

A Tale of Two Mobiles

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The Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library recently hosted a photograph exhibit in conjunction with the fiftieth anniversary of the Federal Depository of the University of South Alabama's Marx Library. Government Documents created a display featuring various types of government documents. To complement their exhibit, Kristina Polizzi and Deborah Blakey co-designed an exhibit around the use of government sponsored photographs of historic buildings in Mobile, Alabama, created by the Historic American Buildings Survey and Mobile Historic Development Commission. The exhibit focused on buildings constructed in the nineteenth century. It was housed on the third floor of the Marx Library in the McCall Library exhibit cases along the main corridor leading to the archives.

People rarely consider photographs to be government documents or even historically important. However, as the Historic American Buildings (HABS) and the Mobile Historic Development Commission (MHDC) collections show, they are invaluable. They allow for more historical information to be shared than the written word would be able to accommodate. Simple things like where the eaves or chimney were located is important to those renovating these buildings but this information might not be recorded in a written document. Also, images of buildings such as slave quarters that have been lost to time are irreplaceable because of the historical significance of the buildings. People were even occasionally captured in the photographs, which adds to the uniqueness of these collections.¹

This exhibit looked at a visual representation of how historic properties in Mobile changed over the span of fifty years by looking at two government-funded photographic surveys of historic properties in downtown. The display compares images from the 1930s HABS with images from the MHDC in the



Promotional materials.

1980s. Both time periods show Mobile during an economic downturn, and the properties reflect the economic standing of their owners. By looking at the differences in the images you can see how time caused the building to be lost or changed. The main criteria for this exhibit was that the location was photographed in both collections and that it had a link to this history of Mobile, either architecturally or through the owners.

We narrowed our pool down to eleven properties. These addresses were chosen because of where they were located, when they were built, how well known they or their owners were, and their uniqueness within the city. We chose the Old General Hospital built in 1830, Bishop Michael Portier House built in 1834, the Golet-Randlette-Beck House built in 1874, Judge John Bragg House aka Bragg-Mitchell Mansion built 1855, the Old Southern Market built in 1858, Fire Phoenix Station No. 6 built in 1859, the Protestant Orphan's Asylum built in 1834, the Quigley Twin House built in 1856, the Texas-Waring House built in the 1840s, the Dargan-Waring House built in 1846, and the Joshua Kennedy House built in 1857.



Photograph examples. Photos courtesy of Kristina Polizzi.

The earliest buildings used in this exhibit were built in the aftermath of the 1827 fire that took out nine blocks of downtown Mobile. The Old General Hospital and the Bishop Michael Portier House were among the first buildings to be constructed. While we did not include the Cathedral of Immaculate Conception, Oakleigh, or Spring Hill College because of the lack of photographs in the collections, they too were created after the fire and still stand as a testament to the desire of the architects not to have a repeat of the great fire of 1827.² These buildings were a witness to the growth of Mobile in the following decades. The explosion of the cotton trade that began during the 1830s allowed for Mobile to grow and prosper. The thriving docks made both individuals and the city rich, which enabled these buildings to be constructed in such a manner that they would survive fires and hurricanes for decades to come.

The Old General Hospital was an important part of Mobile's history. It oversaw the care of the yellow fever victims and Civil War soldiers, among others, during its 133 years as a working hospital. The Bishop Michael Portier House was the main home of the Bishops of Mobile until the 1960s. Father Ryan, the "poet-priest of the south," lived there for a short time. Bishop Portier was responsible for building some of Mobile's

most notable locations, including the Cathedral of Immaculate Conception, Spring Hill College, Providence Hospital, and the Catholic Cemetery. The Golet-Randlette-Beck house was home to a Sea Captain and to several teachers. The Judge John Bragg House aka Bragg-Mitchell Mansion was built by Judge John Bragg and saw its iconic oak trees removed during the Civil War. It was later owned by the prominent Mitchell family. The Old Southern Market has had multiple uses over its lifetime. It was a local market, slave market, city hall, and most recently it has been turned into the History Museum of Mobile. Much of the commodities that traveled through the Port of Mobile passed through its doors. It has the distinction of being the oldest continually occupied city hall in the United States as well.

The Fire Phoenix Station No. 6 was originally a volunteer fire station until the city bought it out. The building then was leased to private businesses until it was turned into the Phoenix Fire Museum. At that point the city moved it to its present location on South Claiborne. The Protestant Orphan's Asylum was built to house the orphans from the Yellow Fever epidemics that regularly infected the city. It later became the Mobile Business College. The Quigley Twin House was owned at one point by

A. M. Quigley and then his widow. Quigley was a brick mason who worked on Davis Avenue. It continued to be a privately owned residence afterwards. The Dargan-Waring House was built by Judge Edmund Dargan and later sold to Moses Waring, a salt broker. The Texas-Waring House was bought by Waring to house his children after they were grown. It was called Texas because it was separated from the rest of the property—it had been the private residence of Mr. Nugent before Waring acquired it. The Joshua Kennedy House was built by Joshua Kennedy, a local wholesale grocer. His family is credited with building much of downtown Mobile.

The 1930s photographs used in this exhibit were obtained from the Library of Congress's HABS collection website. In 1933 HABS was created by Charles E. Peterson of the National Parks Service to help out-of-work architects during the Great Depression. The goal was to document historic buildings and sites dating to before the Civil War across the United States. Peterson envisioned a long-lasting survey that would record churches, public building, residences, and other structures that may be lost to time and development.³

The McCall Library houses a collection of HABS images that were donated by Stephens Croom when they were to be discarded by the Alabama office of the Historic American Buildings Survey. This collection of 111 nitrate negatives matches many of the Mobile images found on the Library of Congress's website. The ability to use The Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library government documents, in the form of images, to show the growth and changes that have made Mobile the city it is today was the catalyst that inspired this exhibit. By combing through the image in the LOC HABS collection and the McCall Libraries Holdings, we were able to pick the building we felt best encompassed this change though time.

The photographs from the 1980s were taken from the Mobile Historic Development Commission Collection at the McCall Library. The MHDC was created in the 1960s by the City of Mobile to combat the loss of historic buildings to urban renewal. The MHDC was commissioned to evaluate the buildings for their inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. They oversee individual buildings as well as neighborhoods and districts.⁴

The McCall Library has five collections from the MHDC. These collections have photographs of historical buildings dating from 1975 to 2008. Mobile went through a revitalization period after we lost multiple historical buildings to urban renewal, which in turn spurred the creation of the MHDC. These photographs are a snapshot into the history of Mobile. Many of these buildings were photographed because they were in danger of being torn down during urban renewal. Thanks to

MHDC's hard work, these building will be preserved for future generations to enjoy as a part of Mobile's colorful history. These were received from the MHDC over several years so that the images could be preserved and utilized by the general public. These collections house nearly 57,000 images of houses, businesses, and streets scenes in Mobile and the surrounding areas. The amount of information stored in these collections cannot be emphasized enough.

By combining the images from these two amazing collections we were able to design an exhibit that shows the good and bad sides of change. One look at most of these images tells a story of how parts of our history are either preserved or destroyed to fit the immediate needs of the community. This exhibit gives an intimate view into Mobile's history. Although Mobile is still considered a sleepy port town, it has had a vibrant past that these photographs are a testament to. By preserving the photographic record of Mobile, future generations will have a glimpse into a world that modern Mobilians will never know, thus preserving the memory of those who came before us and paved a path that allowed Mobile to transform into a modern city while retaining it's past.

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References

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