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## Restoring the Dock Street Theatre: Cultural Production in New-Deal Era Charleston, South Carolina

Stephanie E. Gray  
*University of South Carolina*

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RESTORING THE DOCK STREET THEATRE:  
CULTURAL PRODUCTION IN NEW-DEAL ERA CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

by

Stephanie E. Gray

Bachelor of Arts  
Mount Holyoke College, 2013

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

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University of South Carolina

2016

Accepted by:

Lauren Sklaroff, Director of Thesis

Marjorie Spruill, Reader

Lacy Ford, Senior Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Dock Street Theatre project, completed between the years 1935 and 1937 in Charleston, South Carolina, was a New Deal experiment in “historical restoration” funded by President Franklin Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration (WPA). Opening night of the restored theatre signified the transformation of the Old Planters’ Hotel, a dilapidated nineteenth-century resort built on the site of the original 1736 playhouse, into an architectural gem that resurrected the eighteenth-century theatre that was considered the cultural heart of colonial Charleston. The orchestrated recreation of the Dock Street Theatre resulted from the imperative of Charleston’s white elite to foment through architecture a tangible image of the city’s prosperous colonial and antebellum past. Albert Simons and Samuel Lapham, the project’s architects, utilized the built environment to craft a particular cultural identity of their city that promoted a romanticized view of Charleston as a bastion of the Old South. Two goals were embedded in the restoration of the theatre: to produce an architecturally sound space that resembled as closely as possible the original eighteenth-century theatre, and to physically encode in the built environment the legacy of Old Charleston. The relocation of architectural elements salvaged from a nearby nineteenth-century mansion, the Radcliffe-King House, to the restored theatre helped fabricate a visual and physical connection to Charleston’s past. Ultimately, the project fulfilled its aims to strengthen Charleston’s art identity as a regional theatre and to contribute to the architectural stock of a city whose

cultural elites were intent on maintaining, and, when possible, resurrecting a prosperous past in tangible form.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT .....	v
LIST OF FIGURES .....	viii
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER II: THE DOCK STREET THEATRE: RESURRECTING OLD CHARLESTON .....	8
CHAPTER III: SALVAGED GOODS: BETTER WITH AGE.....	40
CHAPTER IV: A “CAST OF SOCIALITE CHARLESTONIANS” ENJOY OPENING NIGHT .....	56
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	66



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: Entrance of the Planters' Hotel .....	10
Figure 2.2: Dock Street Theatre, exterior view.....	11
Figure 2.3: The Old Planters' Hotel.....	13
Figure 2.4: Architectural sketches by Albert Simons .....	26
Figure 2.5: Movie Tormentor Sketch.....	27
Figure 2.6: Simons and Lapham Architects' drawing sheet 4 <sup>o</sup> 9 .....	28
Figure 2.7: Architectural renderings of the reception hall and green room, and Church Street elevation.....	29
Figure 2.8: Illustrations of Eighteenth-Century theatres.....	32
Figure 2.9: Interior views of the Dock Street Theatre's auditorium.....	35
Figure 3.1: Newspaper illustration of the Planters' Hotel .....	37
Figure 3.2: Architectural plans of first and second floors of the Dock Street Theatre .....	38
Figure 3.3: Radcliffe-King House's Palladian window .....	41
Figure 3.4: Relocated architectural elements from Radcliffe-King House.....	44
Figure 3.5: Replica staircase in Dock Street Theatre's lobby.....	55
Figure 4.1: Federal Art Project's stage backdrops for "The Recruiting Officer" .....	57
Figure 4.2: Invitation to the second opening night .....	59
Figure 4.3: Audience on opening night.....	61

Figure 4.4: Act I, Scene I from “The Recruiting Officer” .....	63
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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

*Many came early to inspect the theater and adjoining Planter's Hotel. They marveled at the softlight in the green room. They inspected with curiosity the old musical instruments on display in glass cases. They wondered how craftsmen ever were able to fit the cypress woodwork so perfectly. They climbed the stairs, gossiped in the foyer, argued with check-room attendants and finally presented themselves and their tickets to the ushers, Citadel cadets and College of Charleston students, clad in Colonial costumes.<sup>1</sup>*

On November 26, 1937, five hundred audience members enjoyed a performance of the eighteenth-century Restoration comedy "The Recruiting Officer" in Charleston's newly restored Dock Street Theatre at 135 Church Street.<sup>2</sup> Performed by the city's Little Theatre acting troupe, the Footlight Players, the production was a reenactment of the same play that opened the original Dock Street Theatre exactly two hundred years before. This evening signified the successful transformation of the Planters' Hotel, a dilapidated nineteenth-century hotel and restaurant built on the site of the 1736 playhouse, into an architectural gem. The restored building recreated an eighteenth-century theatre lost to fire three times over, but featured all the advantages twentieth-century modern technology could offer. The City of Charleston presented each guest in attendance with a souvenir folder that commemorated the theatre's completion after three years of

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<sup>1</sup> R. M. Hitt, Jr., "City's Culture Made Theater Gift Possible, Hopkins Says," November 27, 1937, Scrapbook 1937, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1937-1947, Manuscript I&OIb (Dock Street Theatre), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

<sup>2</sup> Restoration comedy refers to comedies written during the Restoration period in England from 1660 to 1710.

painstaking research and construction. In the words of Douglas D. Ellington, the federal architectural research consultant of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in charge of overseeing the overall design and research of the architectural restoration project, the Dock Street Theatre was:

(R)eady to become an active instrument in the public life....Operated in a full sense of idealistic obligation, it could become an instrument of more than local satisfaction, could also be of national value and importance. It is not too extravagant to imagine that an actual cultural renaissance might have founding from within its walls. The building is not merely a theatre, but the planning and arrangement is such that it stands ready to function broadly as a cultural and artistic heart of the city.<sup>3</sup>

On that late November evening in 1937, the Dock Street Theatre reclaimed its role as a regional center of art in an orchestrated recreation of a specific moment in Charleston's distinctive and cherished colonial history.

The Dock Street Theatre restoration project, completed between the years 1935 and 1937, is representative of the intersection between the regionalist ethos embedded in New Deal cultural projects and local politics and preservation endeavors in Charleston, South Carolina. As such, the theatre's restoration represented a product of both the New Deal's national cultural agenda and the imperative of Charleston's white elite, the city's cultural producers, to fashion through music, literature, fine arts, and historic preservation a tangible image of Charleston's prosperous colonial and antebellum past.<sup>4</sup> An analysis that focuses on the architecture and material culture of the Dock Street Theatre reveals how the historic actors responsible for the theatre's restoration utilized the built environment to craft a particular cultural identity of Charleston. This cultural process

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<sup>3</sup> "1736-1937: In Commemoration and Rededication of the Dock Street Theatre, Charleston, S.C." (Charleston, S.C: City of Charleston, 1937), 792 Se8, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Eileen Yuhl, "High Culture in the Low Country: Arts, Identity and Tourism in Charleston, South Carolina, 1920-1940" (Ph.D. Diss., Duke University, 1998), 3.

aligned with the federal goal of the New Deal to create a national art that drew from local artistic accomplishments, as well as advanced the agenda of Charleston's elite to recreate a romanticized view of their city as a bastion of the Old South.

The Roosevelt administration's New Deal cultural programs ushered in an era of unprecedented federal institutional and monetary support for artistic and cultural endeavors from 1933 to 1945. The goal of Federal Project Number One within the WPA was to employ out-of-work artists to produce cultural products that dismantled the hierarchical superiority of "high" culture and brought art to everyday, ordinary Americans.<sup>5</sup> Between the years 1935 and 1943, the Federal Art, Theatre, Music, and Writers' Projects produced a tremendous outpouring of American art in various forms, including plays, folk songs, post office murals, films, novels, slave narratives, and more. The underlying agenda of these New Deal cultural programs was to achieve a form of "cultural democracy," inspired by the ideological imperative to provide "Arts for the Millions." This nationwide goal meant increasing accessibility, democratizing art, and creating a new portfolio of national art that emphasized regionalist and folk traditions.<sup>6</sup> The efforts to increase physical access to art resulted in the establishment of regional art centers in order to decentralize the arts away from metropolitan meccas, particularly New York.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jane De Hart Matthews, "Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for a Cultural Democracy," *The Journal of American History* 62, no. 2 (1975): 320.

<sup>6</sup> Francis V. O'Connor, *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Greenwich, Conn: New York Graphic Society, 1973); Jane De Hart Matthews, "Arts and the People," 320. For more on regionalism, the South, and the New Deal, see: Robert L. Dorman, "Termination: The Regionalist Movement, the New Deal, and the Coming of World War II," in *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Michael Steiner, "Regionalism in the Great Depression," *Geographical Review* 73 (Oct. 1983), 430-46.

<sup>7</sup> De Hart Matthews, "Arts and the People," 321.

While the New Deal cultural programs have received much scholarly attention, most scholars focus on art, literature, radio, theater, and photography produced by the four main programs of Federal One. New Deal architecture, meanwhile, has been analyzed mostly within the context of the Civilian Conservation Corps, infrastructure projects, racialized housing policies, and the processes of commercialization and suburbanization.<sup>8</sup> Cultural and architectural historians, especially, have elevated the built environment to a leading role in their works by analyzing how buildings, streets, and their material components – both real and imagined – have been dynamic forces in shaping American culture during the New Deal era.<sup>9</sup> As scholars have argued, shaping the built environment is a process through which key political and cultural issues are mediated, and as a result, it is often a physical representation of specific localized cultural and political identities.

The Dock Street Theatre project of the late 1930s did not necessarily address the democratizing imperative of the national cultural agenda, but it embodied the regionalist ethos of New Deal art that celebrated local artistic production and historic traditions. The

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<sup>8</sup> The New Deal cultural programs have attracted scholars from many disciplines and sub-disciplines, including history, art history, architectural history, material culture, media studies, and environmental history. For example, see: Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992); Barbara Dianne Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948*, The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History & Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Gabrielle M. Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street: Architecture and Consumer Culture in the New Deal*, Center Books on American Places (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Neil M. Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Sharon Ann Musher, *Democratic Art: The New Deal's Influence on American Culture* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> For example see: Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Dianne Suzette Harris, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Gabrielle M. Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street: Architecture and Consumer Culture in the New Deal*, Center Books on American Places (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

concept of regionalism emphasized the ways in which local cultural identities informed a broader, national American identity.<sup>10</sup> In Charleston, cultural construction during the New Deal was as much about fostering an understanding of the city's historic and artistic identity as it was about politics. Regionalism as an art movement, which included historic preservation activities, often went hand in hand with local preservation politics. By the 1930s, the City of Charleston already had developed a strong preservation ethos, formulated mostly by women in early iterations of preservation organizations. The regionalist emphasis and focus on local achievements that the New Deal programs encouraged aligned with the burgeoning historic preservation movement in early twentieth-century Charleston. The preservation community's underlying agenda during the 1920s and 1930s was to safeguard pre-Civil War structures as a celebration of Charleston's wealthiest and most romanticized eras: the colonial and antebellum periods.

Several historians argue that an elite conservatism, developed in resistance to unwelcome modern changes and difficult economic times, fueled Charleston's early preservation movement in the mid-to-late nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> The founding of cultural organizations in the early twentieth century institutionalized this conservatism. The Charleston Art Commission formed in 1910 as a challenge to the nationwide urban planning movement "City Beautiful," focusing instead on maintaining the "city historic"; the Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings (SPOD) and the Poetry Society of

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<sup>10</sup> According to Stephanie Yuhl, regionalists in the 1930s "wanted to provide an alternative vision of American culture that was a personal and populist antidote to the increasingly homogenous, mechanized and commercialized culture of modern America." Yuhl, "High Culture in the Low Country," 81.

<sup>11</sup> Don Harrison Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910*, Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 226-228; Robin Elisabeth Datel, "Southern Regionalism and Historic Preservation in Charleston, South Carolina, 1920-1940," *Journal of Historical Geography* 16, no. 2 (1990): 197-215; Yuhl, "High Culture in the Low Country," 2-3, 5, 24.

South Carolina both were established in 1920; and the Society for the Preservation of Negro Spirituals emerged in 1922.<sup>12</sup>

Stephanie Yuhl, a noted historian of Charleston's historic preservation movement, identified elite whites' increased cultural and artistic production, and especially their preservation activity, as a search for a "usable past" that enabled them to assert their cultural significance in the present...and to reinforce their claims to social authority."<sup>13</sup> By focusing on Charleston's architectural legacy, according to Yuhl, preservationists "fashioned an official public culture for their city that transmitted a particular version of a regional and national past that neither residents nor visitors could ignore."<sup>14</sup> Charleston's cultural elites wanted to preserve the buildings and streetscapes of more prosperous times as a way to cope with a difficult present and reassert their cultural and political power. In the 1930s, Charleston suffered economically because of the nationwide depression; to combat this plight, preservationists focused on preserving the legacy of the colonial and pre-Civil War periods when Charleston was one of the wealthiest cities on the eastern coast.

Preservationists employed architecture as the primary vehicle through which to achieve the goal of harking back to a time when the city flourished financially and enjoyed high cultural status. By shaping Charleston's built environment, cultural elites could establish a visual literacy of prosperous colonial and antebellum Charleston that would be recognizable nationwide. Prominent preservationists were mostly interested in

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<sup>12</sup> Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, 228.

