

'UPPING STONES'



This brownstone carriage step on Chapel Street could date to the 1830s, when the house it once served was built.

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Student focuses new attention on city's carriage era



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT BEHRE/STAFF

The curved marble carriage step in front of the Aiken-Rhett House museum at 48 Elizabeth St. is one of the grander surviving steps.

It's been almost a century since residents (not tourists) got around Charleston by horse and carriage, but one wouldn't know that by looking at the city's sidewalks.

At least 105 large stones, or carriage steps, still dot the public right of way downtown, evidence of a time when women and children hopped onto horses like they now pile into cars.

College of Charleston anthropology student Craig Garrison regularly walked his dog by one such stone and became so intrigued that he spent much of this summer counting them.

"I looked everywhere," he says. "I rode my bike and did one neighborhood a week."

Garrison's resulting 40-page report lists the city's surviving carriage steps, also known as "upping stones," in all their variety, including materials (brownstone, granite, marble, limestone, cast concrete, even quartz), dimensions, style and notable features.

His research also led to his belief that Charleston has a greater number and variety of these steps than any other city in America.

He also knows that the carriage step goes at least as far back as Roman times, but gradually began to fade away as carriages themselves did.

His survey includes none above the city's Crosstown Expressway, an area largely developed in the automobile and streetcar era.

Professor James Ward of the college's Historic Preservation and Community Planning Department says Garrison's work focuses attention on part of the cityscape that many ignore.

It's true the stones can pose tripping hazards and make it more difficult to open car doors, but Ward says they also have value.

"It goes to the issues of scale, which is something we're rapidly losing in Charleston," he says. "I guess we have no choice but to build bigger buildings, but along the way, maybe we should be looking at the small things and save what we can to maintain the scale, texture, ambiance of this city."

These steps do speak to the social history, sort of a pre-Americans With Disabilities Act of improving accessibility. "It was used as a metaphor for a boy



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These stones along a Meeting Street walkway weren't counted in a recent survey of carriage steps because they're no longer in the sidewalk area. The city has 105 in the public realm and perhaps many more in private yards.

New focus on carriage era

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becoming a man when he no longer had to use the 'upping stone,'" Garrison says.

The stones also were a sort of status symbol: There's no local stone in the Lowcountry, so it all had to be imported, though more recent stones were made of cast concrete and could have been produced here.

Garrison says his research showed carriage steps began appearing here as early as the 18th century and still were being placed in front of new buildings as recently as the 1890s.

The city's ordinances once mandated that these carriage steps could not intrude into the streets more than 15 inches, but none do today.

Even those in front of St. Michael's Church, stones arched to nestle over the curb, now sit on the sidewalk.

Charleston's current codes don't specifically address carriage steps, says Public Services Director Laura Cabiness.

She says if they existed before Dec. 11, 1962, the city considers them "a permissive encroachment" and allows them to stay.

It's unclear how endangered they are.



This cast concrete carriage step across Meeting Street from the Nathaniel Russell House museum is one of the most ornate ones on the city's streets.

Where are they located?

● South of Broad	49
● Harleston Village	27
● Ansonborough	8
● Mayzck	
Wraggborough	10
● Radcliffeborough-Cannonborough	11

—Source: A Catalog of Carriage Steps in the Historic District of Charleston

Many more have migrated into people's yards to serve as benches or tables. Garrison says he didn't count those.

The city allows them to stay but also allows them to disappear.

Putting out new or faux carriage steps would be kitsch, but holding onto those that exist adds to the city's mellowed-by-time ambience.

"What protection is there?" Ward asks, adding that Garrison's study sets an important benchmark for a debate on their preservation.

"It reflects on the background of these stones and how we're losing them and asks simple questions like, 'Do you want to think about this a little?'"

Given their weight, they're difficult to steal, or even move, though some have. One step on Bull Street was moved closer to a house after an automobile nicked it in the 1960s.

Another was stolen in front of St. John's Lutheran Church in January 2007 and never returned.

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