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Book Review: Charleston and Savannah: The Rise, Fall, and Reinvention of Two Rival Cities

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Charleston and Savannah: The Rise, Fall, and Reinvention of Two Rival Cities by Thomas D. Wilson (University of Georgia Press, 2023: ISBN 9780820363196, \$39.95)

For those aware of it, history ever hangs heavy in the air of many a grand, old Southern city like the characteristically hot and humid climate that pervades the region in the depths of summer. The coastal cities of Charleston and Savannah are no different. Indeed, along with other historically significant cities such as Richmond, Atlanta, Nashville, New Orleans, Memphis, and many others, they are exemplary cases. When considering historic Southern coastal cities such as Charleston and Savannah, one's mind is tempted to connect the next dot in the logical curve and include New Orleans in the comparison.

Wilson, anticipating this assumption, deftly explains that while cities such as New Orleans may have a similar allure and geography, they were founded and developed later on in the nation's history. The author effectively defines the scope of his history by explaining that the experience of walking through Charleston and Savannah is markedly different than in other coastal colonial cities because of their historical character. That character is marked by the compact continuity of the two cities' historic districts and a seamless blend of colonial and modern aesthetics. Walking a mile in either of the titular cities will expose the spectator to a wealth of urban

complexity, which has resulted from Charleston and Savannah building within their original city plans and has led to the creation of complex, compact, and richly unique mixed land-use patterns.

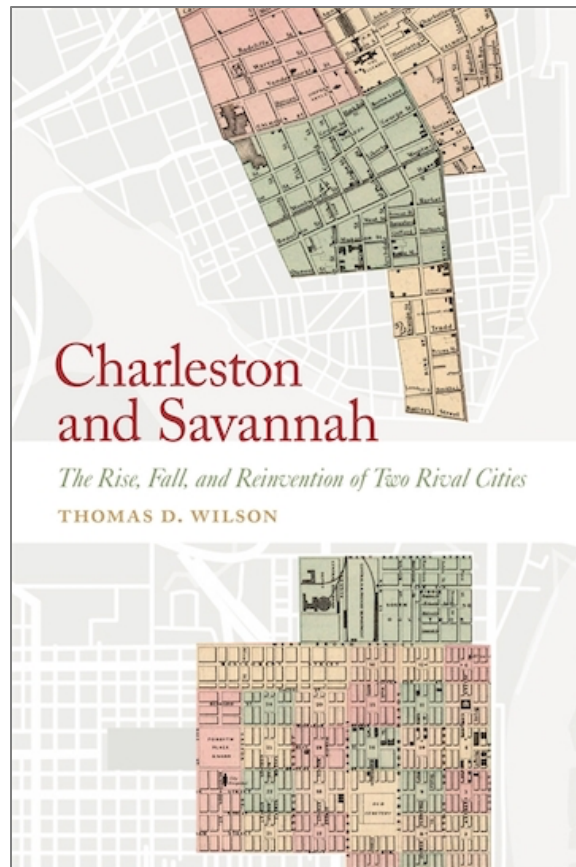


Image courtesy of University of Georgia Press

Wilson's thoughtful and comprehensive history benefits from a wealth of source material and spans the socioeconomic ebbs and flows of the two port cities. Starting from their inception as British colonial settlements, the narrative continues through their rise resulting from their involvement in transatlantic trade during the 18th century, the wealth and prosperity of the Antebellum and Industrial periods, the cities' declines at the end of the Civil War and the end of Jim Crow, right through to their reinvention in the contemporary economy as tourist destinations. Historical and cultural preservation efforts

continue to be at the core of both cities' success in the tourism industry. Indeed, the author expertly grapples with the intersection of preservation efforts and different aspects of each city's past that remain problematic. Those issues include the slave trade, slavery, civil rights violations, as well as ongoing race and class-based issues, particularly as they relate to the historical preservation movement and tourism.

Well-researched and richly detailed, this work essentially compares the development of these erstwhile competitors. Wilson utilizes quantitative and qualitative methods in his analyses and examines various aspects of the cities' evolution, such as landscape, demographics, city planning, economies, and weather. Well-written and thorough, this work

will certainly appeal to historians, geographers, city planners, architects, and tourists looking to deepen their knowledge of these two distinctive Southern cities.

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