<sup>13</sup> Stephanie E. Yuhl, *A Golden Haze of Memory: The Making of Historic Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Yuhl, "High Culture in the Low Country," 24–5.



protecting elite and notable historic buildings over vernacular structures.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, efforts in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries to preserve Charleston's earlier architectural identity were focused on the most historic section of the city where colonial and antebellum structures were concentrated: the southernmost area of the peninsula.<sup>16</sup>

The Dock Street Theatre project thus emerged from a dual agenda derived on one hand from the New Deal's national rhetoric that encouraged regionalism, and on the other hand from Charlestonians' particular fascination with their own colonial and antebellum history. In the 1930s, Charleston utilized the New Deal ideological agenda and federal monetary support to advance a local program aligned with the preservation movement's mission to safeguard the landmarks of the city's wealthiest periods. In the case of the Dock Street Theatre, the local objective did not conflict with the goals of the federal government in granting emergency relief to fund the project. Rather, the national and local agendas complemented each other in the joint effort to recreate the historically and culturally significant colonial-era theatre. The Dock Street Theatre project succeeded in both strengthening Charleston's art identity on a national stage as a regional theater, and contributing to the architectural stock of a city whose cultural elites were intent on maintaining, and when possible, resurrecting, a prosperous past in tangible form.

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<sup>15</sup> Some of Charleston's early preservation projects include the Powder Magazine, Old Exchange Building, and the Joseph Manigault House.

<sup>16</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 208.

## CHAPTER II:

### THE DOCK STREET THEATRE: RESURRECTING OLD CHARLESTON

The proposal of the Dock Street Theatre as a federally-sponsored preservation project originated with Elizabeth Maybank, the wife of Charleston's mayor Burnet R. Maybank. The nineteenth-century Planters' Hotel, erected on the site of the original theatre, had become tenement housing for African Americans by 1884.<sup>17</sup> The housing complex fell into deplorable condition by 1934, and was widely considered an eyesore on Church Street in Charleston's historic French Quarter. According to Eola Willis, a Charleston-born historian and writer, Maybank first suggested the Dock Street Theatre as a restoration project most likely in the spring or summer of 1934. The idea "was received with enthusiasm by the mayor and the city council, and so ordered."<sup>18</sup> The "most ambitious restoration South of Williamsburg" began with a meeting called by the Mayor Maybank on October 16, 1934.<sup>19</sup> Attendees included Edmund P. Grice, the Charleston county administrator of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), Douglas D. Ellington, architectural consultant for FERA, and representatives from local

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<sup>17</sup> Colleen K. Reilly, "Staging Charleston: The Spoleto Festival U.S.A." (Ph.D. Diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2009), 154.

<sup>18</sup> Eola Willis, "Opening of Dock Street Theatre by Footlight Players," n.d., Folder 21/69/5, Container 21/69: Theatre writings, ca. 1920-1945, Eola Willis Papers, 1857-1951, SCHS 1174.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina; Earl M. Collison, "Project Reaches Fruition 3 Years After Inception," *The Post and Courier*, November 26, 1937, Scrapbook 1937, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1937-1947, Manuscript I&OIb (Dock Street Theatre), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

<sup>19</sup> Albert Simons, "Architect Tells Project History," *The Post and Courier*, November 20, 1937, Scrapbook 1937, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1937-1947, Manuscript I&OIb (Dock Street Theatre), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

organizations interested in Charleston's art and history. Upon the suggestion of Judge Theodore D. Jerbey, president of the South Carolina Historical Society, the committee decided that the area surrounding St. Philip's Church on Church Street near its intersection with Queen Street was most suitable for architectural restoration because it included many historic landmarks that had fallen into disrepair, including the Powder Magazine and the Planters' Hotel (Figures 2.1 and 2.2).

After the committee selected the Dock Street Theatre as the first restoration project and the city council approved the decision, Mayor Burbank corresponded with Harry L. Hopkins, the federal director of FERA and a personal friend of the mayor. According to Albert Simons, a Charleston architect whose firm would spearhead the restoration project, Hopkins "was immediately attracted by the plan, since it eminently fulfilled the government's desire to underwrite projects which would provide work for the unemployed as well as be in themselves constructive and worthwhile."<sup>20</sup> Maybank's friendship with Hopkins, his political affiliation with South Carolina senator James Byrnes, and his support of President Roosevelt most likely helped produce a favorable reception of the project at all political levels and played a role in ensuring that the project was funded throughout its entirety.<sup>21</sup> In May of 1935, the press announced that the official committee in Washington, headed by Ellington, formally approved the project. The allocated FERA funding applied to "the beautiful old Planters' Hotel, and the Dock

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.; Robert N. S. Whitelaw, "A Plan of Operation for the Dock Street Theatre by the Carolina Art Association," February 15, 1938, Folder 25-195-3, Container 21/195, Carolina Art Association Correspondence, 1933-54. Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1933-1958, SCHS 1177.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>21</sup> Tara Mitchell Mielnik, *New Deal, New Landscape: The Civilian Conservation Corps and South Carolina's State Parks* (Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 13; Marvin L. Cann, "Burnet Maybank and Charleston Politics in the New Deal Era," *Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association*, 1979, 39-48.



Figure 2.1: Entrance of the Planters' Hotel before the FERA restoration project began. Caption reads: "The Entrance of the Planters Hotel, Charleston, South Carolina Before Being Remodeled as the Entrance of the Dock Street Theatre, A Revival of the Theatre of 1736, The First Erected in America." (Photo courtesy of South Carolina History Society).

Source: Folder 26-35-1, Container 26, Dock Street Theatre Papers (1937-1950), Albert Simons Papers, 1964-1979, 1253.00, South Carolina Historical Society (SCHS).



Figure 2.2: Dock Street Theatre, exterior view. Handwritten note on back of photo reads: "Charleston, S.C. Dock Street Theater ca. 1930."

Source: Federal Writers' Project (S.C.), Charleston, S.C.: Theatres, WPA Photograph Collection, Digital Collections, South Caroliniana Library (SCL).

Street Theatre, once on adjoining properties, treated as one unit.”<sup>22</sup> The project area as described included four connecting buildings on the corner of Queen and Church streets (Figure 2.2).

The Dock Street Theatre thus became the first project in Charleston funded by FERA as part of the national program to restore historic buildings and landmarks (Figure 2.3). The project coordinators originally planned for the Dock Street Theatre to open on February 12, 1936, to mark the two-hundredth anniversary of the theatre.<sup>23</sup> The timeframe was soon extended, however, probably as a result of construction challenges posed by the meticulous and careful adaptive use of the Planters’ Hotel. Over the course of three years the City of Charleston received additional funds from the WPA, which replaced FERA in April of 1935. On June 3, 1935, the WPA allocated an initial \$100,000 for the project. Almost a year later, in May of 1936, Harry Hopkins granted an additional \$60,000 for the project’s continuation. By this time, \$159,000 had already been invested.<sup>24</sup> Near the end of January of 1937, project costs exceeded \$250,000, and at the project’s completion in November, the federal government had allocated \$350,000 to the restoration of the Dock Street Theatre.<sup>25</sup>

From the project’s inception, the City of Charleston understood that the theatre was to be a gift from the federal government. According to Simons, the Dock Street

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<sup>22</sup> Eola Willis, “Chapter XVIII: The Dock Street Theatre” c 1942, Folder 21/69/5, Container 21/69: Theatre writings, ca. 1920-1945, Eola Willis Papers, 1857-1951, SCHS 1174.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>23</sup> *The State*, June 4, 1935, NewsBank, accessed through Richland County Public Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

<sup>24</sup> *The State*, May 19, 1936, NewsBank, accessed through Richland County Public Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

<sup>25</sup> “Restored Ancient Theater,” *The State*, January 24, 1937, NewsBank, accessed through Richland County Public Library, Columbia, South Carolina.



Figure 2.3: Original caption reads: “The Old Planters’ Hotel, once a gay hostelry, has been selected for restoration with federal relief funds, and may be converted into a town theatre, under present plans. If congress appropriates the money, this may be but the first of several restoration projects in Charleston.”

Source: “Planters’ Hotel to Be Restored,” *Post and Courier*, published in “1736-1937: In Commemoration and Rededication of the Dock Street Theatre, Charleston, S.C.,” (Charleston, S.C.: City of Charleston, 1937), 792 Se8, SCL.

Theatre was “an out and out gift to Charleston with no restriction as to its operation.”<sup>26</sup> The bestowal of the theatre to the city emphasized the notion that it was to function as a cultural center to foster art and not primarily as a commercial institution. On opening night, Mayor Burbank accepted on behalf of Charleston a symbolic key to the theatre in a ceremonious exchange of hands from the federal government to the city. The rhetoric of the project sought to dissociate the preservation of the Dock Street Theatre from the burgeoning southern heritage tourism industry that W. Fitzhugh Brundage, a leading historian of historical memory in the American South, has argued “increasingly became a commercially oriented celebration of the South’s architecture, landscape and history.”<sup>27</sup>

As commercial success was an implicit rather than explicit goal in the Dock Street Theatre project, the overt purpose of the restoration enterprise was not the “transformation of the southern past into a commodity,” in Brundage’s terms. The goal of the project, rather, was to help Charleston reclaim its role as a cultural center in the South. Brundage called presentations of the past, including museums and historic recreations, “memory theaters” which “provided settings in which southerners performed their “southernness” before eager audiences.”<sup>28</sup> But unlike historic house museums, the Dock Street Theatre’s intended audience, at least initially and understood within the broader New Deal cultural agenda, was artists, not tourists. The theatre’s significance derived from the successful restoration of a celebrated and important historic and artistic landmark, not for the commercial profits it could potentially provide to the city.

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<sup>26</sup> Albert Simons to Emmett Robinson, March 20, 1936, Folder 25-195-2 (1937), Container 21/195, Carolina Art Association Correspondence, 1933-1954. Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1933-1958, 1177.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>27</sup> Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 148.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.



Over a decade after the theatre opened, the Carolina Art Association (CAA) described the educational and artistic role the theatre was to fulfill in Charleston when it opened in 1937: “The Theatre was intended to be used by the City in the same way as the Charleston Museum building and the College of Charleston buildings. They are owned by the City and operated by institutions that add to the educational life of the community.”<sup>29</sup> Robert N. S. Whitelaw, the CAA’s director, voiced the sentiment shared amongst Charleston’s elite that the city was ready to reenter the national art scene: “It is not merely love of home or mere provincialism that prompts us to believe that of all cities in the Southeastern region, Charleston, once the center of cultural influences, could more easily become again such a center than any other city.”<sup>30</sup> DuBose Heyward, a prominent Charleston writer famous for his 1925 novel *Porgy*, similarly saw the opening of the Dock Street Theatre as a befitting reestablishment of Charleston as a main contributor to the regional art scene of the South: “With all of this activity abroad in the land it was inevitable that Charleston should resume her ante-bellum position as one of the cultural centers of the region.”<sup>31</sup> Heyward contributed to fulfilling that goal when he assumed the position of writer-in-residence, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, during the theatre’s first year of operation.<sup>32</sup>

The first step in the restoration project that would engender this reclamation of regional cultural significance was to conduct preliminary research on the original eighteenth-century Dock Street Theatre’s history and architecture. Douglas Ellington,

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<sup>29</sup> Executive Board of the Carolina Art Association (CAA) to CAA Members, March 19, 1948, Folder 26-35-11, Dock Street Theatre Papers (1937-1950), Albert Simons Papers, 1964-1979, 1253.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>30</sup> Whitelaw, “A Plan of Operation for the Dock Street Theatre by the Carolina Art Association.”

<sup>31</sup> DuBose Heyward, “Dock Street Theatre: Carolina Art Association, Management.,” January 1938, 792 H49 1938 Oversize, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

<sup>32</sup> Barbara L. Bellows, *A Talent for Living: Josephine Pinckney and the Charleston Literary Tradition*, Southern Literary Studies (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 198.

based in Washington, D.C., did much of the initial research, relying heavily on the writings of Eola Willis.<sup>33</sup> In 1924, Willis had published *The Charleston Stage in the Eighteenth Century*, a book that outlined the theatre's quite tragic history. The first Dock Street Theatre, named for the busy colonial wharf at the end of the street, was built in 1736, but burned down sometime between 1743 and 1749. Another theatre was constructed in 1763, and it, too, was destroyed by fire. A third theatre was erected in 1773, but fire once again was responsible for the building's destruction in 1782.<sup>34</sup> The 1930s restoration was to be the fourth Dock Street Theatre.

On the effort involved in producing *The Charleston Stage in the Eighteenth Century*, Willis wrote Ellington that she "labored lovingly for eight years among the city's oldest archives digging out the knowledge of the localities of Charleston's oldest theatres, and am naturally rejoiced that my book...is now pointing out the site of our earliest Theatre."<sup>35</sup> In June of 1935, at the very beginning of the restoration project, Willis wrote to Ellington inquiring if she could donate her self-curated collection of old theatrical books from the colonial and early post-Revolutionary periods to the theatre in hopes of establishing a "small Dramatic Library" in the restored space. Ellington

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<sup>33</sup> Eola Willis was a member of the Colonial Dames, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Huguenot Society, the Poetry Society of South Carolina, the Charleston Garden Club, the Century Club, the Carolina Art Association, the Musical Art Club, the Footlight Players, and the Epiphany Guild of St. Michael's Church. She was one of the three organizers of the Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings and a founder of the Charleston Art Commission. Agatha A. Simmons, "Eola Willis: Writer of International Dispute" n.d., Folder 21/72/3, Container 21/72, Biographical Papers, 1893-1950, Eola Willis Papers, 1857-1941, 1174.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>34</sup> Eola Willis, "The Dock Street Theater," *The Charleston Evening Post*, n.d., Folder 21/69/5, Container 21/69: Theatre writings, ca. 1920-1945, Eola Willis Papers, 1857-1951, 1174.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>35</sup> Eola Willis to Douglas Ellington, May 6, 1935, Folder 21/66/11, Container 21/66: Correspondence, 1884-1951, Eola Willis Papers, 1857-1951, 1174.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

responded that after conferring with Harry Hopkins, steps would be taken to create a room to display Willis' collection.<sup>36</sup>

That Willis played a significant role in the Dock Street Theatre restoration cannot be denied for she was responsible, in part, for increasing federal and nationwide interest in the project. One month before the theatre was to open with its first performance, Thomas C. Parker, the assistant director of the WPA and Federal Art Project (FAP), corresponded with Willis. He related that he received her manuscript, "The Story of the Original Dock Street Theatre," from Robert Armstrong Andrews, head of the South Carolina FAP. On behalf of Holger Cahill, director of the FAP, Parker congratulated Willis for her "fine research and the excellent presentation of your material," and forwarded a copy of the manuscript to Hallie Flanagan, director of the Federal Theatre Project.<sup>37</sup> In addition to providing important historical information on the theatre, Willis contributed to the prominence of the project by attracting the attention of key figures in the larger circle of New Deal cultural projects.

