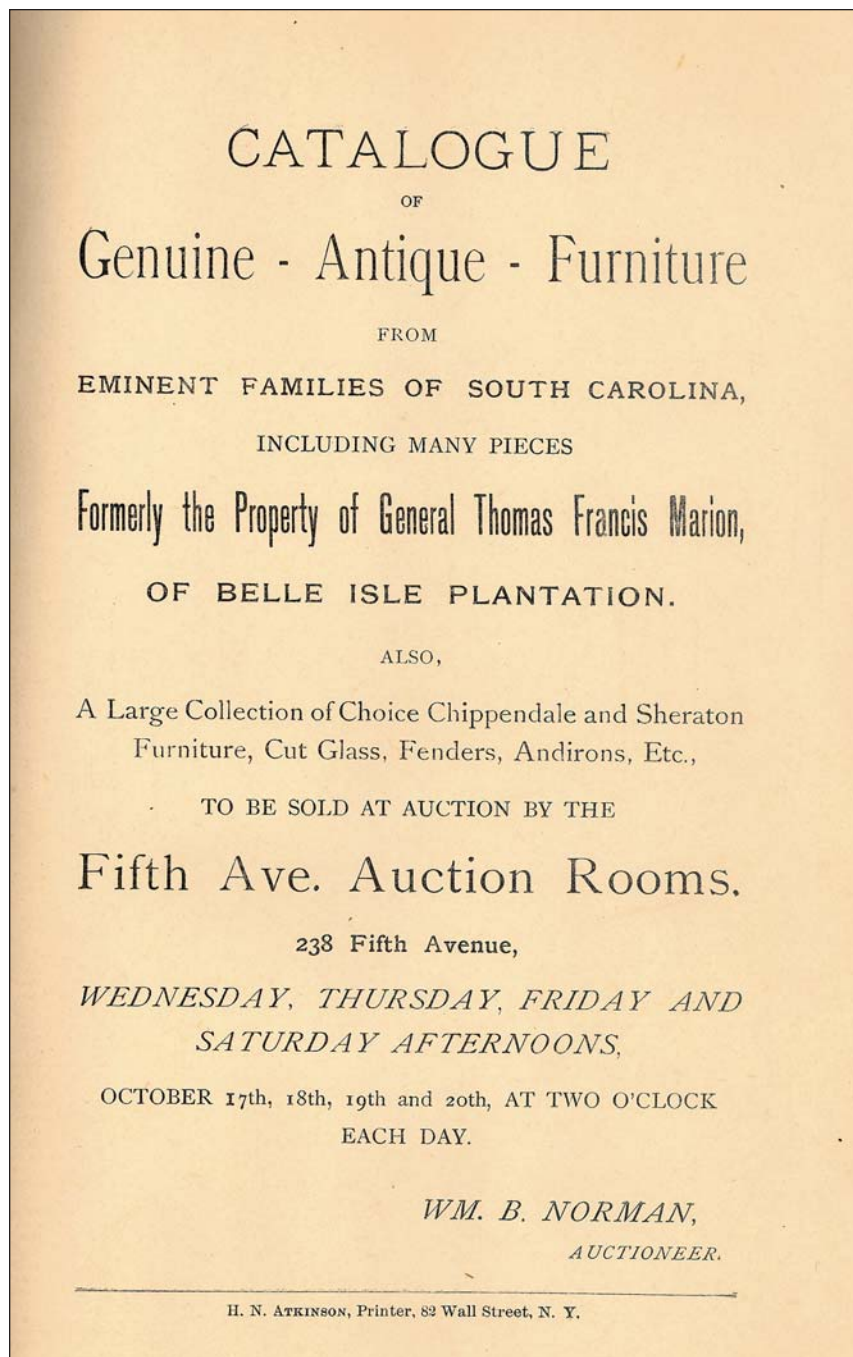


Soulfully Sold

Catalogue of genuine Antique Furniture from eminent families of South Carolina
Published in 1894 by the Fifth Avenue Auction Rooms, New York City

Courtesy, Charleston Museum, S.C.



With its silversmiths, jewelers, blacksmiths, cabinetmakers, and numerous other skilled craftsmen, Charleston, South Carolina, was the cosmopolitan nucleus for southern decorative arts during the Colonial, Federal, and Antebellum periods. However, as locals know, “The Holy City”—as it is oftentimes called because of its many churches—has not consistently enjoyed a position of affluence. Traditionally, the two wars fought on its turf and other misfortunes have been held responsible for the loss of much of Charleston’s fine and decorative arts.

Following the British occupation of Charleston between 1780 and 1782, enemy soldiers evacuating the city made away with between three hundred and six hundred rice barrels filled with estate and ecclesiastical silver, and wantonly destroyed houses and furniture. The Union bombardment from 1863 to 1865 wrecked numerous valuable possessions and more residences. On losing her home to cannon shells, one lamenting woman described her smashed windows and shattered furniture as “diamonds and splinters” covering the street. At the war’s end, according to one report, almost every church had lost its communion plate, “often a massive and venerable set [,] the donation of an English or colonial ancestor.”

