

The Charleston Hotel

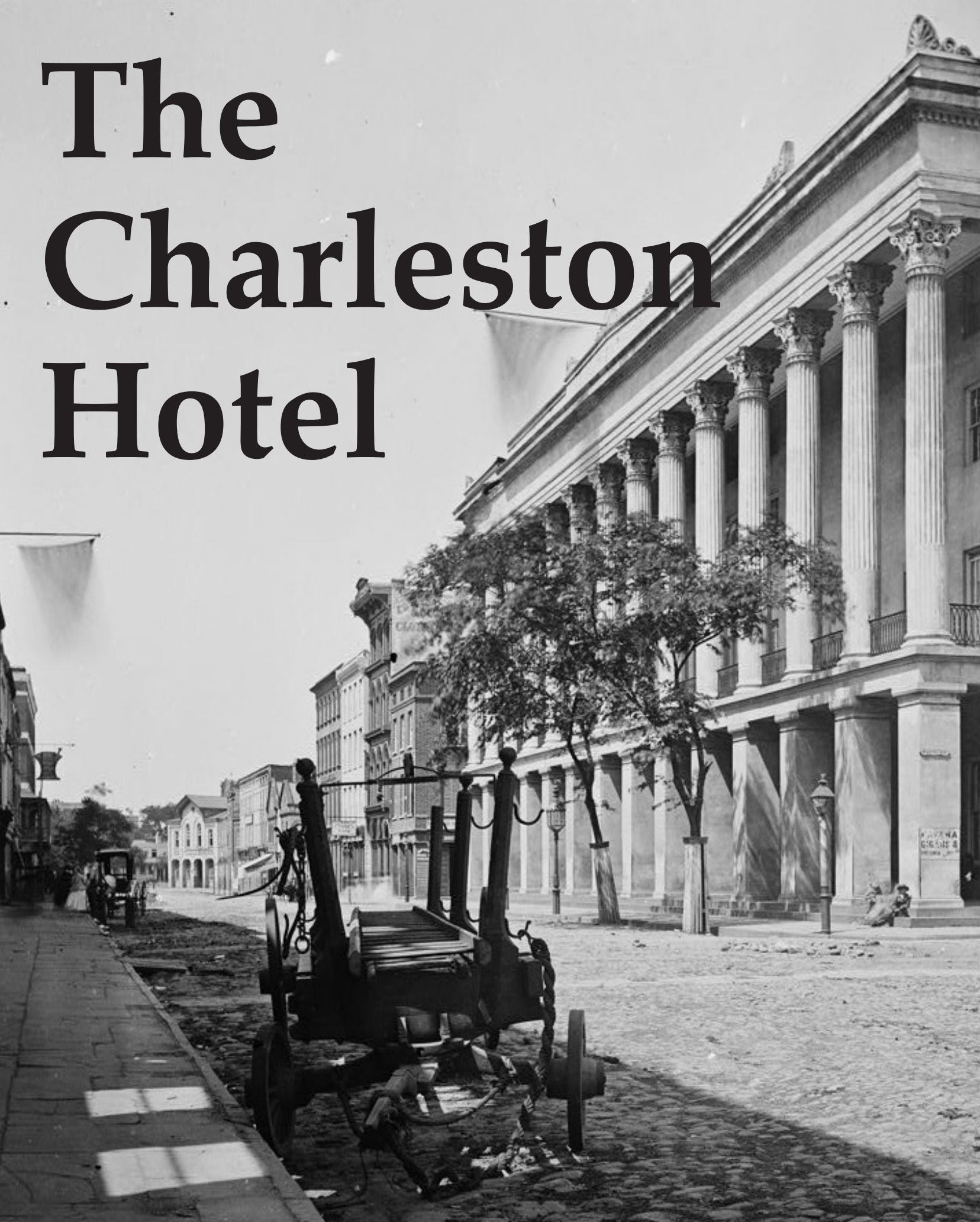




Figure 1



By Patricia A. Kaufmann

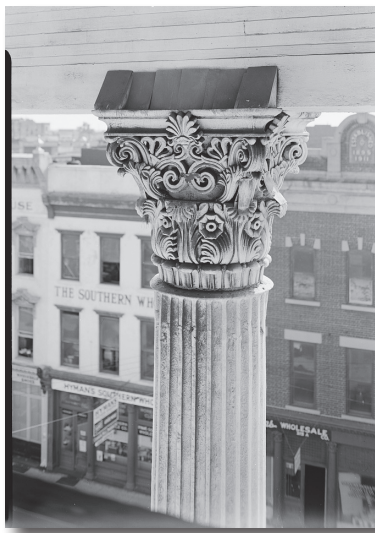


Figure 2.

