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[Dissertations](#)

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[< Previous](#)

[Next >](#)

[Home](#) > [SAS](#) > [Penn Humanities Forum](#) > [Undergraduate Humanities Forum](#) > [UHF Fellows](#) > [UHF 2006-7](#) > [6](#)

UNDERGRADUATE HUMANITIES FORUM 2006-7: TRAVEL

Charming Charleston: Elite Construction of an Idealized History in Twentieth-Century Tourism

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Abstract

An innocuous tourist pamphlet? The hyperbolic claim of a self-important city? Or the relics of slavery-era paternalism and nostalgia in a twentieth century Southern city dominated by an elite class obsessed with heritage. The associations that leap from this pamphlet, published and widely distributed in the 1930s and 1940s advertising Charleston as a tourist destination for those seeking the aesthetic and historic, raise illuminating questions about the nature of tourism in Charleston. The artist could have chosen anybody to hold the door open to the incoming public, but he chose an elderly black gentleman, grasping the gate with a huge grin on his face, having taken his hat off, and with a slightly bowed posture. Inside the gate, the luscious gardens and blooming azaleas beckon, along with the steeples of the city's churches in the distance. The image, in short, seems to invite a very specific audience into Charleston. This brochure markets Charleston tourism as packaged for tourists seeking to go back to olden times; they desired to view gardens, historic houses and landmarks, and in essence experience the Charleston of an antebellum planter, complete with a happily subservient and very visible black population.

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