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Will waterfront's past be part of its future?

ARCHITECTURE

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Tom Ilderton walks around the scruffy parking lot near the State Ports Authority's passenger terminal and knows there's something special to be seen by peering over the edge.

Ilderton, a history buff whose father once leased a warehouse building nearby, knows this lot is built atop massive granite blocks, some of the most imposing remnants of Charleston's old waterfront.

These blocks can be seen only along the edge of the old wharves: The top has been covered by gravel, asphalt, chain link fences and concrete parking stops.

Ilderton estimates each blocks weighs about 5 tons, and the craftsmanship in their construction can be seen on their beveled edges as well as the occasional set of stairs (now blocked off) leading down to the water.

"There's a lot of history here, and if we don't put some emphasis on it, there's a chance it will be eliminated," he says.



Charleston's Granite Docks

Charleston's granite docks near the State Ports Authority's passenger terminal are believed to date from the late 19th century. They are largely obscured today by gravel, asphalt, chain link fences and concrete parking stops.

Ilderton is referring to the authority's new plans to redevelop and rejuvenate this 15-acre area. The authority recently hired Cooper Robertson & Partners to come up with a master plan.

"I don't want to put any type of stumbling block in front of them because what they're doing is going to be great for the city," Ilderton says. "But this is an historic site, and some of it, if not all of it, needs to be protected."

The good news is that architect Jaquelin Robertson of Cooper Robertson is well aware of the granite features, which he calls "incredibly beautiful."

But improving access is only one of the goals here. Cooper Robertson also must figure out how to create a new passenger terminal that will be secure, efficient and cost effective and how to redevelop nearby property in a way that boosts the economy and gives residents and visitors someplace interesting to go.

"We're trying to investigate the working waterfront and what was going on along the waterfront in various periods of time," Robertson says. "A number of preservation groups are really interested in that, so you could go out and, in 10 minutes or 20 minutes or an hour, get an understanding of the history of the waterfront. That's where the money was made."

Robertson says it's too early to say how the granite piers may be incorporated into the final plan, "but people who know (Mayor) Joe Riley know that it's unlikely we would pass up opportunities to use good things."

What's interesting is how little is known about the wharves. State Ports Authority spokesman Byron Miller says they don't seem to be well understood or appreciated. "People who walk around them might not even notice them."

The wharves likely were built after the Civil War, as the federal government finished up construction on the nearby U.S. Customhouse, though definitive information is hard to come by.

The authority's records don't shed much light. Miller says a 1925 map shows a "Custom House Wharf" that includes two wharves directly across Concord Street from the Customhouse. The authority acquired this property from the federal government in 1959, 17 years after the authority was created in a land deal between the city and state.

The wharves' construction likely was part of the Customhouse project. It's close and similar materials were used. The current parking lot even has some fence remnants that resemble the fence around the Customhouse across the street.

As for the wharves themselves, it's unknown how much granite or other old material lies buried under today's parking lot. The wharves' past seems as fuzzy as their future.

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