Known for its luxurious elegance, the Charleston Hotel at 200 Meeting Street in Charleston, South Carolina, was an iconic symbol of the antebellum South and its often jaw-dropping splendor. We in philately have a unique ability to bring to its story tangible keepsakes and souvenirs. On countless occasions over the past 15 decades, we collectors have turned to the storied mails that have laid in the in normally-forgotten desk drawers, jewelry boxes, attic shelves, file cabinets and diary pages only

to be discovered in more modern times accidentally. In many cases, such well-preserved pieces of history can command 20th and 21st dollars.

This once-grand and quite glorious facility ceased to exist too many years ago for being able to tell the full details of its human and quite lively imprints. Its disappearance was more than recognized in the histories written about it in printed words, and, fortunately, in things you can reach out and touch. The latter are the sometimes surprisingly lucrative

treasures from the ancient past.

We start with an old photograph in Figure 1 —a photo of the hotel during the Civil War, archived in the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. The image shows the distinctive block-long 14-pillar Corinthian colonnade. Figure 2 is a close-up of one of the columns photographed by Louis I. Schwartz in 1958 not long before it met its tragic fate.

A wood engraving depicting General Samuel McGowan (1819-1897) addressing the Abbeville Volunteers in front of the Charles-

Figure 3

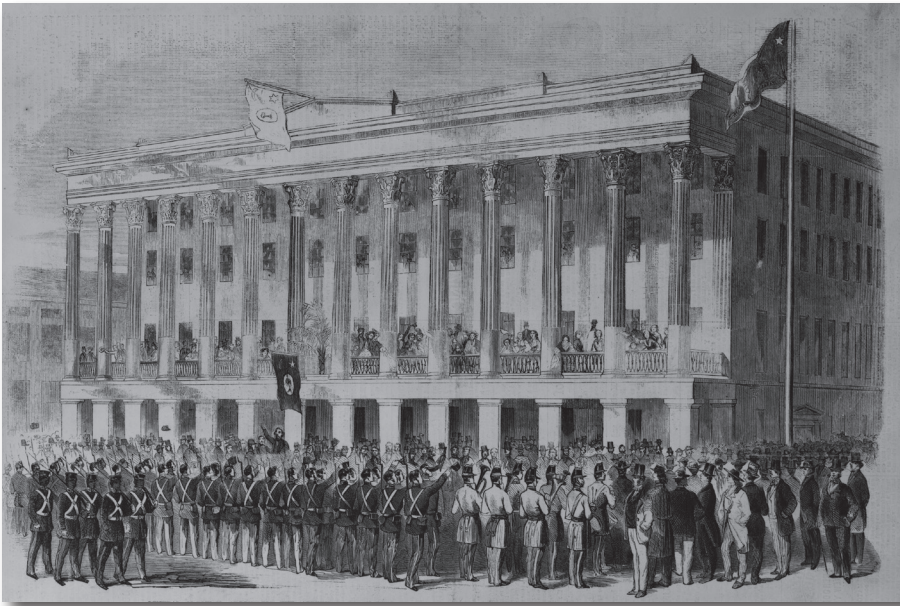


Figure 4



Figure 6

ton Hotel in shown in Figure 3. It was made a from a sketch by an artist contracted by *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, February 23, 1861 (p. 221).

The hotel was designed by German architect Karl Friedrich Reichardt (1803-1871), also seen with the first name spelled Carl or anglicized to Charles F. The hotel was built on a lot that had been left vacant following an 1835 fire. It was mostly completed, but for finishing details although not yet open for business when it, too, was destroyed in the great fire of April 27-28, 1838.

The 1838 fire raged from 9 p.m. until noon the next day, damaging more than 1,000 buildings – at least one-fourth of the center of the city. Following

the fire, the city council passed a series of ordinances limiting wood construction and instituted new regulations for managing the duties of the Board of Fire Masters, the City Engineer and Fire Department and numerous volunteer fire companies. There had been little rain preceding the fire and the water supply in fire wells and cisterns was scant, thus it was challenging to put out.

