

Historical Background of King Street

The building discussed in this paper, 278 King Street, is located in the heart of Charleston's commercial corridor. Since the founding of Charleston in 1670, King Street has played a major role in the city's development and commercial landscape. It started out as a Native American trail along the peninsula, following a stretch of high ground strategically situated between marshlands. Once construction on the walled city began in the 1690s, this path became the main highway in and out of the fortifications for traders, planters, and merchants (see figure 1). It was one of the city's earliest streets and was included in the Grand Model of Charles Town. The path from the Battery at White Point to present-day Beaufain Street, the original town line, was called King Street in honor of Great Britain's monarch.

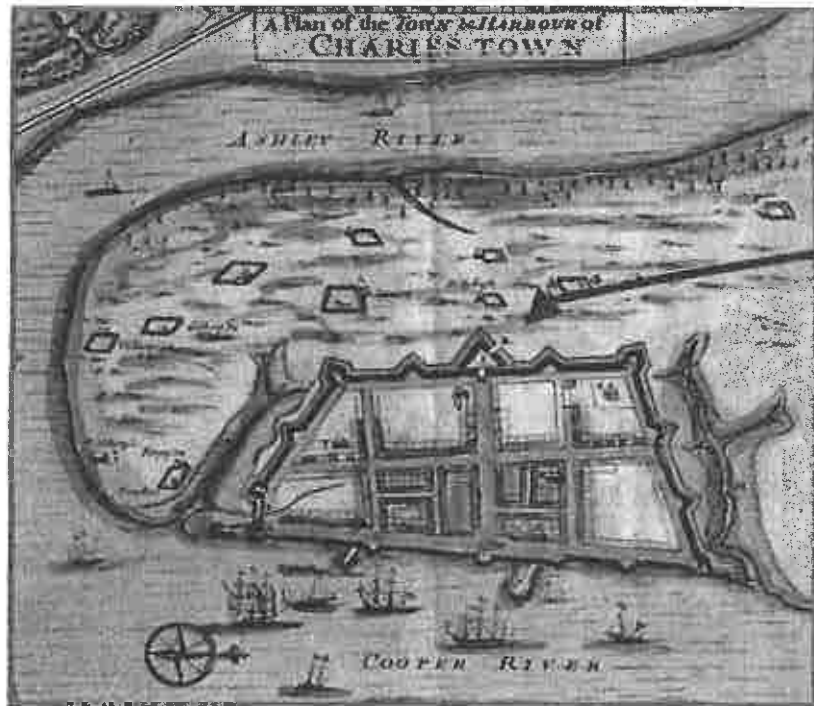


Figure 1: Crisp Map of Charles Town, 1711; Arrow shows trajectory of King

Outside the town limits, the path had many names such as, "The Broad Path," "The High Way," and "The Broad Road." In the Grand Model, the street was intended to culminate

at a public square located at the intersection of Broad and Meeting Streets but this never evolved. Instead, King Street became the city's major north-south axis.¹

During Charleston's colonial years, King Street remained semi-rural with widespread houses and lots.² The city's waterfront served as the main commercial and business area so buildings along King Street were mainly residential and "given over primarily to hucksters, peddlers and tavern keepers."³ North of the city's boundary line, King Street ran between plantations owned by Colonel Rhett and Captain George Anson. In 1741, the Commons House of Assembly authorized the building of new wagon roads to the interior settlements of Orangeburg and Kingstree.⁴ This new trajectory caused businesses to seek locations on King Street.

After the American Revolution, development along King Street proceeded at a rapid pace. In 1782, King Street could only boast of 8 listings and three years later in 1785 it had 7 listings. By 1790 the city directory names 170 shopkeepers, merchants, and tradesmen along the street. The range of trades includes saddlers, bricklayers, brokers, hairdressers, butchers, painters, cobblers, tailors, a billiard table owner, and even a violinmaker. In 1802, King Street featured 334 registered commercial stores and had extended beyond the official city line of Boundary Street, now called Calhoun Street.⁵

¹ Robert P. Stockton, "A Historical Profile," in *King Street Façade Program: Final Record of Study*, (Charleston: City of Charleston Planning and Urban Development Department), pg. 2.

² Leila Sellers, *Charleston Business on the Eve of the American Revolution*, (Chapel Hill, 1934), pg. 81.

³ Charles Frasier, *Reminiscences of Charleston*, (Charleston, 1854), pg. 13.

⁴ Stockton, pg. 2.

