on something less tangible: the community we have built together. When we founded the Society in 2020 — in the middle of a pandemic, no less — we had little more than a shared conviction that the heritage of the American South deserved a new kind of advocate. Five years later, we are a community of over 1,100 members, a publishing house of twenty issues, and a voice that is increasingly heard in the debates that shape the future of our historic places.

That community is our greatest asset. More than any grant or endowment, it is your engagement — your research, your advocacy, your willingness to show up for a workday at a crumbling courthouse or a public hearing at city hall — that makes preservation possible.

Thank you for another extraordinary year. I look forward to what we will accomplish together in 2025.



CONTENTS

Mapping the Antebellum South	1
From the Director's Desk	5