Rebuilt per Reichardt's design, the hotel finally opened in 1841. The dimensions were roughly 150 feet on the front by about 200 feet deep. It spanned the block of Meeting Street between Pearl and Pinckney Streets. The hotel comprised 170 bedrooms (singles and suites), bathrooms, two large and elaborate

Figure 5

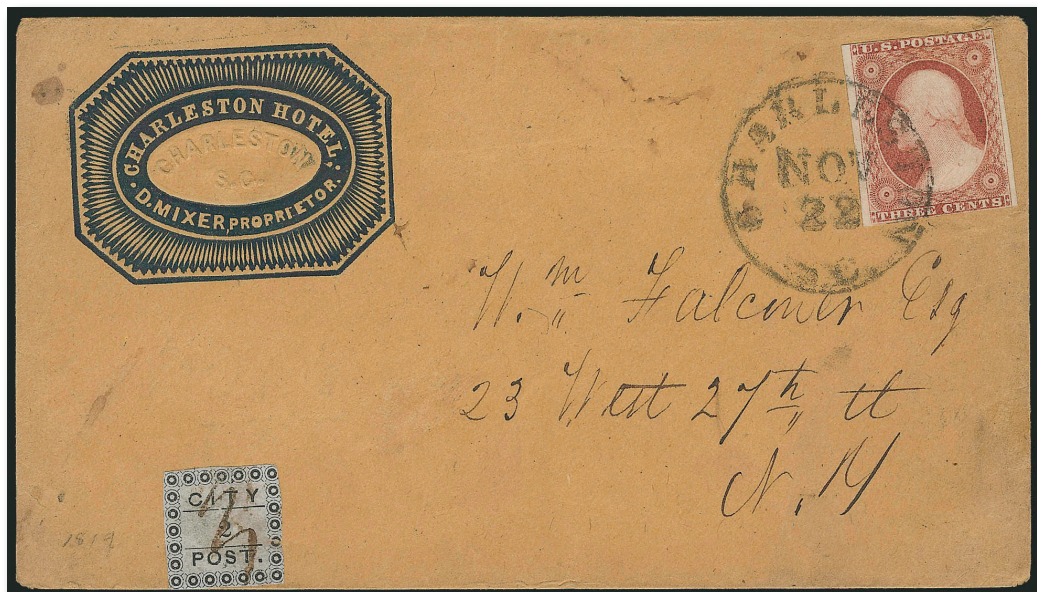


Figure 7. Figure 8.

dining rooms, parlors, reading and reception rooms, and a gentlemen's shaving saloon. It catered to a wealthy and famous clientele, including presidents and royalty, as well as being the site of many prestigious Charleston events.

The Civil War had a disastrous effect on Charleston, including this magnificent hotel. By the 1890s, it was taking in local boarders at budget prices, unable to keep up with the times. Figure 4 shows the mezzanine of the hotel in 1958.

After a long period of decline, during which much of the hotel stood vacant, it was demolished between 1959-1960, a process that took six months. Destruction of this grande dame of hotels prompted preser-

vationists to successfully push to expand the city's protected historic district.¹

So, what did they put up in place of this elegant hotel? They built a motor lodge, the Heart of Charleston, as shown in the postcards in Figures 5 and 6. I remember staying there more than a half-century ago, while attending a philatelic event. It was memorable not only from its famous past, but because you drove through the surrounding building into a central courtyard with parking spaces at each room.

As time marched on, the Heart of Charleston too was demolished. Today, the space is occupied by a large bank and commercial complex that gives a rath-

Figure 9.



Figure 10.

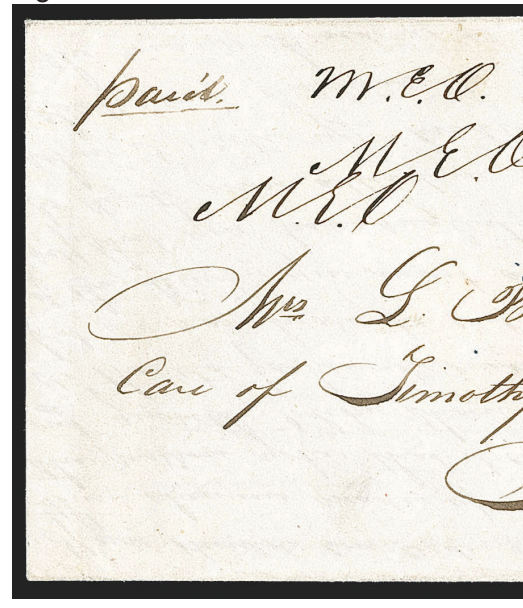


Figure 11.