⁵ James W. Hagy, "1790 City Directory," in *People and Professions of Charleston, South Carolina 1782-1802*, (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1992), pg. 1, 5, 8-9, 34, 48, 72, 89.

By 1820, King Street had shed its seedy reputation and was the location for some of Charleston's most respected firms.⁶

It seemed that as Charleston grew in popularity and prestige, King Street would continue to match that growth. For the first half of the nineteenth century, King Street housed Charleston's principal concentration of merchants who utilized stores on the first floor and living quarters on the second.⁷ With the advent of the railroad in 1835, King

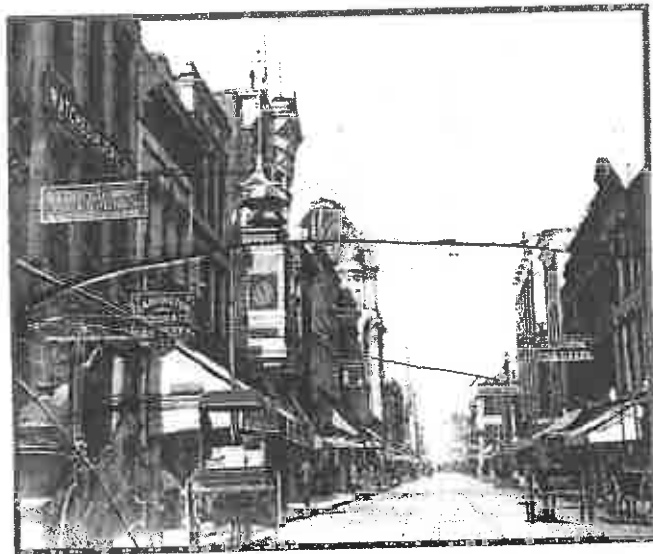


Figure 2: King Street looking north from Hasell, circa 1895.

Street witnessed an influx of fashionable boutiques and hotels as well as new trade shops and warehouses. This trend continued throughout the 1840s and 1850s.⁸

While the Civil War stifled commerce throughout the city, the 1870s and 1880s brought recovery by

changes in city government, increased real estate values, and industry expansion.⁹ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, King Street became a popular entertainment

⁶ Stockton, pg. 8.

⁷ Robert A. Warnock, Consultant, *A Historical Survey of the Development of Lower King Street from Broad Street to Wentworth Streets, Charleston, South Carolina*, (Charleston: The King Street Merchants Association, November 1988), pg. 7.

⁸ Jane H. Pease and William H Pease, "The Blood Thirsty Tiger: Charleston and The Psychology of Fire," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* (October 1918). From vertical file located at the South Carolina Room, Charleston County Public Library, Charleston, S.C., pg. 282.

⁹ Jeanne A. Calhoun and Martha Zierden, *Charleston's Commercial Landscape 1803-1860*, (Charleston: The Charleston Museum Archeological Contributions 7, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, September 1984), pg. 33.

center upgrading their long-established taverns and billiard parlors and building newer and bigger stores¹⁰ (see figure 2).

King Street did experience declines from time to time mostly due to competition and catastrophe. In the 1820s many wagon trains chose to unload their cargo at Columbia and ship it to Charleston wharves rather than use the road leading into the city. Planters also cut out King Street middlemen by shipping their cotton directly to the waterfront.¹¹ In the fire of 1826, thirty houses were destroyed and damages totaled \$100,000. The fire of 1838 was much worse, impacting 145 acres, 1,000 buildings, causing damages of \$4 million, and killing at least two prominent citizens, as well as several unnamed African Americans.¹² Approximately nineteen King Street merchants suffered losses.¹³ The earthquake in 1886 harmed almost half the buildings in the city and caused five to six million dollars in damages. Streets like King Street fared better than most because the row configuration allowed buildings to support each other.¹⁴

Through it all, King Street has endured and ultimately flourished. After nearly 300 years, it is still Charleston's main mercantile thoroughfare, offering something for everyone. The buildings along the street have witnessed a rich and varied history, both local and national. This paper explores the story and people of 278 King Street.

¹⁰ Stockton, pg. 13, 19

¹¹ Stockton, pg. 9

¹² Pease, pg. 291-292.

¹³ Stockton, pg. 9,12

¹⁴ Carl McKinley, "The Story of the Earthquake," *City Yearbook 1886 City of Charleston South Carolina*, (Charleston: Walker, Evans, and Cogswell Company, 1886), pg. 25, 358-359.

↑ This section was excellent overall context w/o on King Street