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Reviews...

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Reviews...

DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM Architectural and Historical Walking Tour Guide, edited by Marjorie Longenecker White. *Birmingham Historical Society (1425 22nd Street, South, Birmingham, Alabama 35205) and The First National Bank of Birmingham, 1977. 142 pages, illustrated, index, paper, \$5 (add \$1 for postage and handling).*

NINETEENTH CENTURY MOBILE ARCHITECTURE An Inventory of Existing Buildings. *Mobile City Planning Commission (P.O. Box 1827, Mobile, Alabama 36601), 1974. 76 pages, illustrated, glossary, paper, \$4.*

Both of these books are in the form of a photographic catalogue with a descriptive paragraph supplied for each structure; but, the resemblance ends there.

DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM, as the title implies, covers only the central part of the city and consequently is concerned mostly with commercial buildings. The Mobile book is an inventory of existing 19th century structures, and the majority of these are residences. Only buildings that can be dated to the 19th century are included, while the Birmingham book covers the total period of downtown development from the city's founding in the 1870's to the present decade.

NINETEENTH CENTURY MOBILE ARCHITECTURE begins with a two page introduction which explains the general architectural development of the city and the methods used for collecting the material. This inventory is seen as a way to encourage architectural continuity in the construction and reconstruction of the city and as a guide for touring the historic areas of the city.

The book contains 157 entries of which the majority are (or were) residences. There are no 18th century buildings extant in Mobile although settlement there dates from about 1700. The largest number of recorded structures fall within the period from 1850 to 1870 while the last two decades of the century are represented by eleven examples of which only a couple are fully developed Queen Annes. Unfortunately no explanation is given for this disproportionate distribution. It is hard to know whether it is the result of local building conditions and tastes, of selective demolition, or of some other factor.

Based on this inventory, it appears that Mobile throughout much of the 19th century was architecturally conservative and retained two basic house types to which current stylistic features were applied. One was a three-bay, two-story, brick box with double bridged chimneys and gable roof; the other was the raised wooden cottage derived from Creole building. As other styles followed the Federal, only the detailing changed. Bracketed

eaves and a low hipped roof were concessions to the Italian Villa rage while a bay window and jigsaw woodwork indicate the late Victorian period. The most common and distinctive ornament, though, is the decorative cast iron grillwork that adorns porches and galleries, with the particular design motif of each providing a clue to its age.

It is fascinating to mentally compare how the same styles were interpreted in Huntsville and Mobile. Although they shared many elements, the end result was not necessarily the same. It is apparent that while the same style may have been popular in both places, the way it was executed depended largely on local conditions and traditions.

DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM is compiled as a tour guide to encourage people to look at the visual record of the city's buildings with the hope that the experience will foster an appreciation of Birmingham's history and built environment. It begins with a brief history of the town's founding and development to the present day.

The book is divided into approximately thirty short walking tours with each area sharing a common historic background. Buildings and alterations are dated, and architects and contractors are listed when known. But this is not just an objective cataloging of extant buildings; the picture of a modern parking garage is flanked by an old photograph of the building that was razed to make room for it. "Before" and "after" shots of modernized buildings show clearly what has been lost. Old views of street-

scapes during a busier day are compared with the contemporary street life. The text provides not only architectural information but also descriptions of the various businesses that inhabited the structures and the way that blocks evolve from one function to another. The book presents an excellent view of the city in transition - of the constant growth and modification that take place as the city center adapts to ever changing conditions and needs.*

MONEY

The Alabama Historical Commission has awarded preservation grants for 1979 to three restoration projects in Huntsville.

Receiving matching funds are the Weeden House, Gates Avenue, for structural stabilization, heating and air conditioning; the East Huntsville Baptist Church for interior and exterior restoration of Oak Place (George Steele's home on Maysville Road) for use as offices; and the O. R. Hundley House on Madison Street for roof, porch and window repair and exterior painting.

This money is distributed to the states by the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service of the U.S. Department of the Interior for use in preserving National Register properties. The amounts of the grants were not available at this writing.

PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS

*Collection of the Huntsville Public Library: cover, pages 10, 14, 15 and 21.
Linda Bayer: all others*