Figure 12.



er plain-featured nod to the historic Charleston Hotel with its modern raised multistory portico, as shown in Figure 7. It was constructed in 1989-90, designed by the Florida architectural firm of Aubry Architects, SBF

The Charleston Hotel Postal History

Many U.S. and Confederate collectors are well familiar with the advertising covers of the Charleston Hotel.

The Charleston Hotel cameo corner card in Figure 8 is used with an Honour's City Post 2¢ black (Scott 4LB3) and 3¢ dull red (Scott 11) tied by a Charleston SC Nov 22 (ca. 1854) circular datestamp. It sports

a stellar provenance of Hessel, Golden and Kuphal. Figure 9 shows a matching corner card of the same general time period; it is franked with a 3¢ orange brown (Scott 10) canceled by a Feb 15 town postmark.

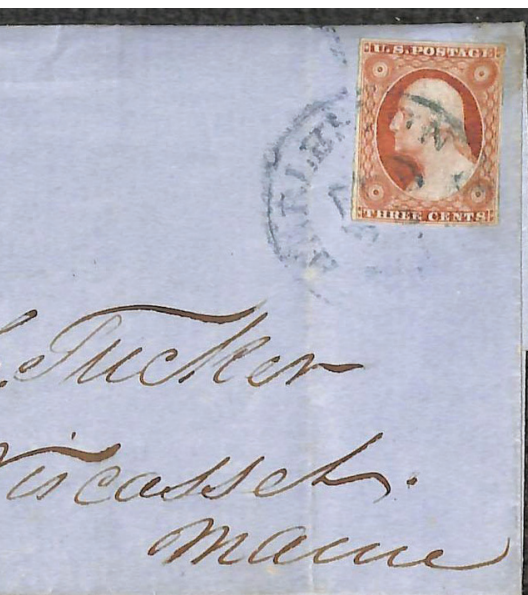
Not all advertising covers were as fancy as embossed cameo or illuminated designs. Early uses were often simply handstamped with "Charleston Hotel." Such an example is that in Figure 10, a double oval struck on the top back flap of a cover franked with a 10¢ black 1847 issue (Scott 2).

A clear strike of the same double-oval handstamp is shown in Figure 11 on an 1846 stampless cover used with a blue Wilmington N.C. circular datestamp

Figure 10 Reverse.



Figure 13.



and matching “10.”

Figure 12 is a simple but clearly struck hotel handstamp incorporating the proprietor’s name on an 1850s folded letter franked with a 3¢ dull red 1851 issue (Scott 11). It is postmarked by an indistinct Charleston circular datestamp.

The all-over orange illustrated advertising cover shown in Figure 13 is a Confederate stampless use postmarked Charleston S.C. Oct 8 1861 with a matching PAID 5 (CSA catalog type E3). There is a W. Eaves N.Y. manufacturer imprint on the back flap and lower right front.

Figure 14 shows another early Confederate advertising cover of the same color but franked with

a Charleston SC 5¢ blue postmaster’s provisional stamp (Scott 16X1), while Figure 15 is the same ad design in gray. This illuminated cover design is also seen in pink, green, and blue. It is franked with a 3¢ dull red (Scott 11) tied by a grid cancel and postmarked Charleston SC DEC 29, 1860, not long after South Carolina seceded from the Union, making this an early Independent State Use.

