

Book Reviews

Colin Brooker. *The Shell Builders: Tabby Architecture of Beaufort, South Carolina, and the Sea Islands*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, www.sc.edu/uscpress, 2020. 320 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. US \$39.99, paper; ISBN 978-1-64336-072-0.

Coastal concrete, or tabby, as they call it in the Carolina and Georgia Lowcountry. No history-minded traveler there can miss it—that delightfully practical concoction of lime, sand, and oyster shell that was used to erect brooding river forts, plantation big houses, slave dwellings, barns, sugar mills, cisterns, rice gates, seawalls, and box tombs. Tabby was fashioned from the ocean's bounty and spread largely by means of naval power. Surviving examples, backgrounded by spreading marsh, placid estuaries, and moss-hung live oaks eloquently conjure up a culture tuned to its distinctive environment.

A good book about tabby has long been overdue, and now Colin Brooker, a British architect and engineer with decades of experience as an historic

preservation consultant, has provided it. Brooker explores tabby from every conceivable angle, including its chemistry, antecedents, variants, history, and literature, and writes with winning ease. His research is impeccable, and his knowledge of the material profound. He has seemingly investigated every surviving remnant of the stuff, from an old foundation repurposed under a Daufuskie Island lighthouse to a crumbling chimney base situated by a Hilton Head baseball diamond. But even more interesting than Brooker's architectural knowledge, is his cast of characters—"landowners ... sea captains, pirates, merchants and speculators, politicians, governors, an occasional clergyman, one or two signers of the Declaration of Independence, several heiresses ... and women widowed with fortunes large enough to fuel ambitions of suitors and new husbands alike." (9) Who knew that such a modest compound could thread through the lives of so many intriguing protagonists?

Brooker begins with an overview of tabby's old-world antecedents. These include examples along the North Af-

rican littoral where mixtures of lime, earth, gravel, and rock were employed in buildings, walls, gates, aqueducts, and fortifications. From there, craftsmen took the technique into southern Spain, whence it eventually spread into the Caribbean and southeastern margins of North America. There are accounts of tabby as early as 1493 in Santo Domingo, where Christopher Columbus's house was made of it. A century later it appeared at Spanish Santa Elena (now Parris Island, S.C.), and St. Augustine, Florida. By the eighteenth century it was ubiquitous in the Sea Islands, where deep shell deposits provided handy quarries. In 1766, the naturalist William Bartram wrote that "ye people comes and rakes up what they please brings them in a boat heaves them on shore to dry after which they burn them to lime." (50) If the shells were not washed before burning they produced a hideous smell that offended neighbours and proved inferior for construction. The generally accepted formula for good tabby was three parts clean shell, three parts lime, and three parts sand, but wise builders adjusted the sand to match the quality of their lime.

Once they had a good supply of tabby, workmen poured it into pegged wooden box forms, typically many feet long and one- to two-feet high. After each pour dried, the form was broken apart and reset atop for the next pour. Skilled artisans could raise a wall quickly, and they also excelled at making tabby floors, roofs, and just about any other construction element required or the human mind could conceive.

Beaufort, S.C., established by royal charter in 1711, preserves a delightful collection of tabby buildings, and Brooker details them carefully. Beaufort was occupied by Union forces early in the Civil War but, happily, was not burned, and is today one of the pretti-

est towns in the United States. Outlying plantations did not always fare so well. After their owners abandoned them, looting and decay were often their fate. The use of tabby declined during the late nineteenth century when efficient railroad connections facilitated rapid delivery of building materials from commercial hubs. It is, therefore, fortunate that so many examples still survive, especially in Beaufort, but Brooker worries about ongoing threats to isolated remnants, including rampant coastal development and "irresponsible zoning." (14)

The Shell Builders will primarily be of interest to architectural historians, but maritime historians, and scholars more generally, should also take note, given that tabby is, in Brooker's apt phrase, "a quintessential product of the Atlantic world."

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Margaret Conrad. *At the Ocean's Edge: A History of Nova Scotia to Confederation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, www.utorontopress.com, 2020. 456 pp. illustrations, maps, tables, index. CDN \$29.96, paper ISBN 978-1-4875-2395-4. (E-book available.)

Lying as it does, in the author's words, "a great lobster stuck off the northeastern coast of North America," Nova Scotia is the most maritime of Canada's Maritime Provinces, prevented from being an island by only a narrow isthmus. The title of this new history, the first scholarly treatment in several generations, references the relationship the area has with the sea and the reader with a nautical bent might expect the title to set a major theme for the work. It is with a slight disappointment that we find that the author, although standing