

### Clayton's Galveston

*The Architecture of Nicholas J. Clayton and His Contemporaries*

BARRIE SCARDINO AND DREXEL TURNER

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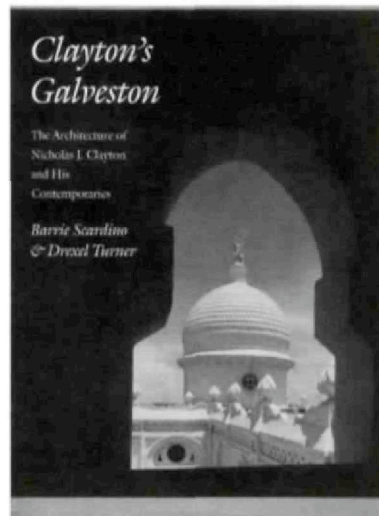
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### Galveston Style

*Clayton's Galveston* by Barrie Scardino and Drexel Turner. College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2000. 290 pp., illus., \$45.

Reviewed by Barry Moore

A century ago, Houston was struggling to achieve national commercial and cultural status. Meanwhile, a mere 50 miles away, Galveston, blessed by a deeper port, better climate, a seriously wealthy population, and a well-formed 19th-century idea of what a port city should be, was actually succeeding at it. Among those responsible for that success was architect Nicholas Clayton, who gave form to Galveston's instincts and aspirations and, more than anyone else, transformed the city into a Newport on the Gulf of Mexico.

As important as Clayton was, it took him a while to receive his due in print. But finally there is a book that tells the story of Galveston's great architectural epoch — *Clayton's Galveston*. To describe this handsome volume as long-anticipated would be an understatement. Local preservationists have long been aware of the seminal research into Clayton's legacy begun 25 years ago by city planner and University of Houston instructor Drexel Turner, research that was supplemented by the efforts of architectural historian Stephen Fox and photographer Marilyn Marshall Jones. In 1990, writer Barrie Scardino came aboard to mold the Clayton material into a narrative supported by carefully selected images. The result, it is safe to say, is one of the most anticipated books on Texas architecture in a generation.

Nicholas Clayton came to Galveston

at the best possible time. It was seven years after the Civil War and he was a vigorous 32 years old, an Irish native who, at the age of nine, had come to America with his widowed mother and settled in Ohio. He apprenticed as an architect in Cincinnati, then landed on Galveston Island in 1872.

*Clayton's Galveston* is filled not only with evidence of Clayton's skill as an architect, but also with rare images of the Galveston that existed before he arrived, as well as representative images of the work of his contemporaries. Combined, they create a beautifully bracketed framework for Clayton's own designs. The book's rich photographs, as well as its illustrations from 19th-century publications, create a visceral sense of the quality and scale of Clayton's architecture. Obviously, Clayton-designed buildings still in existence, such as the Gresham House and Old Red at the University of Texas Medical Branch, offer the greatest opportunity for analysis and study. But it is the list of now-extinct structures such as Harmony Hall, the Beach Hotel, the Lasker House, old Sacred Heart Church, and the great Ursuline Academy that enchant and magnetize. It is impossible to devour this feast of images and not want more. Or to resist a trip to Galveston's Rosenberg Library to see what might be found there in the archives that is not in the book.

Nicholas Clayton described himself as the first professional architect in Texas. That he was, as well as the first Texas architect to be widely known outside the state's borders. He had a large, prosperous practice that garnered commissions up the Mississippi, through Louisiana, and around the Gulf Coast to Tampa.

From 1872 through 1900, Clayton was the right man in the right place. Galveston, with its abundant riches, provided unparalleled opportunities for a talented architect. But then came the Great Storm of September 1900, and afterwards, nothing was the same, either for the city or its leading architect. By the time Clayton died in 1916, his practice had shrunk to a bare memory of its former importance, with Clayton working alone out of his home.

*Clayton's Galveston* unavoidably conveys the sadness of that decline. But at the same time, it celebrates and documents the architectural legacy of the state's first great architect. ■

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