

The Majesty of
MOBILE



Mobile's waterfront skyline is dominated by the thirty-five-story RSA Battlehouse Tower and RSA Bank Trust Building.



Raphael Semmes was the famed captain of the Confederate cruiser CSS Alabama. His statue, on Government Street, is engraved with "Sailor, Patriot, Statesman and Scholar."

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Text by Jim Fraiser
Photography by Pat Caldwell
Foreword by John Sledge



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Page 3: Fort Conde has been partially reconstructed at 150 South Royal Street. The fort's brick walls and cannon held sway over Mobile for 100 years in service of the French, British, Spanish, and Americans.



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For my son, Paul—J. F.



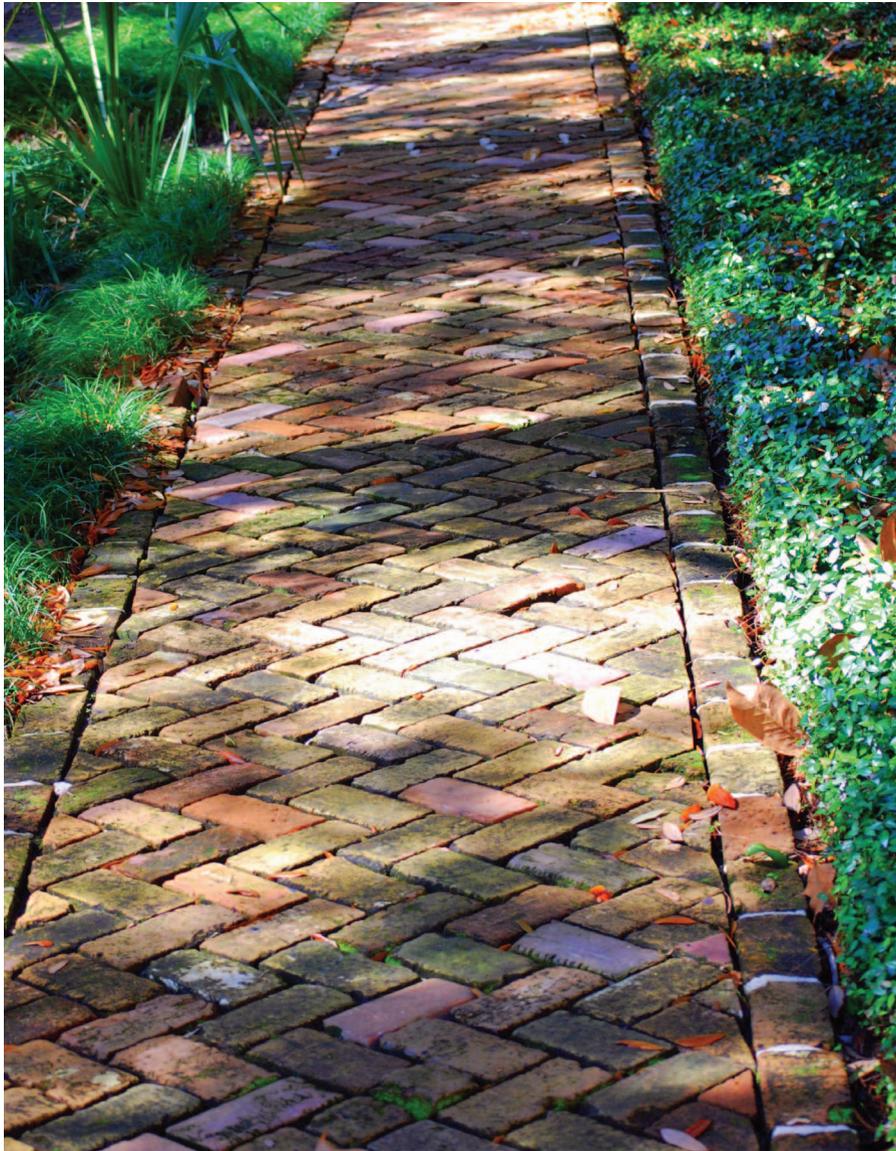
Battleship Memorial Park features the World War II-era battleship USS Alabama.

Architecture is my delight . . . worth great attention. It is then, among the most important arts. Were I to tell you how much I enjoy . . . architecture, sculpture, painting, music, I should want words.

—Thomas Jefferson

This I regard as history's highest function, to let no worthy action be uncommemorated, and to hold out the reprobation of posterity as a terror to evil words and deeds.

—Tacitus



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Foreword

A book such as this has long been overdue, namely, a celebration in stunning color photographs and readable prose of the glorious architecture, both grand and modest, that lines the oak-canopied streets of Mobile, Alabama. Locals and visitors have always known about Mobile's rich architectural legacy, of course—one antebellum traveler declared the city the most distinctive he had seen, a sentiment echoed by Pres. Woodrow Wilson during his 1913 visit—but until now there hasn't been a suitably attractive and accessible volume communicating that to take home, display, and thumb through with such pleasure. Readers of this book who know Mobile will more than likely experience a clutch of the heart within these pages, and those who don't will likely be making travel plans as soon as possible.