Willis herself declared the important part she played in discovering and making available to the public the history of the original Dock Street Theatre. She called the opening of the theatre her "greatest achievement" and in a letter to Robert N. S. Whitelaw in May of 1937, Willis wrote, "everybody knows that I am responsible for the Dock

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<sup>36</sup> Eola Willis to Douglas Ellington, June 13, 1935, Folder 21/66/11, Container 21/66: Correspondence, 1884-1951, Eola Willis Papers, 1857-1951, 1174.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina; Douglas Ellington to Eola Willis, June 18, 1935, Folder 21/66/11, Container 21/66: Correspondence, 1884-1951, Eola Willis Papers, 1857-1951, 1174.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>37</sup> The letter refers to Holger Cahill, director of the Federal Art Project. Thomas C. Parker to Eola Willis, October 29, 1937, Folder 21/66/11, Container 21/66: Correspondence, 1884-1951, Eola Willis Papers, 1857-1951, 1174.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

Street Theatre.”<sup>38</sup> A biography of Willis claims that “to her truly belongs the honor of unearthing this national monument.”<sup>39</sup> Years after the theatre’s opening, in the dedicated inscription of the Maybanks’ copy of *The Charleston Stage in the XIII Century*, Willis acknowledged that Elizabeth first suggested the restoration of the original theatre and Mayor Maybank “made the wish come true.” Willis, however, wrote that it was her book that made public for the first time “the meagre history and site of the original Dock Street Theatre, making it possible for the erection of a second playhouse of the name, and enabling to give to the world, this important item of dramatic information, to the credit of Charleston, South Carolina.”<sup>40</sup> In Willis’ opinion, one that was shared by many of the city’s cultural producers, the bringing to light of the theatre’s important role in colonial Charleston and its rebirth contributed to the city’s contemporary acclaim as a cultural center.

Although Willis played a central role in the Dock Street Theatre project, women’s organizations, which were usually the leading actors in Charleston’s preservation campaigns, were less involved in the restoration than might be expected. Susan Pringle Frost, the first woman realtor in the city, fervently and successfully fought many preservation battles throughout her career. In 1920, Pringle established the Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings (SPOD), and under her leadership SPOD attempted to save the Planters’ Hotel from demolition. The organization, however, chose to focus its

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<sup>38</sup> Eola Willis, “Some of the Literary Activities of Eola Willis,” n.d., Folder 21/72/3, Container 21/72, Biographical Papers, 1893-1950, Eola Willis Papers, 1857-1941, 1174.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina; Eola Willis to Robert N. S. Whitelaw, May 14, 1937, Folder 26-35-1, Dock Street Theatre Papers (1937-1950), Albert Simons Papers, 1964-1979, 1253.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>39</sup> Simmons, “Eola Willis: Writer of International Dispute.”

<sup>40</sup> Eola Willis to Burnet and Elizabeth Maybank, December 31, 1940, Folder 21/66/11, Container 21/66: Correspondence, 1884-1951, Eola Willis Papers, 1857-1951, 1174.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

efforts on rescuing the threatened Joseph Manigault House rather than committing to a preservation campaign to save the Planters' Hotel. Frost did, however, successfully appeal the city to enact an ordinance to protect the old ironwork and woodwork of the Planters' Hotel when the building was threatened with demolition in 1918.

In addition, SPOD sought financial support from Henry Ford, a major champion of historic preservation, and from private preservation groups to fund a restoration of the theatre long before it was considered as a federal New Deal project. SPOD was unsuccessful in this endeavor, but the group persuaded Charleston's mayor at the time, Thomas P. Stoney, to protect the exterior shell of the group of buildings that comprised the Planters' Hotel in the hopes that one day it would be restored.<sup>41</sup> Frost and SPOD were not involved in the WPA-funded restoration project in the 1930s, but Albert Simons acknowledged that "Miss Susan P. Frost, and the Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings, deserve much credit for safeguarding the old Planters' Hotel buildings when their destruction was contemplated."<sup>42</sup>

The absence of women from the federal project reflected a growing nationwide trend within the historic preservation movement of men assuming more leadership roles as heritage tourism became a commodity. Men such as Simons and his partner, architect Samuel Lapham; Alston Deas, Frost's successor as president of SPOD; Robert N. S.

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<sup>41</sup> Sidney R. Bland, *Preserving Charleston's Past, Shaping Its Future: The Life and Times of Susan Pringle Frost*, 2nd ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 71; Jack Irby Hayes Jr., *South Carolina and the New Deal* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 42. Hayes described Frost and the Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings (SPOD) as having ignored the Planter's Hotel, focusing their efforts instead on preserving the Joseph Manigault House and the Heyward-Washington House, as well as working to enact the first zoning ordinance. The fact remains, however, that Frost and the SPOD actively sought to preserve the Planters' Hotel and achieved some form of success when Mayor Thomas Stoney sealed the buildings on the corner of Church and Queen Streets. This meant closing off the buildings, which preserved their exterior walls, maintained the condition of the interior, and prevented their demolition.

<sup>42</sup> Simons, "Architect Tells Project History."

Whitelaw, director of the Gibbes Museum of Art and the Carolina Art Association; and E. Milby Burton, director of the Charleston Museum in the 1930s, politicized preservation and used their personal connections with government and business to advance preservation goals.<sup>43</sup> For these men, the Dock Street Theatre project represented an opportunity to proclaim Charleston's national cultural relevance, and by extension their own prominence as influential, artistically-inclined, political players.

The rhetoric of the project in newspapers and other promotional literature established Charleston as a logical place to reinstate an important cultural center because it could boast the first purpose-built theater in the country. Based on Willis' and Ellington's historical research, and supported by Simons, Harry Hopkins announced that "our tentative research points very convincingly to the probability that the old theatre, which has been supposed to have been the third building of its kind in the United States, was actually the first. This adds to the historical importance of the reconstruction project that has been launched."<sup>44</sup> For those involved in the project in the WPA and in Charleston alike, this research proved the historical significance of restoring the architectural treasure.

Proclamation of having the nation's first theatre, however, was not uncontested. Charleston was placed in competition with Williamsburg, Virginia, regarding which city could claim an earlier theatre history. Harold H. Shurtleff, director of research and records at Colonial Williamsburg, disputed the notion that Charleston's theatre was first and asserted that Williamsburg's theatre dated from 1716. Regardless of the particular

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<sup>43</sup> Yuhl, "High Culture in the Low Country," 27.

<sup>44</sup> "Planters' Hotel to Be Restored," *The Post and Courier*, n.d., Scrapbook 1937, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1937-1947, Manuscript I&Olb (Dock Street Theatre), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

historical details, however, Charleston could still claim to have an earlier theatre history than most American cities, a fact remarked upon in *The New York Times*' piece describing the nationally-significant restoration project: "At any rate, the Dock Street Theatre is fifteen years older than the Nassau Street Theatre in New York and thirty years older than the Southwark Theatre in Philadelphia."<sup>45</sup>

The significance of Charleston being the first, or possibly second, city to offer theatre as entertainment for its citizens – a symbol of sophisticated culture in the colonial period – was an important promotional feature of the restoration project because it reinforced an image of Charleston's role as the premier cultural center of the South in the eighteenth century. Thomas Lesesne, a writer for Charleston's *The Post and Courier*, also boasted of the city's distinctive colonial past, expressing pride in Charleston's history as a center of refined entertainment: "When America's first building erected for playhouse purposes was opened, Savannah was in its swaddling clothes. Moncks Corner was an important trading post where the road to Peedee and that to the Congaree intersected. Bison were ranging South Carolina areas."<sup>46</sup> While other Southern cities were in their infancy, centers of trade, or largely rural and unsettled, Charleston had emerged as the leading colonial city in sophisticated cultural affairs.

The agenda of the Dock Street Theatre's restoration was to recreate the glorious Old Charleston of yesteryear uncovered through research into the theatre's celebrated history. Architecture was one medium through which elites sought to resurrect colonial

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<sup>45</sup> "Theatre and Hotel of 1736 Restored," *The New York Times*, November 21, 1937, Folder 26-35-3, Dock Street Theatre Papers (1937-1950), Albert Simons Papers, 1964-1979, 1253.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas P. Lesesne, "Theatre Services Past and Present," *The Post and Courier*, November 28, 1937, Scrapbook 1937, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1937-1947, Manuscript I&Olb (Dock Street Theatre), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

Charleston, which was part of a larger effort to create what Stephanie Yuhl called a “tangible historic identity for the city.”<sup>47</sup> This goal was one of the underlying themes of the Charleston Renaissance, a term used to describe the outpouring of artistic and literary work in the 1920s and 1930s that celebrated local cultural achievements. The collective work of writers, painters, musicians, and historians reflected an appreciation of the city’s distinctive history. According to Yuhl, these writers and artists viewed the word Charlestonian as meaning “something fixed and worthy of preservation, an accumulation of history, family, land and racial prerogative – little was problematic, alienating or painful.” In other words, this “operative identity myth” was one shared by the producers of the Dock Street Theatre’s restoration; the Old Charleston recreated in the project was a sanitized and romanticized version of the past where racial and class tensions were nonexistent.<sup>48</sup>

Many of the leading figures of the Charleston Renaissance regarded the city’s architecture as its most unique characteristic and made Charleston’s built environment the focus of much of their work. For example, Elizabeth O’Neill Verner depicted vernacular buildings in a dilapidated state in her artwork, while Alfred Hutty found inspiration in the city’s architectural monuments and rural vistas.<sup>49</sup> Josephine Pinckney, a novelist and poet, used the Dock Street Theatre restoration itself to symbolize the New Deal era in a play written for the Carolina Art Association and intended to be performed at Middleton Place, an eighteenth-century rice plantation and a major tourist attraction in

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<sup>47</sup> Yuhl, “High Culture in the Low Country,” 5.

<sup>48</sup> Yuhl, *A Golden Haze of Memory*, 16.

<sup>49</sup> Robert R Weyeneth, *Historic Preservation for a Living City: Historic Charleston Foundation, 1947-1997* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 20; Other leading Renaissance figures include Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, De Bose Heyward, Helen Hyde, Katherine Merrill, Eola Willis, and Anna Heyward Taylor, amongst others. For a discussion on the use of the term Charleston Renaissance see: Yuhl, “High Culture in the Low Country,” 17.



Charleston.<sup>50</sup> Pinckney was close friends with Albert Simons' wife, Harriet P. Simons, who was an active member of Charleston's elite like her husband. She was a strong advocate for women's and civil rights, and took part in many cultural organizations including the Society for the Preservation of Spirituals.<sup>51</sup> DuBose Heyward, one of the period's most notable literary figures, summarized Charleston's ethos in the 1920s and shared the perspective of many of the city's artists, writers, and preservationists: "when a liberated spirit began to express itself in the arts, it became evident that the South was prepared to take its place in the national revival."<sup>52</sup>

Preservationists identified with this "sense of place" that was at the heart of the Charleston Renaissance, and preservation-minded architects particularly so.<sup>53</sup> Charleston-based architects Albert Simons and Samuel Lapham spearheaded the Dock Street Theatre restoration project at the local level, drawing plans for the new theatre and overseeing the day-to-day work of the project. Although working together under the firm of Simons and Lapham, both men independently were active members of Charleston's culture elite. Simons, especially, was dedicated to Charleston's preservation ethos. He devoted much of his career to safeguarding the city's architectural heritage and constantly policed historic areas for demolition projects and new constructions.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, the firm was a logical choice to head the restoration project because Simons served as president of the

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<sup>50</sup> The 1946 project was never completed. Bellows, *A Talent for Living*, 206.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>52</sup> Heyward, "Dock Street Theatre: Carolina Art Association Management."

<sup>53</sup> Weyeneth, *Historic Preservation for a Living City*, 20; Pamme Lynn Eades, "Alice Ravenel Huger Smith and the Development of Charleston Regionalism" (M.A. Thesis, University of South Carolina, 1994), 96; For more on the Charleston Renaissance see: James M. Hutchisson and Harlan Greene, eds., *Renaissance in Charleston: Art and Life in the Carolina Low Country, 1900-1940* (Athens [Ga.]: University of Georgia Press, 2003).

<sup>54</sup> Weyeneth, *Historic Preservation for a Living City*, 6.

Carolina Art Association, taught fine arts at the College of Charleston, and had a reputable history of engaging in preservation work.

Simons and Lapham immediately embraced the agenda of the Dock Street Theatre project to recreate the appearance and feel of Old Charleston. They aimed to produce architectural spaces and interior decorations similar to those of the original Dock Street Theatre of the mid-eighteenth century, as well as that of the Planters' Hotel, a popular nineteenth-century social club built in place of the destroyed theatre that functioned as both a hotel and eatery for South Carolina plantation owners. In a letter to Emmett Robinson, director of the Footlight Players, Simons expressed his belief that it was imperative that the Dock Street Theatre become "a living part of the community" and not "a museum piece, exquisite, but useless."<sup>55</sup> While the theatre restoration needed to establish a visual and experiential connection to both the extant and non-extant historic buildings, the new space also needed to be functional and not merely an architectural showpiece.

