First Presbyterian Churchyard Ironworks: Historic Columbia
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GEOG 595- Spring 2021

About Historic Columbia

Historic Columbia was founded on November 14, 1961 with the goal of preserving historic properties and sites in Columbia and Richland County. Historic Columbia believes that understanding Columbia’s history is important for the city’s future. The organization works to raise awareness of Columbia’s past through public outreach and education and by inspiring the community to become involved in local history.

Research

My first course of action was to gain a better understanding of what iron foundries were operating in Columbia from 1870-1900. The best source of information for businesses are the City Directories. The South Caroliniana Library at UofSC has Columbia City Directories from 1859 to 1927, though there are missing years throughout this period. The directories I used were from 1859, 1860, 1868, 1875-1876, 1879-1880, 1888, 1891, 1895, 1897-1898, and 1899. The directories contained advertisements for iron companies and information about which businesses were operating and who worked for them. There were even a handful of people who were listed as working for specific ironworks and foundries for years. The city directories helped me to narrow down which foundry likely created the decorative wrought iron at First Presbyterian.

The two main businesses operating during this time were Congaree Iron Works and Palmetto Iron Works. There were other iron foundries but these two had the most workers and advertisements. Congaree Iron Works was owned by John Alexander and located across the street from First Presbyterian. Palmetto Iron Works was owned by George A. Shields and located at present day Finley Park. Given its nearby location, it was mostly likely Congaree Iron Works that supplied the fencing for the church.

Photography Collection

In addition to searching for information about the foundry where the iron work at First Presbyterian might have been produced, I also documented the iron work through photography. There were fourteen different subjects I photographed. The white backing behind the photos was to allow for a more uniformed collection and for finer details to be distinguished easier. The ruler was added for a quantitative element. I created a Word document with a short caption of whose graves the fencing surrounded and the date the pictures were taken.

Experience Gained

This internship was heavily focused on library research. While I have had multiple research opportunities in previous classes, none have involved this extent of primary-source research. I hit many dead ends, spending hours on documents that turned out to be useless. But in doing so, I learned how challenging it is to understand and to reconstruct the past. This internship gave me the opportunity to use resources at the South Caroliniana Library, an institution dedicated to the preservation of documents and the cultivation of research. Most of the documents I needed were available only in-person at the Granitville Room, so I was able to gain experiences in reaching out to the archivists working at the library and learned how helpful and knowledgeable they are.

Project Description

My project focused on documenting the use and history of ironwork around Columbia. My work was part of a larger project to track the evolution of wrought and cast iron as an architectural element in the historic city. Future research will be added to what I have compiled, and eventually the completed findings will be presented. I focused on gaining a general background of iron foundries in Columbia and on documenting ironwork in one location, the First Presbyterian Church graveyard. My specific plan was to find who made the iron fencing around the graves and memorials.

Many of the graves with decorative fencing belonged to family names that are present in Columbia today. These were the local elites who had the notoriety to have their names on buildings and streets. By the 19th century, many church graveyards were becoming overcrowded so only select few would have plots within church grounds. The First Presbyterian Church graveyard is home to members within influential standings such as legislators, university presidents, and ministers.