So what is it that makes Mobile's built environment so special? After all, many other towns have monumental Greek Revival churches, elegant Italianate houses, polychromatic Queen Anne mansions, and cozy bungalows. Granted, these are all national styles, but when encountered on a Mobile street overarched by live oak trees, flanked by azalea bushes, and lined with cast-iron lampposts, they seem somehow sprung uniquely from this sandy soil, to be lovingly caressed by just these salty breezes. And then there are the Creole and Gulf Coast cottages, more vernacular expressions that trace their pedigree back to the Caribbean and then to Normandy. Often effortlessly blended with more formal architectural expressions such as Greek Revival, these lovely cottages are defined by their strong side-gabled profiles and full recessed (and sometimes wraparound) porches—or *galleries*, as the French colonists termed them. Mobile's porches are some of the South's most inviting, in fact, and play no small role in imparting a small-town charm to a city that is actually much larger than many unsuspecting observers might guess.

Though founded more than three hundred years ago, Mobile, alas, can no longer boast any of its earliest architecture or, for that matter, too many landmark structures from all the subsequent decades. These buildings—the original protective fort, a wooden Catholic church, timber and mud dwellings with tile or, more likely, palmetto-frond roofs, and a long list of jaw-dropping houses and churches and stores—are vanished, done in either by the hot, wet climate or such vagaries as storm, fire, war, and neglect.

It's hard to say for sure when Mobilians began to realize just how important the buildings crowding so familiarly all around them might be. No one appears to have batted an eye, for example, when the bricks of old Fort Conde were pulled down by energetic Americans during the 1820s and used for fill along the Mobile River's marshy banks. By their lights, the fort was an antiquated pile, no longer necessary for defense in the brash and growing young Republic, and besides it was in the way. Room needed to be made for streets, offices, houses, stores, taverns, and, critical

to antebellum wheeling and dealing, coffeehouses. Opinion had turned a bit by 1895, however, when the Old Guard House (erected in 1839) with its distinctive clock tower was torn down to build the (now lost too) German Relief Hall. A writer for the *Mobile Commercial Register* noted the demolition in somewhat wistful terms. “The antique-looking building,” he wrote, “formerly occupied by the police authorities and behind the massive walls of which so many have pined in durance vile, [is] no more.”

The 1930s, '40s, and '50s saw a flowering of local colorists, people such as Marian Acker MacPherson, William and Annie Shillito Howard, Genevieve Southerland, S. Blake McNeely, and Caldwell Delaney, whose etchings, paintings, photographs, poetry, and prose alluringly conjured the city's romantic past, especially as manifested in its architecture. Moss-hung trees foregrounding gently decaying brick townhouses; ornate, rusting cast-iron gates; columned mansions reduced to surplus stores or vacancy; and colorful contextual figures, usually African American, sporting fishing poles or laundry bundles were their stock in trade. These buildings, they were saying through their creative works, mostly overlooked amid the hurly-burly, were the past made tangible, and worthy of preservation. Short on scholarship as much of this material was, it nonetheless paved the way for successful historic-homes tours and heritage organizations such as the Historic Mobile Preservation Society, Friends of Magnolia Cemetery, and the Mobile Historic Development Commission, which have done much to raise awareness and fight for what remains of historic Mobile.

Too often, we preservationists and not a few longtime inhabitants decry what has already been lost in Mobile—the remarkable rows of three-, four-, and five-story riverfront saloons and warehouses, the Southern Hotel, St. John's Episcopal Church, the LeVert House, the United States Customs House, the Scattergood-Grey House, Bloodgood Row, and whole neighborhoods of shotgun houses and side-hall cottages leveled during Urban Renewal. But as this beautiful book makes clear, much else remains as a feast for the eye and the imagination. There is, for example, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception with its soaring, gilded towers and barrel-vaulted interior; Christ Episcopal Church with its highly formal Greek Revival façade and priceless Tiffany windows; the Hall-Ford House with its masterful mix of Creole and classical elements; Georgia Cottage with its famous literary associations and long oak alley; the Marshall-Eslava-Hixon-Dixon House with its intact antebellum garden; and the Kilduff House with its flat-sawn balustrade and palmettos in the yard. Indeed, whether you are Old Mobile or a tourist from Honolulu, Hoboken, Hampshire, Herat, or anywhere else, these pages will surely delight and instruct. Enjoy.

—John Sledge

Acknowledgments

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the staff at the Mobile Historic Development Commission, especially that of author John Sledge, whose expertise on Mobile was vital to the successful completion of this project. I also appreciate the early guidance of former Mobilians Kathryn Day Watkins and Lucy Duffy Tankersley and the editing of Nina Kooij. Our endless thanks go to the owners of the lovely houses we covered in this book, and those responsible parties at the churches and museums we visited, for graciously allowing us in their private and public spaces and taking the time to share them with us.



Herd Records, at the corner of Dauphin and Dearborn, celebrates Mobile music with this colorful mural on its exterior studio brick wall. The mural was painted by local artist Brian Young.



Messages of wit and wisdom cover the walls of the original Wintzell's Oyster House. Founded in 1938 by Oliver Wintzell at 605 Dauphin Street, it is a perennial Mobile favorite for locals and tourists alike.

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