The architects believed that the credibility of the Dock Street Theatre project rested largely on the authenticity of their reconstructed building. They conducted thorough research and publicized the project as being historically accurate. Their efforts were lauded by the press: "The interior is as true to the original periods as careful research and skill in using old pieces could make it."<sup>56</sup> Once Ellington, Simons, and Lapham completed the research phase of the restoration project, they turned toward the more technical tasks. Simons reported that the architectural and engineering preparations necessitated over twenty-five sheets of architectural drawings, more than one hundred

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<sup>55</sup> Simons to Robinson, March 20, 1936.

<sup>56</sup> *The State*, August 18, 1938, NewsBank, accessed through Richland County Public Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

sheets of architectural detail, and around twenty-five sheets of structural, electrical, mechanical, and heating plans (Figure 2.4-2.7). In addition, sixty-four tons of structural steel went into the supporting structure and roof, and an acre of flooring, eight miles of wood strips for plaster, 530 tons of concrete, and “uncounted bricks, kegs of nails and gallons of paint went into the work.”<sup>57</sup> Meanwhile, 1500 truckloads of rubbish were removed from the restoration site and one hundred truckloads of flooring and framing were donated to the poor to use as firewood.<sup>58</sup>

Simons and Lapham made sure to preserve the original cast iron balcony and sandstone entrance columns with carved mahogany brackets adorning the facades of the four buildings on the corner of Queen and Church streets that together comprised the Planters’ Hotel. Ellington, Simons, and Lapham described their preservation approach in the January 1938 issue of *Architectural Record*: “The technique of restoration in Charleston differs substantially from that in vogue elsewhere in that it is ‘freer’ and tends to preserve, externally at least, the cumulative effects of age and use.” The architects repaired the brickwork and the balcony, installed new window sashes and frames, and applied a thin color wash to the repaired walls to duplicate “the soft rose of the old stucco.” In addition, they reinforced the exterior walls and foundations, and rebuilt the

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<sup>57</sup> Albert Simons, “Architect Tells Project History,” *The Post and Courier*, November 20, 1937, Scrapbook 1937, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1937-1947, Manuscript I&Olb (Dock Street Theatre), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina Simons and Lapham had much help executing this project. They identified the following people as important in the engineering and construction of the theatre: John E. Macdonald and J.C. Cranwell, who prepared all estimates of costs and gave general engineering assistance; R. B. Bennett, who received bids and awarded contracts for materials needed; W. H. James, who was superintendent of construction on the job, and A. McL. Martin, who checked in deliveries of materials; J.A. Elsey and A. W. Fisher, carpenter foremen; T. Ritchie Simmons, who supervised the reinforced concrete work; and Cambridge Trott, resident engineer during the early stages of the construction.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.



Figure 2.4: Sketches by Albert Simons of various architectural and decorative elements in the Dock Street Theatre. Beneath the bottom right drawing was the note: “One pair of William & Mary Silver Sconces, reproduced from those made by John Rand of London in 1703, Courtesy Crichton & Co.”

Source: Container 42-89A, Architectural Drawings of Albert Simons & Samuel Lapham, 41/1-280, SCHS.

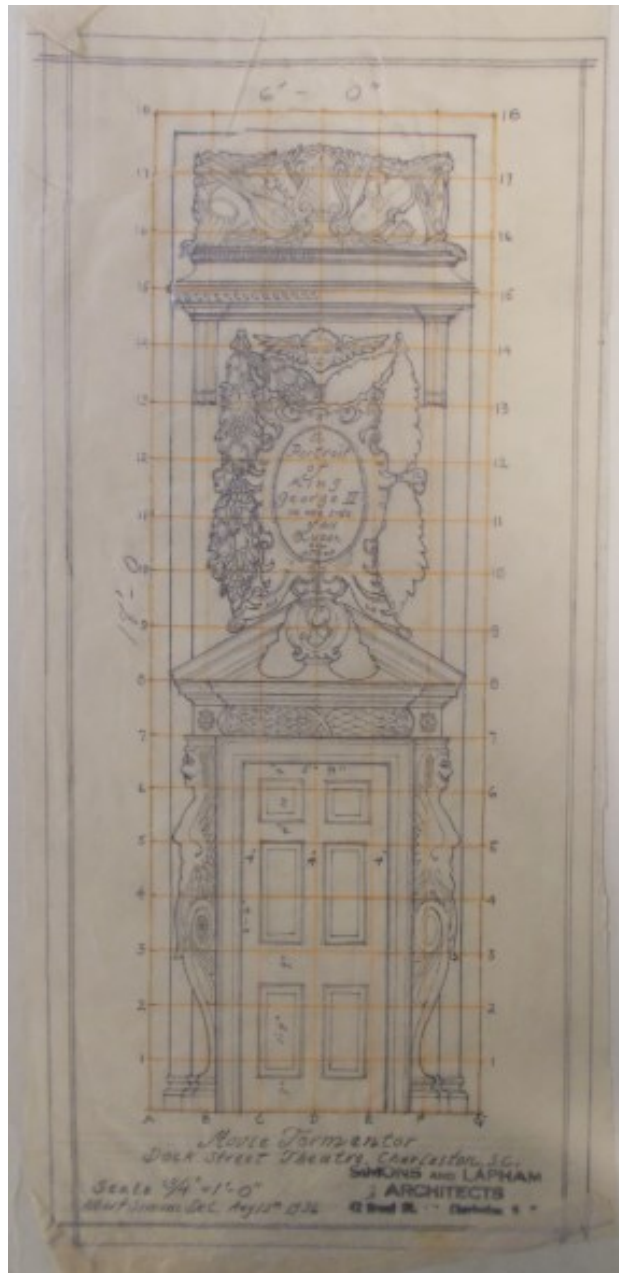


Figure 2.5: The writing within the oval above the doorway reads, “A portrait of King George II on one side of his queen on other,” and beneath the doorway, “Movie Tormentor, Dock Street Theatre, Charleston, S.C.” August 12, 1936.

Source: Container 42-89A, Architectural Drawings of Albert Simons & Samuel Lapham, 41/1-280, SCHS.



Figure 2.6: Simons and Lapham Architects' drawing sheet 4°9 produced for Charleston County FERA, September 17, 1935.

Source: Container 42-89A, Architectural Drawings of Albert Simons & Samuel Lapham, 41/1-280, SCHS.

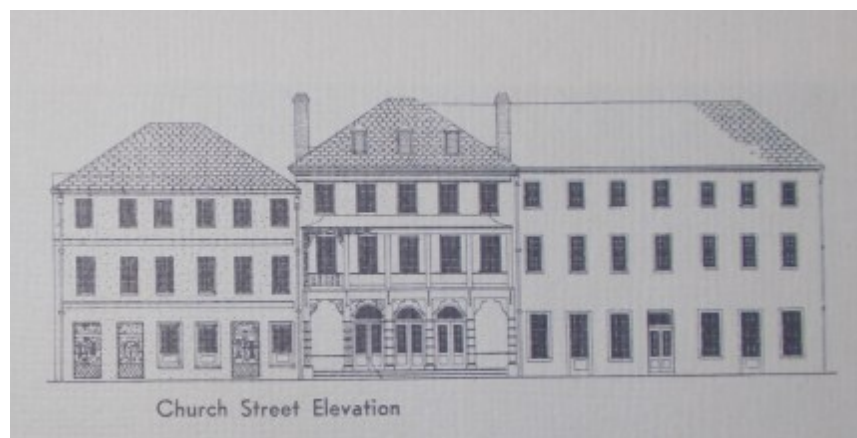
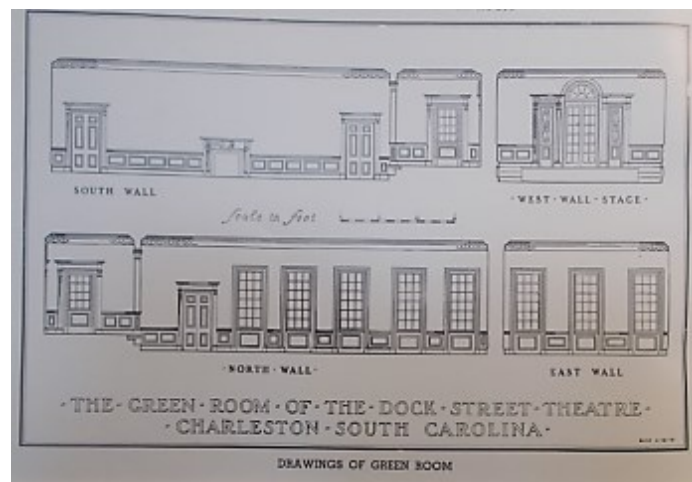
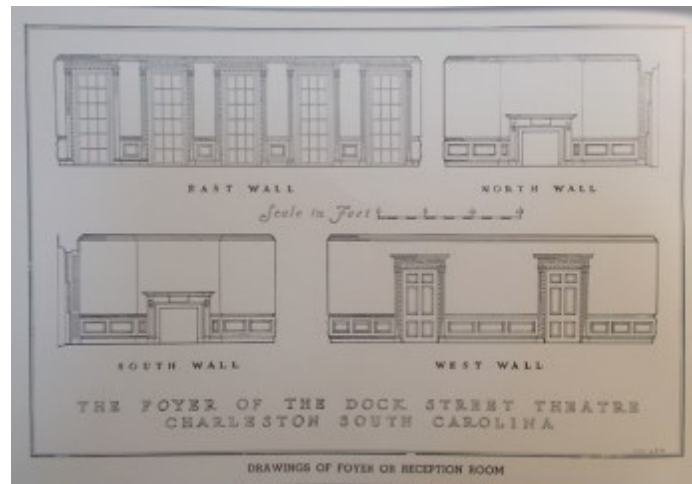


Figure 2.7: Architectural renderings of the reception hall, green room, and Church Street elevation of the Dock street Theatre.

Source: Drawn by Simons & Lapham Architects, reproduced in "1736-1937: In Commemoration and Rededication of the Dock Street Theatre, Charleston, S.C.," (Charleston, S.C.: City of Charleston, 1937), 792 Se8, SCL.

roof, floors, and partitions with mostly steel and concrete.<sup>59</sup>

While the architects maintained the building's exterior, according to Simons the interiors "were but shelled. As though gutted by fire, virtually all the interiors were completely gone or rotted beyond repair."<sup>60</sup> This state of affairs required extensive restoration, and the architects proceeded with caution to ensure an elegant product. The WPA broadcast news of the restoration in print form, and in a publicity release sent to hundreds of daily newspapers, the administration commented on some technical problems that arose during the construction phase of the project. In order to reinforce the building without removing the existing walls, workers developed a "special technique" that required digging six-to-eight feet-deep pockets beside the solid standing walls which allowed them to remain intact."<sup>61</sup>

In highlighting the construction challenges posed by the project, the architects and the WPA positioned the Dock Street Theatre as a national example of skillful and masterfully-executed architectural restoration. The difficulties derived from the architects' resistance to alter the buildings of the Planters Hotel's recognizable exterior, and their willingness to accept an architectural challenge rather than execute substandard preservation techniques. At the same time, national coverage of the construction process emphasized Charleston's leading role in the historic preservation movement and expert use of the most modern technology and building practices available. While

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<sup>59</sup> Douglas Ellington, Samuel Lapham, and Albert Simons, "Charleston Opens Historic Playhouse with Historic Play," *Architectural Record*, January 1938; reprinted in Carolina Art Association, "We Want \$100,000: Because We Like the Round Figure" (Charleston, South Carolina: Carolina Art Association, 1939), 792 W4 1939 Oversize, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

<sup>60</sup> Simons, "Architect Tells Project History."

<sup>61</sup> Original article cited in "Carved Figures Copied in Fresco," November 22, 1937, Scrapbook 1937, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1937-1947, Manuscript I&Olb (Dock Street Theatre), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.



Charlestonians may have heralded the Dock Street Theatre as a success mostly for its architectural continuity with a cherished past, the WPA capitalized on the technical challenges faced and overcome by the architects so that it could propagandize the project to which it contributed \$350,000 of federal funds. The Dock Street Theatre received national attention, and newspaper editors across the country who were interested in the restoration sent letters to Simons and the Carolina Art Association (CAA) requesting information and sometimes photographs of the theatre. The CAA received inquiry letters from *The Associated Press* in Columbia, South Carolina, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*, the last of which published a front page article on the theatre the week of its opening in November of 1937.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to earning recognition for its well-executed exterior preservation and challenging construction, the Dock Street Theatre restoration was lauded for its embodiment of three centuries of Charleston's architecture. *The Associated Press* in Charleston summarized this tremendous accomplishment: "The theater is a structural relic of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The hotel is representative of early 19<sup>th</sup> century construction. The 20<sup>th</sup> century will be represented by heating, ventilating and plumbing systems."<sup>63</sup> The architects were unable to find architectural plans of the original 1736 venue, so they decided to base the design of the new theatre on the style of a London playhouse because that is where the colonies would have found inspiration for the construction of theatre architecture (Figure 2.8). According to Ellington, the original theatre held six hundred

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<sup>62</sup> Letters found in Carolina Art Association correspondence n.d., Containers 21/195-197: Carolina Art Association Correspondence, 1933-1954, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1933-1958, 1177.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>63</sup> "Restored Ancient Theater."

