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Reviews...

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Reviews...

EUTAW The Builders and Architecture of an Ante-Bellum Southern Town, by Clay Lancaster. *The Greene County Historical Society, 1979. 208 pages, illustrated, appendices, index, glossary.*

Whenever possible, local historians should try to tell the story of their community with an eye on those larger events that may have had either a direct or an indirect influence on the outcome of the situation which they are examining. Such an awareness will prevent myopia, but more importantly, it will enable the reader to better understand the uniqueness of the local developments under investigation, presenting them in a generally more stimulating light. In Clay Lancaster's EUTAW: THE BUILDERS AND ARCHITECTURE OF AN ANTE-BELLUM SOUTHERN TOWN, this overview was not cultured, and therefore, the author has turned what could be a very interesting subject into one which neither has any life, nor provokes any response from the reader.

When reading this book I had a difficult time keeping my attention focused on the text. Although Mr. Lancaster has done a fine job documenting the various houses, the information provided does not go beyond what the reader himself could cull from an archive. The writing of history is an interpretative art, a notion which Mr. Lancaster has prac-

ticed in some of his other manuscripts. Why he did not follow the same instinct here is somewhat mysterious, especially when he had such a promising topic.

by John Sarn

Eutaw, Alabama, is a town that possesses a wealth of ante-bellum architecture. It is also a place that is unknown to most of those who are interested in architectural history. It would seem to this writer that confronted with such an opportunity, the author would bring in comparisons of other well-known buildings fashioned in the Greek and Roman revival styles in order to demonstrate clearly the singularity of the developments in Greene County and Eutaw before the Civil War.

Certainly this would not have been all that difficult, for the author is well aware, for example, of the beauty of Natchez. In taking some time to offer a few comparisons, the audience would have been allowed not only to examine the particular strengths and weaknesses of the architecture in the

Eutaw area, but also be given an interesting insight as to how these styles were adapted to the needs of the south central region of Alabama.

Even with this major handicap, however, there are some things to like about the book. It is very well organized insofar as the author has divided the material into easily understandable categories. Domestic structures, for instance, are analyzed under such inventive headings as "One-Story Houses" (Chapter 10), or "Story-and-a-Half Houses" (Chapter 12). Additionally, the author has set up useful developmental role models by recognizing that some of the houses in Eutaw were dependent upon other examples from such nearby locations as Mesopotamia, Alabama. By bringing such comparative information into the text, the reader not familiar with the area is able to make some value judgments with reference as to what makes Eutaw unique from other towns in the area.

Other aspects worth mentioning are the excellent drawings and useful appendices on the builders and the property owners of ante-bellum Greene County. Without the drawings, what discussion there is would often be in vain. In the Benjamin D. Gullet House (Fig. 46) for example, the photograph shows more of the shrubs than it does of the structure so that the drawings of the elevations, moldings, and interior details help to convey the richness of the building which could not be appreciated were they not included. The appendices are also of use, for what biographical and other pertinent data that could not be worked into the text is contained here for easy reference.

This notion of practicality or usefulness, however, seems to point once again to the unfortunate result of the Lancaster book. In creating essentially a reference guide to the architecture of Eutaw and Greene County, the author has not really written a definitive history. While he does compile information and organize his subject matter in an enviable manner, he has not made what he has discussed come alive in the imagination of his readers. Perhaps it would have been better had he written a catalog instead of a text, for at least then I would not have experienced any letdown in terms of expecting a story.

This is an ambitious book for a town and historical society of Eutaw's size, and the people of Greene County should be congratulated. They have a handsome, well illustrated, and expertly documented publication to make their unique heritage known to the world. However, although the skeleton of a fine book is here, the heart is somewhat lacking, an omission which does not do justice to the beauty of the subject matter.

CLAY LANCASTER is a noted architectural historian who has written numerous books on 19th century American architecture. He received his M.A. from the University of Kentucky in 1939 and did postgraduate work at Columbia University where he also taught. Two of his best known books are ARCHITECTURAL FOLLIES IN AMERICA and THE JAPANESE INFLUENCE IN AMERICA.

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