

# Introduction

## SOUTH CAROLINA'S PLANTATIONS & HISTORIC HOMES

Houses are the most honest historians. Built by real people to meet the needs of their time, they tell the stories of lives lived and lost, of children born and raised. They bear the very real marks of economic success and failure, and they reflect the hopes and dreams of their builders. Plain or gilded, they are shelters in which families live and grow; and in their bricks, boards, and mortar live the ghosts of joy and laughter, sorrow and tears.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the plantations of South Carolina created wealth on a level the world has rarely seen. South Carolina planters built family empires whose riches rivaled or exceeded those of the aristocratic planters of Virginia and the great shipping and mercantile families of New England. These families celebrated their wealth in the lives they lived. They traveled to Europe to collect great works of art and educated their children in England's finest schools. At home, they created a unique world of social elegance and courtly behavior that borrowed its formality from European high society and blended it with the warm manners and hospitality of Colonial America. Today, nowhere is the world of the antebellum planter more alive than within the walls of the houses they built.

The very words "southern plantation" elicit visions of grace and grandeur, of elegant homes with graceful white columns, and of carriage rides along lanes shaded by rows of fragrant magnolias or moss-draped live oaks. Yet not all plantation homes were grand and opulent. Some were simple farmhouses, built with hand tools and hard labor to shelter the planter's family. Others are stately symbols of affluence that reflect the reserved tastes of England and continental Europe. Yet others, particularly those built in the closing decades of the antebellum era, are romantic and fanciful displays of the wealth created during booming years of "King Cotton." Rich or poor, simple or opulent, all plantations shared the risks and hardships of the day. Every year, success and disaster were determined by the weather and the quality of harvests; all faced the trials of wars, natural disasters, and periods of economic upheaval.

These houses tell much about the history of South Carolina and the United States through the stories of the people who built and lived in them. They bring the past alive, allowing us to walk floors that were trod by Robert E. Lee, to sit on a porch where George Washington took tea, or to stand in the room where Jefferson Davis finally accepted that his beloved way of life had ended. Step into the ballroom at Hampton Plantation, and it is suddenly easier to hear the music of violins and the clink of wine glasses and to envision elegantly dressed men and women dancing beneath the lights of the glittering chandeliers.



MAGNOLIA PLANTATION