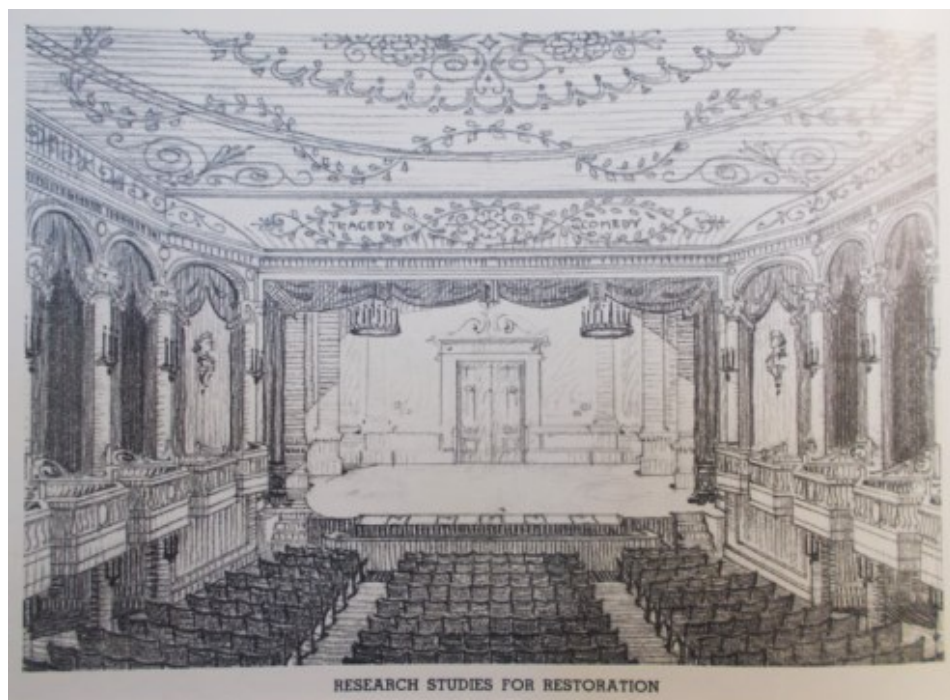


Figure 2.8: Illustrations of eighteenth-century English theatres that inspired architects Douglas D. Ellington, Albert Simons, and Samuel Lapham while drawing architectural plans for the restored Dock Street Theatre.

Source: Robert Armstrong Andrews, "Restoration of the Dock Street Theatre" in "1736-1937: In Commemoration and Rededication of the Dock Street Theatre, Charleston, S.C.," (Charleston, S.C.: City of Charleston, 1937), 792 Se8, SCL.

seats and was “built in the proportions of the theaters of England and much of the style, with a slight French influence, as were the theaters of England of that epoch.”<sup>64</sup>

With help from the Library of Congress staff, the architects found a reproduction of the design of London’s Drury Lane Theatre in Sheldon Chaney’s *The Theatre*, published in 1929.<sup>65</sup> The theatre was built in 1674 by Christopher Wren, one of England’s most famous architects of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries known especially for his church architecture. The Drury Lane Theatre was an English Restoration-style theater, which refers to the architecture produced in England during the period of the restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660 to the end of Charles II’s reign in the 1680s. Restoration theatres usually featured a proscenium arch that framed the stage and bench seating, which Simons respected by using five hundred tilted seats attached to a bench-style back.<sup>66</sup> Thirteen viewing boxes seating eight persons each flanked three sides of the theatre, and the back of the theatre featured a gallery.<sup>67</sup> The details and decorative elements contributed to the atmosphere of an eighteenth-century theater: the Georgian-inspired woodwork of black cypress gleamed from an applied mixture of vinegar and iron filings; drapery decorated the boxes and served in place of doors over the entryways leading from the lobby to the theatre; chandeliers hung from the ceiling; brackets along the paneled walls encased candles; and a black metal ring suspended by

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<sup>64</sup> Collison, “Project Reaches Fruition 3 Years After Inception.”

<sup>65</sup> Erin Shaw, “Preservation Prologue: Albert Simon’s Adaptive Reuse of the Planters’ Hotel as the Dock Street Theatre” (Seminar Paper, University of South Carolina, Columbia, 1998), 7, Manuscripts, Schulz, C.B., South Caroliniana Library.

<sup>66</sup> According to the architects, “since painstaking research revealed no data on the original theater itself, the reconstruction took place along lines indicated by contemporary structures elsewhere – particularly in London. The seating of the Charles II different from that of today; the tiers of boxes – proximate equivalent of modern balconies – were considered most desirable, while the ‘pit’ – the modern ‘orchestra’ – was only fitted with rough benches.” Ellington, Lapham, and Simons, “Charleston Opens Historic Playhouse with Historic Play.”

<sup>67</sup> Rowena Wilson Tobias, “Charleston Preparing To Reopen Oldest Theater With Historic Play,” *The State*, November 14, 1937, NewsBank, accessed through Richland County Public Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

black chains held candle lights that hung in front of the stage (Figure 2.9).<sup>68</sup> The “elaborate lighting and scene effects” created an environment in which the audience would “have the illusion of sitting in an 18<sup>th</sup> century playhouse.”<sup>69</sup>

In addition to drawing on London playhouses for inspiration, Simons honored Charleston’s own heritage in the Dock Street Theatre’s rebirth:

The stairs mounting from the lobby are concrete replicas of the original wooden stairs and the spokes in the stairway railing are copies of those in the Middleton-Pinckney houses, now the city waterworks office in George street. The coved ceiling in the theater is in the same manner as the ceiling of St. Michael’s church....The British coat-of-arms over the stage was copied from the arms at Goose Creek Church. The cloister effect in the courtyard was derived from the old arsenal buildings at Porter Military academy, and the fresco design on the fountain in the courtyard is a copy of insignia over the proscenium of the demolished Academy of Music. The treatment of the shelving in the tap room is based on that of Dr. Turnbull’s apothecary shop which is preserved in the Charleston Museum. The cypress portcullis over the bar is similar to that in the Raleigh tavern at Williamsburg.<sup>70</sup>

While Simons looked to Williamsburg for the portcullis design, the historic landmarks of his native city inspired the design of all of the other architectural pieces and decorative elements mentioned. According to Brundage, the decorative elements of Charleston’s colonial and antebellum periods had “a clear social meaning.” White Charlestonians and visitors to the city found in them “the graciousness and dignity of an aristocratic order whose sensibility lingered in the Carolina low country but elsewhere had been lost to debased, modern tastes.”<sup>71</sup> Two goals in the recreation of the eighteenth-century theatre thus are made apparent: the first was to produce an architecturally sound space that resembled as closely as possible the original theatre, and the second was to encode in the

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<sup>68</sup> Shaw, “Preservation Prologue,” 9.

<sup>69</sup> “Restored Ancient Theater.”

<sup>70</sup> Simons, “Architect Tells Project History.”

<sup>71</sup> Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 204.



Figure 2.9: Interior views of the Dock Street Theatre's auditorium, photographed by Frances Benjamin Johnston in 1936 or 1937.

Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington.  
 Top: LC-J7-SC- 1580 [P&P], <http://www.loc.gov/item/csas200803997/>;  
 Bottom: LC-J7-SC- 1577 [P&P], <http://www.loc.gov/item/csas200803994/>.

built environment the legacy of Old Charleston that prioritized history over modern life.

While the new theatre in spirit represented the eighteenth century and modern lighting, sound, and stage equipment introduced the twentieth century, the extant buildings utilized for the project were physical legacies of the nineteenth century. The Planters' Hotel's façade with its cast iron balcony and sandstone columns was the image most associated with the Dock Street Theatre project (Figure 3.1). The interiors of four buildings that comprised the hotel were divided into different functional spaces to serve the theatre. In addition to the auditorium, the architects designed a lobby, dining room and dining cloister, an open courtyard, a smoking room, a bar, dressing rooms, offices and committee rooms, and a green room to be used for lectures, rehearsals, small concerts, and as a ballroom (Figure 3.2). The third floor was divided into eight apartments for rent, which ranged from a single room and bath to two rooms, a kitchen, and bath.<sup>72</sup>

The Planters' Hotel, built shortly after 1809, was run by a Mrs. Caulder who remodeled the establishment in 1835.<sup>73</sup> Wealthy planter families and their servants from the Carolina Upcountry lodged at the Planters' Hotel for several weeks in February to attend the horse races during the social season.<sup>74</sup> According to the Carolina Art Association, for fifty years the Planters' Hotel "stood unchallenged as the rendezvous of the old south. Distinguished in its cuisine it became the center of the life of the opulent plantation days falling into decay and final ruin as the result of the south's long

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<sup>72</sup> "Operating Policy For Dock St. Theater Mapped," November 19, 1937, Scrapbook 1937, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1937-1947, Manuscript I&Olb (Dock Street Theatre), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina; Carolina Art Association, "Untitled," n.d., Folder 21-195-2 (1937), Container 195: Carolina Art Association Correspondence, 1933-1954, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1933-1958, 1177.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>73</sup> "1736-1937: In Commemoration and Rededication of the Dock Street Theatre"; Carolina Art Association, "Untitled"; Tobias, "Charleston Preparing To Reopen Oldest Theater With Historic Play."

<sup>74</sup> Reilly, "Staging Charleston: The Spoleto Festival U.S.A.," 153.





Figure 3.1: Newspaper article illustration featuring the Planters' Hotel, affirming the resemblance of the restored Dock Street Theatre to the nineteenth-century establishment, February 21, 1947.

Source: Carolina Art Association Scrapbook, Folder 21/205A, Container 21/205: Carolina Art Association Clippings, Programs, & Misc., 1937-1957, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1933-1958, 1177.00, SCHS.

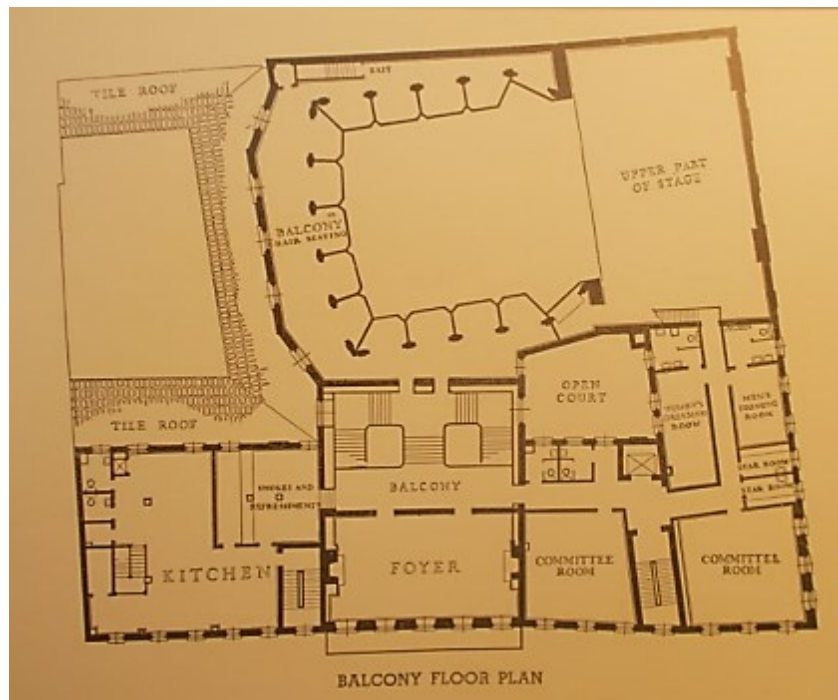
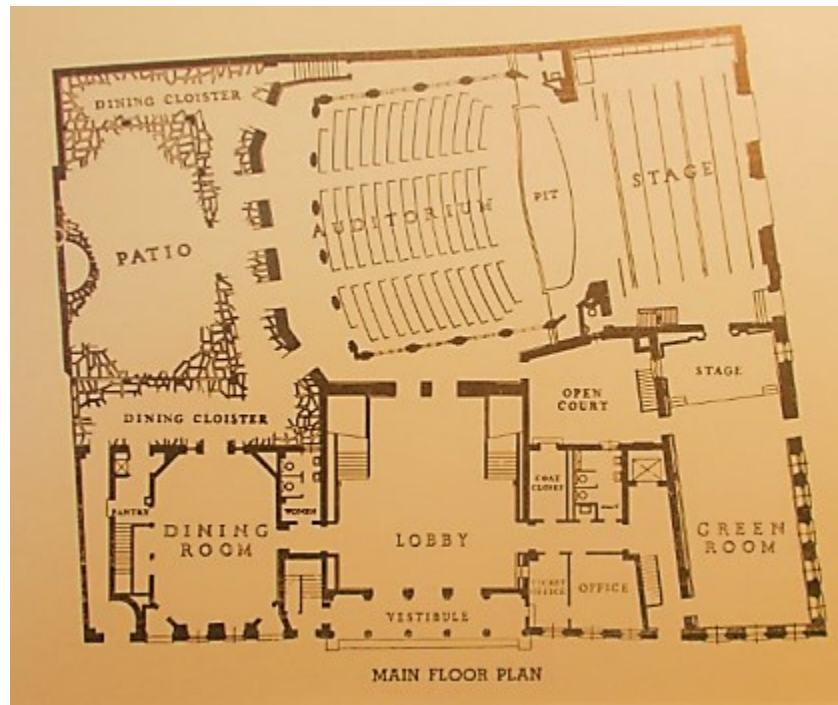


Figure 3.2: Architectural floor plans of first floor (top) and second floor (bottom) of the Dock Street Theatre, 1937.

Source: Albert Simons, floor plans reprinted in "1736-1937: In Commemoration and Rededication of the Dock Street Theatre, Charleston, S.C.," (Charleston, S.C.: City of Charleston, 1937), 792 Se8, SCL.



trouble.”<sup>75</sup> This romanticized view of the hotel and its depiction as a center of social activity was pervasive in descriptions of the restoration project.<sup>76</sup>

The twentieth century was the third and final century represented in the Dock Street Theatre’s architecture and it materialized in the modern stage. The fifty-six feet by thirty-six feet stage with a three-story fly-loft was “equipped with necessary rigging, lighting, switchboards, projectors for any type of motion pictures and other stage equipment of most modern design and far more complete than in any other theatre in the south,” the Carolina Art Association boasted.<sup>77</sup> The theatre also featured a revolving stage to enable quick scene changes. According to Heyward, “The theatre proper occupies the western end of the building and combines to an extraordinary degree the atmosphere of the past with the elaborate equipment of the modern theatre.”<sup>78</sup> The twentieth century was not made immediately visible, but rather was wrapped in nineteenth-century decorative garb:

One of the project’s signal successes is the completeness with which the modern structural work has been concealed, and it is difficult to realize that between the shell of old English brick of the original walls and the transplanted Adam plaster of the interior, there exists a modern structure of reinforced concrete that should withstand the assaults of centuries.<sup>79</sup>

Most importantly, therefore, the twentieth-century technology was hidden from view so as not to disrupt the continuity of the eighteenth-century setting of the theatre auditorium.