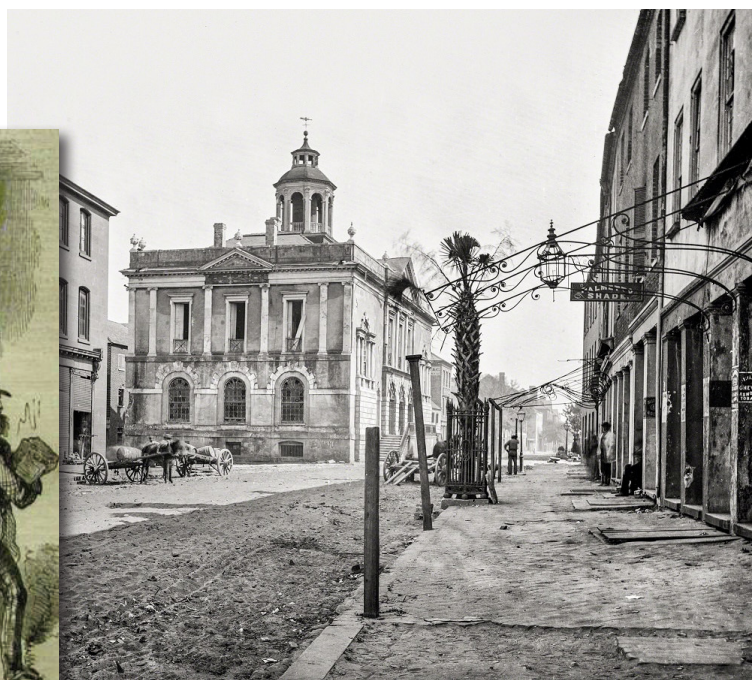
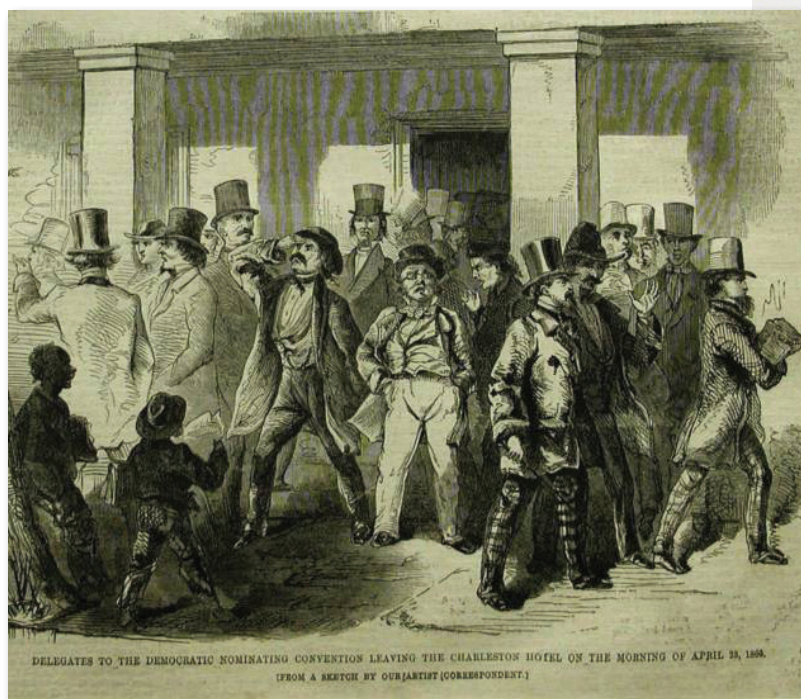
The cover in Figure 16 is used with the first Confederate general issue, a 5¢ green Jefferson Davis (Scott CSA 1). It is tied to the advertising cover by a Charleston S.C. Jan 3, 1862, circular datestamp.

Prior to the war, Northern printers dominated the market for intricately printed and cameo style enve-



Figure 14.

Artist's rendering of the Democrats leaving their 1868 Charleston, South Carolina nominating convention for state and federal elections.



#3 Post Office (old Exchange and Custom House), East Bay Street, Charleston, April 1865.

lopes. At the outbreak of the war, Northern printers were eliminated as their principal source. Supplies on hand at the beginning of hostilities were used until exhausted. Although advertising covers were used throughout the war, most uses were concentrated in the first two years. Southern printers initially filled new orders, but when the large Union Naval blockade cut off paper and other supply sources, that rapid-

ly changed.

Preservationists still chafe at the wanton destruction of the magnificent Charleston Hotel that fell to a wrecking ball instead of being preserved as part of our architectural history. At least we have postal history treasures by which to remember it.

Acknowledgments: My thanks to Schuyler J. Rumsey Auctions and Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries

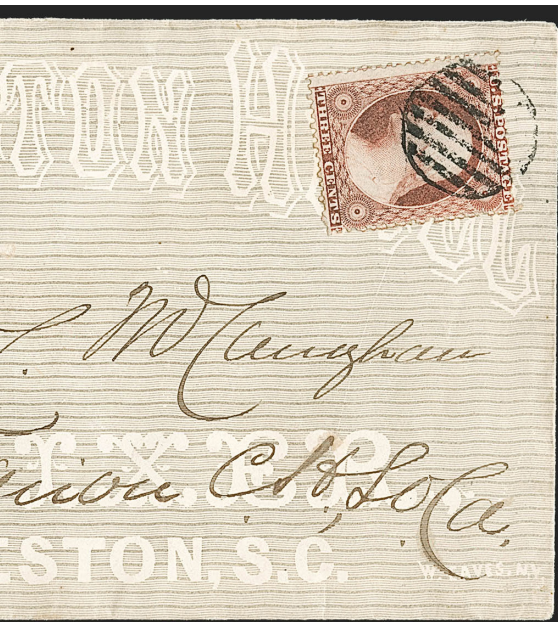
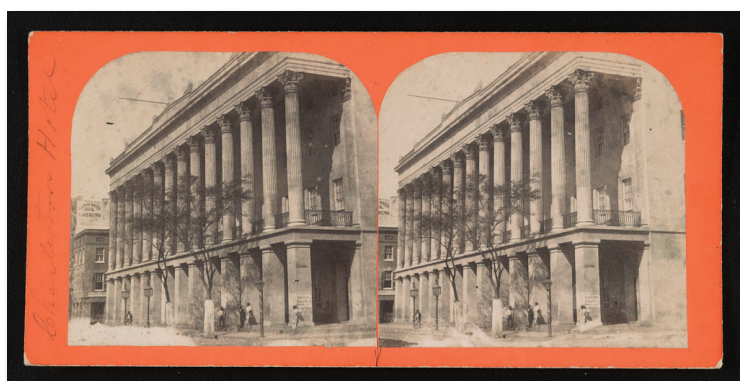


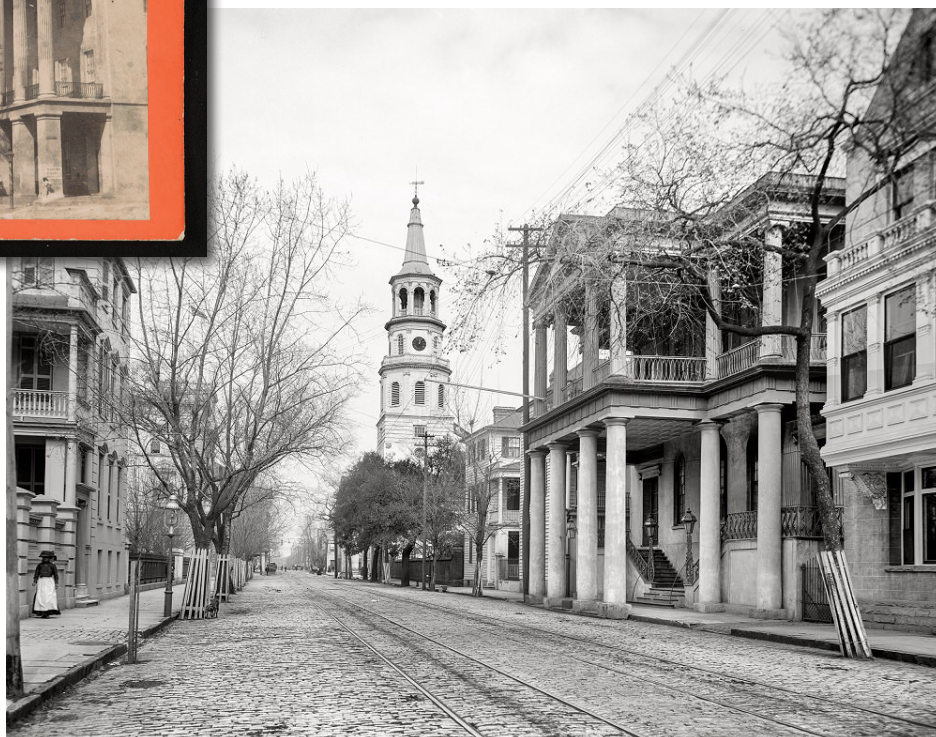
Figure 15.

Figure 16.



Above: Late
stereoscope view
photos of the
Charleston Hotel in
the second half of
19th century.

#9 Meeting
Street and St.
Michael's Church,
Charleston, late
19th century.



for use of select cover images from their databases.
Civil War period photos are from the Library of Congress.

Endnotes

1) *The Charleston Hotel, Charleston Raconteurs: History Told with Wit and Skill*, <http://www.charleston-raconteurs.com/charleston-hotel.html> (Accessed by the April 14, 2023)

2) Historic Charleston Foundation, <https://charleston.pastperfectonline.com/archive/DF74A528-B360-4811-91E6-175661215218> (Accessed April 14, 2023)

3) Patricia A. Kaufmann, Francis J. Crown Jr., and Jerry S. Palazolo, *Confederate States of America Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History*.