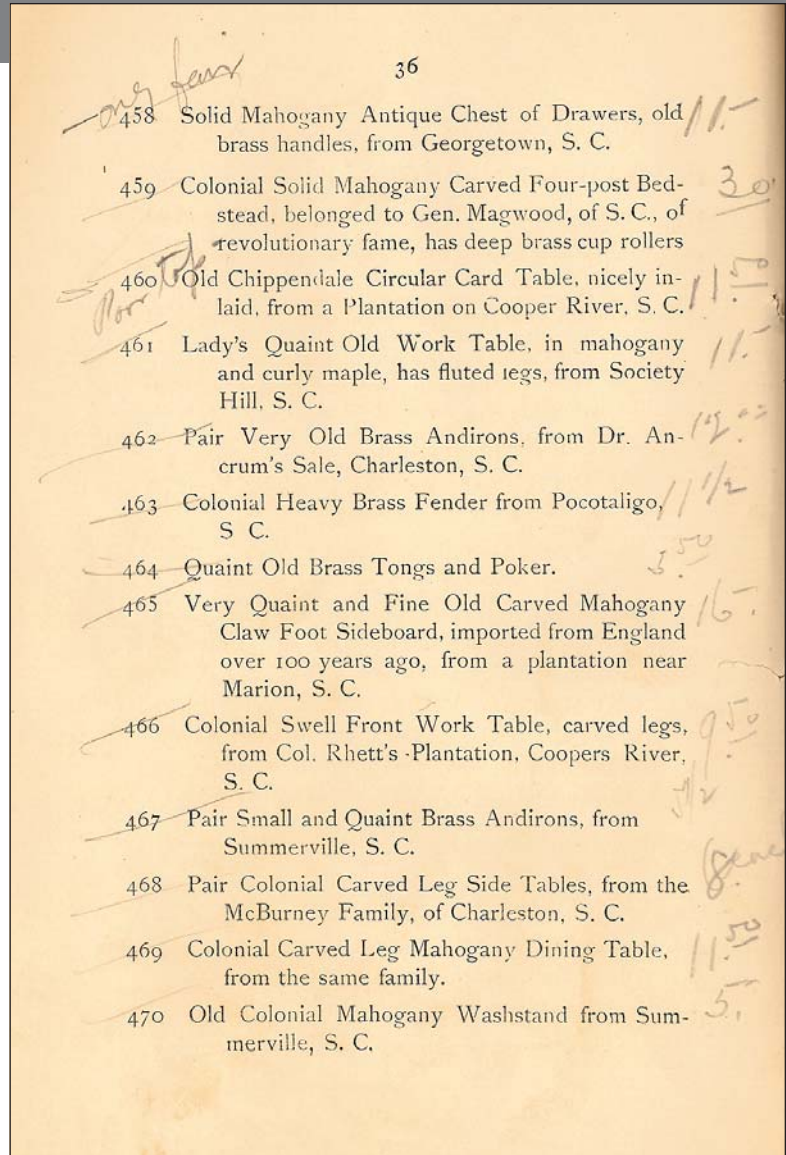
In addition, major fires (most erupting in kitchens) engulfed large sections of the city in 1740, 1778, 1796, 1838, and 1861. Adding to the city’s miseries were countless epidemics and hurricanes throughout its history, and a calamitous earthquake in 1886.

Admittedly, it’s easy to fully blame the Redcoats, Federal troops, improperly supervised cookfires, and weather for the disappearance of the countless thou-

PREVIOUS PAGE:

Title page, *Catalogue of genuine Antique Furniture from eminent families of South Carolina*, Fifth Avenue Auction Rooms in New York City, 1894. Courtesy, The Charleston Museum.

Page 36, *Catalogue of genuine Antique Furniture from eminent families of South Carolina*, Fifth Avenue Auction Rooms in New York City, 1894. Courtesy, The Charleston Museum.



sands of locally made decorative arts that would have otherwise remained in the city. It's easy but actually inaccurate. A recent acquisition by the Charleston Museum—an auction catalogue dating from 1894—reveals a cash-strapped community more than willing to sell off its remnants of wealth.

The forty-two page *Catalogue of genuine Antique Furniture from eminent families of South Carolina*,” printed in the autumn of 1894 by the Fifth Avenue Auction Rooms in New York City, lists 542 lots of furniture, silver, ceramics, and a host of other items from properties throughout Charleston, including estate pieces from such well-recognized Charleston families as the Marions, Aikens, Middletons, and Rhetts. Lot 249, for example, offers a “Very Quaint and Old Breakfast Table...from the (Charles) Pinckney Family.”

This catalogue underscores the fact that the South's problems did not end with the Confederacy. Even though the state was readmitted to the Union in 1868, Federal troops remained in

South Carolina until the late 1870s. And while paid workers kept cotton fields going with some success, without enslaved labor, vast rice plantations failed. Many a Charleston planter and merchant continued to suffer financially well into the twentieth century, causing family heirlooms to be put up for sale. In a depressed economy, cash was king.

Fortunately, since the mid-twentieth century there have been concerted efforts to preserve Charleston's historic merit, and recent decades have brought forth newfound study and education in southern decorative arts. Thanks to attentive dealers, curators, and collectors, many items have returned to Charleston, and this recently discovered auction catalogue, most likely one of many listing locally-made furnishings, reveals that more pieces are awaiting reclamation. [AFA](#)

J. Grabame Long is the curator of history at The Charleston Museum, Charleston, South Carolina.