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<sup>75</sup> Carolina Art Association, “Untitled.”

<sup>76</sup> Tobias, “Charleston Preparing To Reopen Oldest Theater With Historic Play.”

<sup>77</sup> Carolina Art Association, “Untitled,” 3–4.

<sup>78</sup> Heyward, “Dock Street Theatre: Carolina Art Association Management.”

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

### CHAPTER III

#### SALVAGED GOODS: BETTER WITH AGE

The relocation of architectural elements salvaged from a nearby nineteenth-century mansion, the Radcliffe-King House, to the restored Dock Street Theatre was particularly effective in producing the environment of Old Charleston that the project architects aimed to recreate.<sup>80</sup> The use of plaster, wainscot, mantelpieces, cornices, door and window trim, and mahogany doors from this early nineteenth-century residence aided in the effort to fabricate a visual and physical connection to the past for theatregoers in the 1930s (Figure 3.3).<sup>81</sup> According to W. Fitzhugh Brundage, historic architecture “made tangible the mythic colonial and antebellum South, allowing visitors to experience firsthand remnants of what was purportedly one of the nation’s most elegant and refined societies.”<sup>82</sup> The success of the theatre’s architectural revival rested on visitors’ experiential connection with the past, effected through the material culture of the spatial environment itself.

The cultural biography of the Radcliffe-King House architectural elements reveals how material culture was imbued with new value when the city’s cultural producers

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<sup>80</sup> In historic sources, the Radcliffe-King House is also referred to as the Mitchell-King House or Mansion. The name derived from its second owner, prominent Charleston judge Mitchell King.

<sup>81</sup> For specific locations of where some of the architectural elements from the Radcliffe-King House were placed in the Dock Street Theatre see: Shaw, “Preservation Prologue,” 11-12.

<sup>82</sup> Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 208.

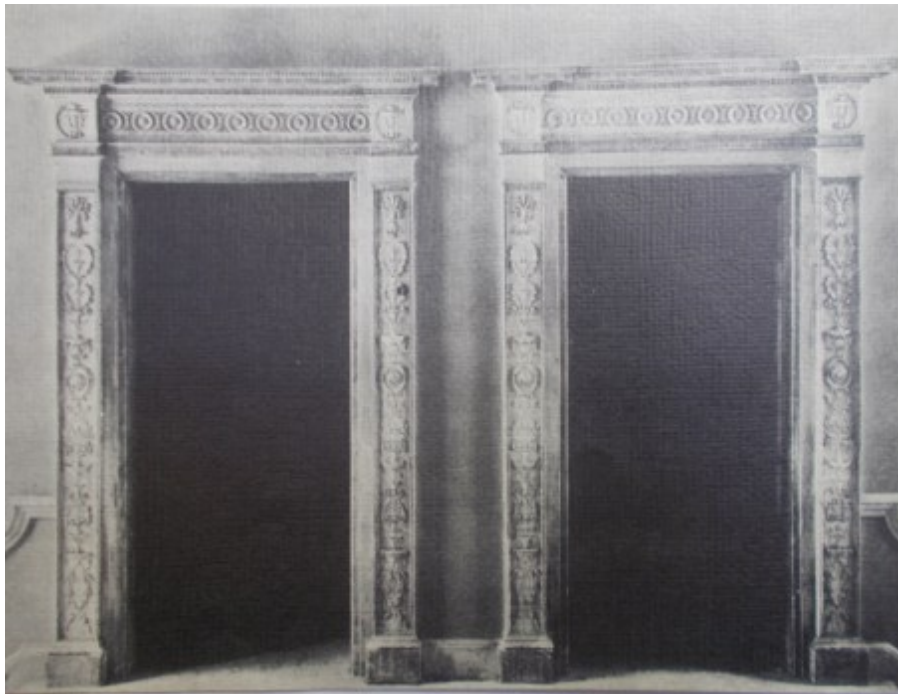
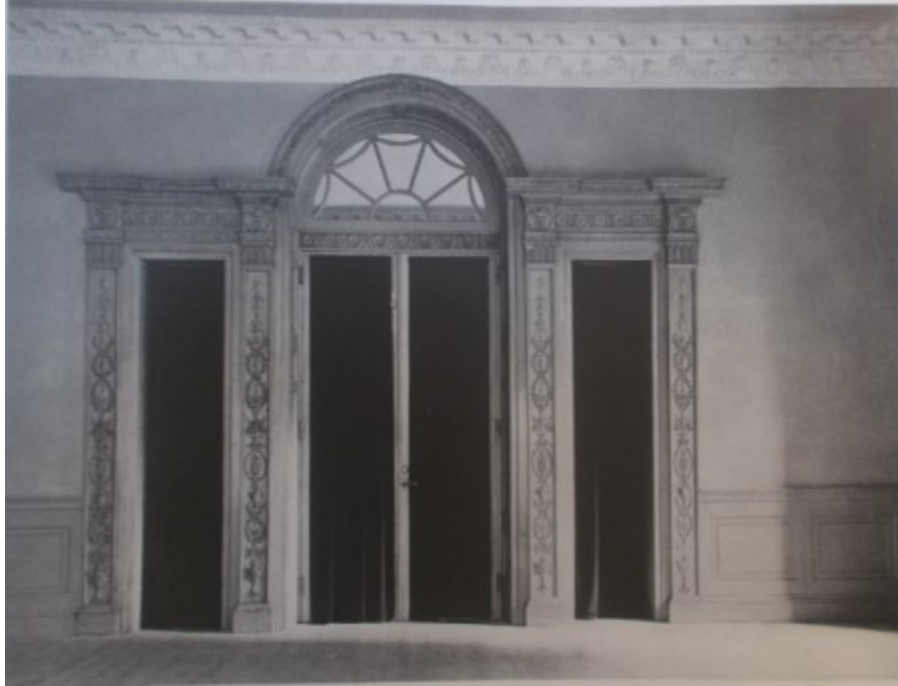


Figure 3.3: Original Caption: “Palladian window from old Mitchell King Mansion [Radcliffe-King House] installed in the Dock Street Theatre. The mansion, now used as a boys’ high school, supplied all the Adam Ornament for the Theatre. Below: Two doorways from the same old house.”

Source: DuBose Heyward, “Dock Street Theatre: Carolina Art Association, Management,” January 1938, 792 H49 1938 Oversize, SCL.

deemed Charleston's architectural fabric "historic."<sup>83</sup> An analysis of the relocated pieces demonstrates how objects were agents in shaping the cultural environment of New Deal Charleston by physically restoring the prosperous antebellum chapter in the city's history during a time when Charleston's elite were disillusioned with modern change. The salvaged architectural elements' irrefutable physicality of the nineteenth century and their textual presence in promotional literature about the Dock Street Theatre restoration project illustrate how the Radcliffe-King pieces became actors in the history of preservation and the shaping of historical memory in Charleston. While the rebuilt theatre captured the spirit of the 1736 theatre, the architectural pieces moved from the Radcliffe-King House into the rooms of the rehabilitated Planters' Hotel manifested tangibly Charleston's prosperous antebellum history of the early 1800s.

The Radcliffe-King House, located at 24 George Street, sat on the corner of Meeting and George streets nearby the homes of prominent nineteenth-century Charlestonians Gabriel Manigault and Middleton Pinckney. The Federal-Style home shared the same architectural style as other significant residential structures in downtown Charleston built in the first decade of the nineteenth century, including the Nathaniel Russell House (1808), Joseph Manigault House (1803), and William Blacklock House (1800).<sup>84</sup> Both the Radcliffe-King House, which was converted into a public high school in 1880, and the Gabriel Manigault House were casualties of urban improvement projects in the first half of the twentieth century: the Standard Oil Company razed the Manigault House in 1929 in order to build a new gas filling station, and the College of Charleston's

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<sup>83</sup> Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commodification as Process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>84</sup> Caglar Aydin, "The Potential of Virtual Heritage Reconstruction in Lost Ansonborough" (M.Sc. Thesis, Clemson University, 2012), 10.

new gymnasium replaced the city's boys high school, originally the Radcliffe-King House, in 1938.<sup>85</sup>

Standard Oil commissioned Albert Simons, one of the prominent architects in town, to design Esso filling stations at other locations in Charleston using architectural pieces from the demolished Gabriel Manigault House, including columns, interior woodwork, doors, window surrounds, and pilasters.<sup>86</sup> Simons used the same tactic of salvaging architectural elements to be used in new constructions or to alter existing structures in his larger and more culturally-significant project: the Dock Street Theatre restoration. For many years before beginning the theatre restoration, Simons and his partner Samuel Lapham recorded, salvaged, and recycled architectural pieces from many threatened buildings in Charleston, earning themselves the reputation of a preservation-minded architectural firm before their names were associated with the New Deal project.

The architectural elements salvaged from the Radcliffe-King House were Adam-style, a neoclassical decorative style popularized in pre-revolutionary America and used within Federal-Style buildings. Adamesque pieces were embellished, curved, and ornamental; in other words, they were considered high-style decorative elements in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The mansion's original doorways, mantelpieces, cornices, and plasterwork were elaborately detailed architectural statement pieces (Figure 3.4). The elements relocated to rooms within the restored Dock Street Theatre featured Palladian windows, scrolled plasterwork, and intricate carvings of flora and figures. The Radcliffe-King mantelpieces installed in the theatre were some of the most decorative and impressive salvaged elements. The mantelpieces relocated to the

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>86</sup> Laura Ashley Burghardt, "The Movement of Architectural Elements within Charleston, South Carolina" (M.Sc. Thesis, College of Charleston and Clemson University, 2009), 60.



Figure 3.4: Relocated architectural elements from the Radcliffe-King House. Top: first floor dining room. Bottom: location within Dock Street Theatre unknown.

Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington. (Top) LC-J7-SC- 1584 [P&P] <http://www.loc.gov/item/csas200804001/>; (Bottom left): LC-J7-SC-1595 [P&P] <http://www.loc.gov/item/csas200804012/>; (Bottom right): LC-J7-SC- 1597 [P&P] <http://www.loc.gov/item/csas200804014/>

Green Room featured Ionic and Corinthian columns, Biblical scenes, angelic figures, and draped floral embellishments (Figure 3.4). The quality and detail of the Adams  
woodwork in the Radcliffe-King House imparted a sense of the high economic status of the mansion's owners, and revealed the owners to be culturally-informed Charlestonians who incorporated English-inspired decorative arts into their homes.

The evolution of the architectural elements' ascribed value over time can be charted using anthropologist Igor Kopytoff's cultural biographical approach.<sup>87</sup> Kopytoff focused on culture as mediated in the economic realm, describing how an object moves within a cultural system of value classification through the processes of commodification and singularization. While the author formulated the concept of an object's "culturally informed economic biography," an analysis of the social, rather than economic, biography of the Radcliffe-King House elements is more revelatory of white elites' cultural production in early twentieth-century Charleston.<sup>88</sup>

The four clear biographies of the Radcliffe-King House architectural pieces are delineated by changes in the use of the building in which the elements were housed. The architectural elements were first featured within a private residence, then a high school, and later an abandoned property before relocation to the restored Dock Street Theatre. Identifying the architectural elements' different social lives by category reveals how the cultural value of the pieces changed over time: first as a functional showpiece in the Radcliffe-King House; then as an aesthetic architectural feature in Charleston's all-male public high school; afterwards, an abandoned piece in a vacant and deteriorated property;

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<sup>87</sup> Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commodification as Process," in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 67.

<sup>88</sup> Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things," 68.

and, lastly, an architectural treasure in the successfully restored Dock Street Theatre. It was only when the architectural pieces were physically relocated from the building at 24 George Street to the Dock Street Theatre at 135 Church Street that they acquired cultural value in a process of singularization during which they became estimable and irreplaceable relics of a bygone era. Their cultural value significantly increased in the 1930s when they were employed in goal of the theatre restoration to recreate the ambience of Old Charleston.

The Radcliffe-King House was built in the first decade of the nineteenth century by Thomas Radcliffe, one of the wealthiest merchants in Charleston. He owned a respected trading house and established the neighborhood of Radcliffeborough by purchasing the tract of land bounded by King, Vanderhorst, Smith, and Radcliffe streets by the mid-1780s. After Radcliffe died, his widow Lucretia lived in the home until her death in 1821.<sup>89</sup> Three years later, Judge Mitchell King, a leading South Carolina jurist, bought the estate and turned his home into a center of literary and artistic life in Charleston. As an active supporter of the Library Society of Charleston and a former professor of poetry at the College of Charleston, King was a member of the city's cultural elite and entertained prestigious guests in his home, including the famous English novelist William Makepeace Thackeray and American novelist and historian William Gilmore Simms.<sup>90</sup> While in the home of Radcliffe and King, two prominent Charlestonians, the architectural elements served the role of functional showpieces that signaled to visitors their proprietors' elevated socioeconomic and cultural status. The Adams woodwork of the Federal-Style mansion both reflected and, in part, created the

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<sup>89</sup> Aydin, "The Potential of Virtual Heritage Reconstruction in Lost Ansonborough," 17,22.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 18–19,23.



cultural and economic status of the owners as visual and tangible representation of their style and wealth.

When King died in 1862, his son assumed ownership of the home and sold the property to the City of Charleston in 1880 for \$11,700. The Charleston city council invested an additional \$4,000 to rehabilitate the building so it was suitable for use as the new male public high school.<sup>91</sup> As such, the Adams woodwork became a nonfunctional aesthetic feature of the school. When enrollment increased to over five hundred pupils, the City decided that the building was no longer serving the school's needs and abandoned the property in 1922. The former mansion turned high school then became a warehouse, where the architectural elements were seen by no one and therefore became culturally valueless. In 1938, the city approved the demolition of the building to make way for the College of Charleston's new gymnasium. Albert Simons designed the new gym, and as an architect intent on maintaining the architectural legacy of Charleston whenever possible, he utilized the old mansion's masonry walls and the iron fence delineating the property's perimeter in the new gym's design.<sup>92</sup>

When the boys' high school, formerly the Radcliffe-King House, received the demolition order from the City, the Charleston Museum became steward of many of its original architectural elements, including some of its ironwork, the capitals of the front door pediment, and the archway and columns of the second floor vestibule.<sup>93</sup> Although the City of Charleston owned the pieces, the museum became their repository. When demolitions in downtown Charleston were imminent, Simons sought to salvage architectural materials that could be relocated to another structure, thus preserving as

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 18–19.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 22.

much of the original fabric of Charleston as possible. According to Robert Weyeneth, historian of Charleston's historic preservation movement, Simons' "salvage effort was a partial solution to what seemed to him an assault on the civic heritage."<sup>94</sup> In Simons' words, "It distresses me painfully to see our fine old building[s] torn down and their contents wrecked or what is more humiliating sold to aliens and shipped away to enrich some other community more appreciative of such things than ourselves."<sup>95</sup>

Simons knew that the Radcliffe-King House was in "desperate straits" as early as 1932. Already commissioned as architect of the Dock Street Theatre project by the time the former Radcliffe-King House was slated for demolition, he sought to make use of the stately residence's fine architectural pieces in the restoration project. When he learned that the school board planned to destroy the old mansion, he urged his partner Lapham to ask his father – who was friends with the chairman of the school board – to allow Simons to use architectural elements from the house's interior in the theatre's restoration. The City Board of Public School Commissioners granted the request and the Charleston Museum agreed to let Simons acquire them for the theatre.<sup>96</sup> Simons viewed the salvaging of Charleston's architectural history as a way to combat the loss of civic and cultural identity. His goal was to keep Charleston's architectural elements within the city; if not in their original location, then in a new one where their historical significance would be valued.

The transition from the third to fourth social life of the architectural elements reveals a change in valuation from inconsequential, abandoned pieces to architectural

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<sup>94</sup> Weyeneth, *Historic Preservation for a Living City*, 6.

<sup>95</sup> Albert Simons to Rivers, May 8, 1928; cited in Weyeneth, *Historic Preservation for a Living City*, 6.

<sup>96</sup> Shaw, "Preservation Prologue," 10–11; Simons, "Architect Tells Project History" The mansion was demolished in 1938 to make way for a new gym for the College of Charleston.

treasures. The value increased drastically: in situ at the vacant property the pieces were worthless because they purportedly had no cultural or monetary worth. When Simons acquired them for use in the restoration of the Dock Street Theatre, they immediately became priceless, not because they lacked significance, but because they were then viewed by Charleston's cultural producers as historic architectural gems. It is important to note that the architectural elements were not suddenly valuable because of the fame of their maker or of the craftsman who reinstalled them within the Dock Street Theatre. Simons lauded the quality craftsmanship of the original plasterer William Purviss, but his name was known beforehand. Clearly, the revelation of the artist did not prompt a shift in the salvaged goods' value. Nor, moreover, was the newly acquired cultural value due to the work of "72-year-old Negro plasterer" John Smith, "said to be the only man in Charleston who knew how [to mold] the decorative cornices and ceilings." In fact, the only mention of Smith appeared in the *New York Times* article published the week of the theatre's opening in November of 1937; the many local articles describing the restoration process did not include Smith's name, unless in a reprinting of the *New York Times'* text.<sup>97</sup>

The new cultural value of the Radcliffe-King architectural fabric derived from its own materiality and origins; the doorways, trim, mantelpieces, and plaster were considered desirable because they were physical legacies of the nineteenth century. The Adams woodwork and plasterwork provided an aura of authenticity to the theatre's restoration that could not be achieved by any other means except by the relocating of period architectural pieces. Most of the salvaged materials were installed in the Green Room, located beside the theatre auditorium, which was used for lectures, rehearsals,

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<sup>97</sup> "Theatre and Hotel of 1736 Restored."

small concerts, and as a ballroom; downstairs lobby; second-floor foyer; smoking rooms; and the restaurant of the restored Dock Street Theatre.<sup>98</sup> The incorporation of salvaged architectural elements into the theatre lent credibility to the restoration effort because the pieces were considered genuine artifacts of history that provided visitors with an authentic experience of partaking in Charleston's past.

Simons and Lapham notated the use of the salvaged pieces in their architectural drawings for the theatre completed in 1935: the south wall of the Green Room was fitted with "new trim to match trim in other parts of room taken from King House," and "plaster cornice to match existing plaster cornice in first floor stair hall of King House"<sup>99</sup> Additionally, the small stage and mantel in the Green Room was "fitted with a superb Palladian window (which leads directly onto the main stage), doorways, mantel, and wainscot from the Charleston Museum's collection of historic woodwork."<sup>100</sup>

Earl M. Collison, writer for Charleston's *Post and Courier*, labeled these installed pieces "Relics Preserved," and described the unusual construction method required to execute the incorporation of the salvaged pieces into the theatre's restoration:

In arranging the splendid examples of carved wood work in the interior, the wainscoting, doors, and windows the usual construction procedure had to be reversed; for instead of interior woodwork, doors and windows being designed to fit their openings, the openings had to be fitted to the existing woodwork in order that the symmetry, proportion and design of these valuable features of the building might not be marred.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Carolina Art Association, "Untitled"; For specific locations of where some of the architectural elements from the Radcliffe-King House were placed in the Dock Street Theatre see: Shaw, "Preservation Prologue," 11–12.

<sup>99</sup> Albert Simons and Samuel Lapham, "Architectural Drawing Sheet 4-13" n.d., South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>100</sup> Heyward, "Dock Street Theatre: Carolina Art Association Management."

<sup>101</sup> Collison, "Project Reaches Fruition 3 Years After Inception."

Albert Simons similarly described the installation of the elements, which he called “beautiful and antique features,” as difficult and necessitating special consideration: “The removal of this woodwork and plaster ornament, the transportation and placement in the various parts of the reconstruction represented a special problem calling for the utmost care and skill.”<sup>102</sup>

In Charleston, men like Albert Simons, Robert N. S. Whitelaw, and DuBose Heyward assigned a value to architectural elements because the pieces were instrumental in their goal to recapture a romanticized past of prosperity. According to Stephanie Yuhl, in the years following World War I, elite whites were “motivated by a perceived threat to their traditional way of life and a fierce civic pride,” and “sought to preserve and enshrine Charleston as a place where remnants of a glorious past lived on, unmarred by the uglier sides of modernity.”<sup>103</sup> This agenda materialized in the Dock Street Theatre project.

Therefore, while the eighteenth-century theatre was a reconstruction of the imagination, and the twentieth-century modern equipment was hidden from sight as much as possible, the Radcliffe-King architectural elements made tangible and visually public the nineteenth century. The new theatre in spirit represented the romance and legacy of eighteenth century colonial Charleston, but the extant buildings utilized for the project were physical legacies of the nineteenth century. According to Eola Willis, the finished product proved remarkably successful. The Dock Street Theatre’s “adornment of classic ornamentation brought from ancient mansions with the Adam stamp, make it easy to

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<sup>102</sup> Simons, “Architect Tells Project History.”

<sup>103</sup> Yuhl, *A Golden Haze of Memory*, 6.

believe that in its erection and finishings it cost three hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”<sup>104</sup>

DuBose Heyward described the significance of the salvage effort and wrote that the Radcliffe-King House became part of the Dock Street Theatre’s history with the installation of the architectural elements. He clearly took delight in the relocation of the Radcliffe-King House’s architectural pieces: “It brings to the newer structure not only its beauty of plaster and woodwork but its wealth of tradition extending far back into Charleston’s past.”<sup>105</sup> In Heyward’s mind, the mansion abounded with memories of its frequent guests, including Robert E. Lee, William Makepeace Thackeray, Henry Timrod, Paul Hamilton Hayne, and William Gilmore Simms, “and so into the mosaic of this unique building fit these memories as well as those of the nation’s earliest drama.”<sup>106</sup> Heyward continued with a favorable description of the complementary combination of architectures within the one restoration project:

For here was no slavish reproduction of a single period, but a bringing together under a single roof of an early eighteenth-century theatre, a group of simple early Charleston dwelling houses, an unmistakable example of the Classic Revival, and the harmonious incorporation therein of interior decoration removed bodily from a Georgian mansion. The harmonizing of these various factors, the ingenuity and taste with which they were merged one into another, and the delightful element of the unexpected which one now encounters in passing from room to room, give this building a character unique in American restorations.<sup>107</sup>

The Radcliffe-King architectural elements, relocated to the Dock Street Theatre, embodied a self-image constructed by elite Charlestonians that found inspiration in the city’s prosperous antebellum past. One way in which they perpetuated this image was

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<sup>104</sup> Willis, “Chapter XVIII: The Dock Street Theatre.”

<sup>105</sup> Heyward, “Dock Street Theatre: Carolina Art Association Management.”

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

through the creation of a visual representation of history; in other words, a tangible past. The salvaged elements played a crucial role in legitimizing the claim of history and self-identity, and for that reason, the cultural value of the Radcliffe-King pieces was revived in the 1930s theatre restoration.

The architectural elements' textual presence in the promotional literature about the Dock Street Theatre's restoration evinces the agency imbued in the pieces as a result of their new use. The Adam-style woodwork is described in commemorative materials, newspaper articles, and letters as if it presented the solution to the lack of existing written documentation regarding the architectural design of the original eighteenth-century theatre. While the new theatre's layout might not have matched that of the original theatre, the lack of authenticity was made tolerable by the irrefutable genuineness of the salvaged goods. Furthermore, the Radcliffe-King details provided the visual link between the mid-eighteenth-century theatre and the later-nineteenth-century Planters' Hotel. According to the architects, the lobby was restored in the Greek Revival style, however, "by using Adam woodwork and plaster detail on the balcony and second-floor levels, the architects carried the sequence one stage farther back: from that to the late Renaissance of the Theater proper is only a step, stylistically speaking – 1780 to 1730."<sup>108</sup>

While much woodwork and plaster were salvaged from the Radcliffe-King House, not nearly enough was recovered to complete the restoration of all of the rooms that comprised the new space of the Dock Street Theatre. When necessary, the architects replicated the woodwork to fill in the gaps. Agricultural historian John T. Schlebecker has argued that in some cases, "a replica, if properly made, can sometimes substitute for

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<sup>108</sup> Ellington, Lapham, and Simons, "Charleston Opens Historic Playhouse with Historic Play."

the real thing.”<sup>109</sup> In the case of the restored Theatre, the replica woodwork received the same admiration as the original pieces. For instance, the central cast-iron and mahogany stairway was a copy of a contemporary stair that nevertheless was admired as a “painstaking ferroconcrete replica of the original” (Figure 3.5).<sup>110</sup> Heyward described the dining room as displaying “unusual woodwork, all original,” and written in a laudatory tone rather than derisive was “what wasn’t removed from the mansion was duplicated by casting.”<sup>111</sup>

Not only were replicas acceptable, but the method by which they were created was praised. As Leora Auslander, social historian and material culture scholar of modern Europe, has argued, three-dimensional objects can serve as “memory cues, as souvenirs in a quite literal sense.”<sup>112</sup> Reflecting on the finished product – the marvelous restored theatre – Heyward declared that the “harmonizing of these various factors, the ingenuity and taste with which they were merged one into another, and the delightful element of the unexpected which one now encounters in passing from room to room, give this building a character unique in American restorations.”<sup>113</sup> While theatregoers could not walk away after an evening of entertainment with a piece of architecture, the theatre’s decorative architectural elements – whether original nineteenth-century pieces or replicas – were memory cues that recalled the image of a more prosperous past: that of antebellum Charleston.

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<sup>109</sup> John T. Schlebecker, “The Use of Objects in Historical Research,” in *Material Culture Studies in America*, ed. Thomas J. Schlereth (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1982), 108.

<sup>110</sup> Heyward, “Dock Street Theatre: Carolina Art Association Management.”

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Leora Auslander, “Beyond Words,” *The American Historical Review* 110, no. 4 (October 2005): 1020.

<sup>113</sup> Heyward, “Dock Street Theatre: Carolina Art Association Management.”





Figure 3.5: Replica staircase in Dock Street Theatre's lobby. Original caption of photography on left: "Central feature of the Lobby is the stairway, a painstaking ferroconcrete replica of the original; since the railing was missing, the architects copied a cast-iron and mahogany contemporary. The magnificent Adam doorways on the landing, leading into the second-floor boxes are originals from the Mitchell King mansion, built in 1805."

Source, left: Du Bose Heyward, "Dock Street Theatre: Carolina Art Association Management." Reprinted from the Magazine of Art (January 1938). SoCar Oversize 792 H49 1938, SCL.

Source, right: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington. LC-J7-SC- 1582 [P&P] <http://www.loc.gov/item/csas200803999/>.

## CHAPTER IV

### A “CAST OF SOCIALITE CHARLESTONIANS” ENJOY OPENING NIGHT

When Simons and Lapham finished the architectural work, the Footlight Players, under the direction of Emmett Robinson, began readying the theatre for the opening performance of George Farquhar’s “The Recruiting Officer,” selected in homage to the original theatre’s opening night. Craftsman John Smith, “a negro artisan not on relief rolls” who was the only black artisan to be acknowledged, “performed painstaking and expert work on the plaster cornices and centerpieces.”<sup>114</sup> William Halsey, a young Charleston artist, painted a fresco in the courtyard’s brick-arched fountain, and copied paintings of eighteenth-century English artist William Hogarth to decorate the tap room. Robert Armstrong Andrews, head of the South Carolina Federal Art Project, was in charge of production of scenery, and although many Federal Art Project workers helped created the sets, Alicia Rhett was responsible for much of the backdrop paintings.<sup>115</sup>

The stage’s main backdrop was based on prominent eighteenth-century artist and playwright John Black White’s 1838 painting of Charleston depicting Broad Street with St. Michael’s Church, the old custom house, and other landmarks (Figures 4.1).<sup>116</sup> Six additional backdrops were created for the comedy: the first represented a paneled room based on an English manor house of the early eighteenth century; the second was

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<sup>114</sup> Simons, “Architect Tells Project History.”

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.; “Theatre and Hotel of 1736 Restored.”

<sup>116</sup> *The State*, November 25, 1936, NewsBank, accessed through Richland County Public Library, Columbia, South Carolina.



Figure 4.1: Two of the six backdrops painted by the Federal Art Project for “The Recruiting Officer.”

Source: Source: Federal Writers’ Project (S.C.), Charleston, S.C.: Theatres, WPA Photograph Collection, Digital Collections, SCL.

modeled after the famous Double Cube room at Wilton Hall in England, designed by the English architect Inigo; the third depicted two paintings by Alicia Rhett in the style of the old masters, titled Spring and Autumn; the fourth was a library scene based on Hogarth prints; the fifth depicted a court of justice in prison that was adapted from a seventeenth-century Italian theatrical backdrop inspired by the drawings of Piranesi; and the sixth featured a woodland scene based on the local landscape of Charleston.<sup>117</sup>

The exterior preserved, the interior gutted and rebuilt, the construction challenges overcome, and the decorations set, all was prepared for opening nights on Friday, November 26, and Saturday, November 27 of 1937. The two-evening event was to be a celebration of the project's success in achieving Charleston's rebirth as a cultural center by the WPA and the City of Charleston. On Sunday night, the Charleston String Symphony performed a special, invitation-only, concert featuring harpsichordist Lewis Richards, but performances on Monday through Wednesday evenings were open to the general public. Leading up to opening night, the Charleston Museum held an exhibit on its main floor displaying "items relating to the history of the Charleston stage," including old copies of music, plays, and broadsides announcing early performances.<sup>118</sup>

One thousand invitations were sent to Charleston's commissions, societies, and a few notable individuals (Figure 4.2). Representatives of all bodies of city government were invited, as well as many state and federal officials and educators. Fifty tickets were distributed to the city council and guests, three hundred to patriotic and civic

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<sup>117</sup> Rowena Wilson Tobias, "New Dock Street Theater To Repeat Comedy Given More Than 200 Years Ago," *The State*, November 25, 1937, Scrapbook 1937, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1937-1947, Manuscript I&Olb (Dock Street Theatre), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

<sup>118</sup> "History of Stage in Charleston Told by Exhibition at Museum," November 25, 1937, Scrapbook 1937, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1937-1947, Manuscript I&Olb (Dock Street Theatre), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

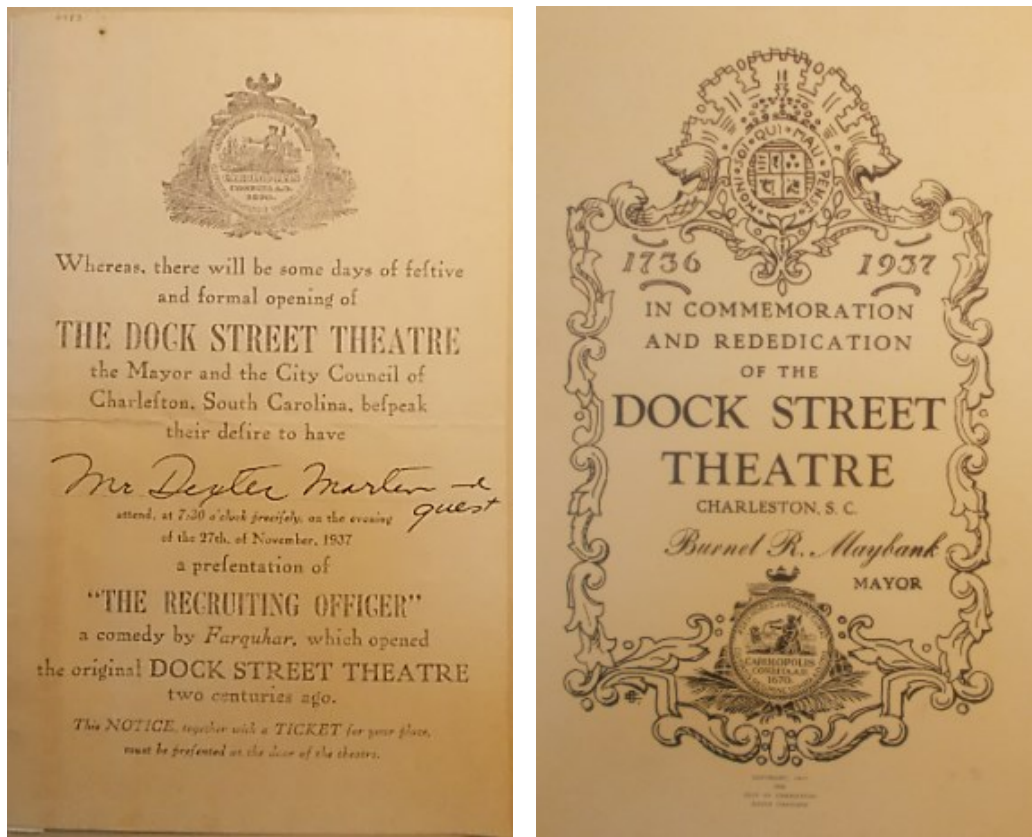


Figure 4.2: Invitation to the second opening night of the Dock Street Theatre on November 27, 1937. To the right is the commemoration booklet published in 1937 to celebrate the completion of the restoration project.

Source: Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1937-1947. Manuscript I&O1b (Dock Street Theatre), Scrapbook 1937. SCL.

organizations, three hundred to city board and commissions, two hundred to federal and state officials, fifty to military units in the Charleston area, fifty to county officials, and fifty to colleges, newspapers, and dramatic critics.<sup>119</sup> Making an appearance on opening night were senators from Berkeley, Horry, Richland, and Dorchester counties, and leading educators from the Citadel, Winthrop College, the Medical College of South Carolina, Newberry College, and Furman University.<sup>120</sup> Also taking their places amongst the state's cultural elite on Friday evening were federal representatives Harry Hopkins, WPA director, Ellen S. Woodward, assistant director in charge of women's and professional projects, and Nickolai Sokoloff, director of the Federal Music Project (Figure 4.3).<sup>121</sup>

The events of the evening recreated for theatregoers the ambience of the opening night of the original theater in February of 1736, imitating the dress and entertainment of the initial eighteenth-century production. The evening began with a Charleston String Symphony concert conducted by Tony Hadgl and illuminated by candlelight. The presentation of the key to the theatre from WPA director Harry Hopkins to Mayor Maybank followed the musical performance, enacting the giving and receiving of the "gift" of the Dock Street Theatre from the federal government to the City of Charleston. In his speech, Hopkins related to the audience his affection for Charleston and acknowledged its distinct heritage:

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<sup>119</sup> "Playhouse Debut Bids Are Issued," November 15, 1937, Scrapbook 1937, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1937-1947, Manuscript I&OIb (Dock Street Theatre), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

<sup>120</sup> "Invitations Are Accepted," November 18, 1937, Scrapbook 1937, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1937-1947, Manuscript I&OIb (Dock Street Theatre), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

<sup>121</sup> Aubrey C. Williams, deputy administrator of the Works Progress Administration, was also invited, but was unable to attend the opening. Hitt, Jr., "City's Culture Made Theater Gift Possible, Hopkins Says."





Figure 4.3: “A cast of socialite Charlestonians” enjoying the Dock Street Theatre’s opening night, November 26, 1937.

Source: “First U.S. Theatre Is Restored: Charleston Blue Bloods Give It Gala Opening.” *Life*, December 20, 1937. 792 F57 1937 Oversize.

Four years ago yesterday I came to Charleston for the first time in my life....I look at it tonight and can scarcely believe myself. There is no city in America where this could have been done other than Charleston. This city has escaped the ruthless march of the industrial system. Here a heritage of culture and arts is honored and respected. In dedicating this theater I would dedicate it to the people of Charleston – proud, fearless, courageous, intelligent. You have accepted faithfully a proud heritage and I believe you children and your children’s children will accept the same heritage from you untarnished. Two hundred years from now our descendants may sit in this very theater. I hope they can say of us – proud, fearless, courageous, intelligent. It gives me great pleasure to present to the mayor of this city the key to this theater on behalf of the United States government.<sup>122</sup>

After Hopkins’ speech, Edward L. Worthington, who played the part of Captain Plume in the play, recited a prologue written by DuBose Heyward. The prologue began by telling audience members they were about to experience both the past and the present in the evening’s performance: “Here, where our sires came to see the show / And laughed and wept two centuries ago, / We greet you for the present and the past,” and concludes with a reminder that Charleston’s progenitors were unmatched in their prestige: “So let your laughter ring – these walls are strong - / Remembering that, though the years are long, / A Charleston ancestor could not be wrong.”<sup>123</sup> The prologue introduced the Footlight Players’ performance of “The Recruiting Officer” (Figure 4.4). The Society for the Preservation of Spirituals closed the program with ten of their most famous spirituals, and in the words of one audience member, “the concert provided an appropriate climax to a night filled with exact reproduction of life in Charleston two hundred years ago.”<sup>124</sup> Following the spirituals, Mayor Maybank invited the audience to inspect the building which led to “marveling at the remarkable craftsmanship shown in the restoration of the old building, its beautiful mantels, paneling, woodwork and architectural strength and

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> “1736-1937: In Commemoration and Rededication of the Dock Street Theatre.”

<sup>124</sup> Hitt, Jr., “City’s Culture Made Theater Gift Possible, Hopkins Says.”





Figure 4.4: Act I, Scene I from “Recruiting Officer,” performed November 26, 1937.

Source: Folder 21-201-6, Container 21/201: Carolina Art Association, printed matter, 1935-1945, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1933-1958, 1177.00, SCHS.

beauty.”<sup>125</sup> This tour of appreciation was a fitting end to the evening when the Dock Street Theatre reestablished Charleston’s significant theatre tradition.

The amount of press coverage of the opening weekend – which expressed an overwhelmingly favorable reception to the Dock Street Theatre’s restoration – gives testament to the success of the project. Immediately following the opening, the Carolina Art Association (CAA) entered a two-year contract with the City of Charleston set to end on December 1, 1939, to manage the Dock Street Theatre. For one dollar a year, and with an agreement that twelve thousand dollars would be raised to “guarantee management and purchasing of necessary equipment,” the CAA accepted responsibility for upholding the Dock Street Theatre’s mission of becoming a regional cultural center.<sup>126</sup> The CAA imagined that the theatre would be used by local art organizations such as the Footlight Players, the Poetry Society of South Carolina, the Musical Art Club, the Society for the Preservation of Spirituals, and the dramatic societies of the Junior League, Ashley Hall, and the College of Charleston. The CAA assumed management of the theatre “with the aim of making it a center for all the lively arts in the South, a center...which will be a vital part of the community life and in no sense of the word a “museum piece,” fulfilling the hope architect Albert Simons harbored for his project.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> E. M. Collison, “Performances At Dock St. Theater To Be Repeated,” *The Post and Courier*, November 27, 1937, Scrapbook 1937, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1937-1947, Manuscript I&Olb (Dock Street Theatre), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

<sup>126</sup> Harold A. Mouzon and Robert N. S. Whitelaw, “Carolina Art Association to Ways and Means Committee, City Council, City of Charleston, SC,” February 4, 1948, Folder 26-35-11, Dock Street Theatre Papers (1937-1950), Albert Simons Papers, 1964-1979, 1253.00, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>127</sup> Rowena Wilson Tobias, “The Carolina Art Association Will Take Over the Operation of America’s First Playhouse,” *The State*, November 28, 1937, Scrapbook 1937, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1937-1947, Manuscript I&Olb (Dock Street Theatre), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

Robert Armstrong Andrews, South Carolina FAP director, simply expressed the cultural significance of the Dock Street Theatre's restoration: "The story of this reconstruction is a chapter in the greater story of the government's program of work relief. But it is also a chapter of compelling romance."<sup>128</sup> Douglas Ellington also believed the theatre to be of both national and local importance. He praised all who worked towards resurrecting the Dock Street Theatre, which had remained an important historic site in memory only, into a physical, tangible present. The theatre, "operated in a full sense of idealistic and artistic obligation...could become an instrument of more than local satisfaction, [it] could be also of national value and importance."<sup>129</sup> Ultimately, the Dock Street Theatre restoration project exemplified the process of cultural production operating on both a federal and local level. The WPA-funded project allowed Charleston to craft its own cultural identity within the national cultural agenda of the New Deal, an identity that was informed by preservation politics and a desire to make tangible a romanticized past.

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<sup>128</sup> "1736-1937: In Commemoration and Rededication of the Dock Street Theatre."

<sup>129</sup> "Souvenirs Will Be Presented at Opening of Dock Street Theater," November 26, 1937, Scrapbook 1937, Dock Street Theatre Collection, 1937-1947, Manuscript I&Olb (Dock Street Theatre), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

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