

ATG Special Report — How Not To Write An Architecture Book

by **Gene Waddell** (College Archivist, College of Charleston) <waddelle@cofc.edu>

Some Approaches to Writing

“If you write a page a day, you’ll have a book a year.” That’s what a professional writer, **Robert Marks**, told me, and he wrote several dozen books and hundreds of articles. About half of his books were non-fiction, and the rest were novels. He could write an erotic novel in six weeks, but he had already done his research.

Robert’s point was the importance of diligence. It is not necessary to take twenty-five years to write a book, and if I had taken good advice, I would have finished my book on Charleston architecture much sooner than I did.

Robert also told me something else of great importance for a writer to know. He said the philosopher **René Descartes** wrote that any problem can be solved if it is divided into small enough parts so that each part can be solved separately. A book should be written one section at a time. If you can’t write a page on some days, you should be able to write a paragraph. The point is to write at least a minimum amount on some kind of regular basis.

Robert never wrote a line until he had a contract. He took editors to lunch and discussed his idea and found out exactly what they were willing to pay for. I wrote my book on Charleston architecture without considering who might be willing to publish it, and it took me nine years to find a publisher.

Other good advice that I was given and didn’t take includes creating a place that you only use to write and setting a regular time to write. I knew a writer and painter who built a separate studio in his backyard so he would have a place to go to only to work. By leaving his house and going to his studio every morning, he was able to maintain a good work schedule and produce a tremendous body of work. A room that you use only for work might suffice to put you in the right frame of mind to write or even a desk used for no other purpose. As with exercise, if you do not set aside a regular place and time to do it, something else will take its place. You need to find a routine that you can stick to unless you want a writing project to continue indefinitely.

To keep working on a regular basis, you will probably need to pace yourself. I didn’t do that either. By pacing yourself, I mean deciding how much you can do without exhausting yourself and being unable to keep to some kind of schedule. When I get a good idea that needs to be put on paper, I can’t help but exhaust myself, but I try now to make that the exception rather than my regular way of writing. If you do better by

exhausting yourself on a regular basis, that’s fine if you allow enough time to recover in between. If you can write 20 pages in one day, that’s great unless you don’t write another 20 pages until a year later. Whatever works.

One of my problems is that I like to write about several different subjects at the same time. That refreshes me better than rest. When I return to another subject, I am more likely to see the material differently and to have new insights as well as new enthusiasm. However, it takes much longer to finish any one of the books I am working on.

I recommend writing about what you like best and want to know the most about. Your work will become a labor of love and will take longer than you want it to, but you will enjoy the research and writing. Unless you care passionately about something, what you write is unlikely to be better than what many other people could write on the same subject, and I see no point in writing what anyone else could write.

If you want to write a book in a reasonable length of time, I recommend that you select a manageable topic and stick to it. I am not very good at that sticking to a narrow topic or even to sticking to one topic, but I am fairly good about eventually finishing what I start, and you shouldn’t start anything you don’t intend to finish.

While you are not actually writing, there is much that you can do to get ready to write, and that too needs to be done on a regular basis. I have found no better way to locate information when I need it for writing than to pull a book off the shelf and look for a passage I recall having read. Making marginal notes and marking passages will remind you of what most impressed you when you initially read a book and of the insights you had at the time, and it makes a lot of re-reading unnecessary. All the relevant information that I might need (including citations) is in hand. This approach to research and writing requires a large personal library, but for me it’s the best possible investment. I don’t waste time taking notes unless I can’t find a copy of a book for myself, and the Internet makes it possible to find any books more easily and less expensively than ever before. I mark everything I might ever want to refer to.

While I am reading and have an insight that I know I want to include in an article or book that I am currently working on, I draft a paragraph or several paragraphs to get the idea on paper immediately. I put my drafts in file folders, and when I am ready to write a section or a chapter, I resort and subdivide my file folders. Before I start writing a full draft of a section, article or chapter, I have usually already drafted substantial parts of the text, and the work consists primarily of filling in what is missing and rewriting.

Some of my best insights happen after I have been reading or writing, and I always carry a pencil and paper to make notes to myself. Eventually these notes also get sorted into folders or inserted directly into drafts. In other words, my books accumulate, and in my opinion, that is the best way to write comprehensively about any subject. Since the value of every book is in proportion to how nearly definitive it can be made, every author who wants to make a permanent contribution to scholarship should try to write as definitively as possible.

A definitive book can be written about a narrow topic relatively quickly, but to exhaust the research potential for a topic as broad as an entire city during two centuries of its existence, a quarter of a century is somewhat less excessive than it might seem, but in my case it was excessive. I would expect a book that took so long and that was written late in a career to be about a broader one than could be covered in a few years of research and writing. I would expect any treatment of a major topic to be comprehensive and to include enough information for the reader to draw his own conclusions. A book of permanent value has to treat all aspects of a subject and to account for all of the available information.

Outlines can be helpful or treacherous if they are not continually revised. If you start a writing project by making an outline, you are likely to overlook important aspects of your subject. An outline can easily become equivalent to a hypothesis that blinds you to anything other than what fits your preconceptions. After you have gathered all of the information relevant to a topic is the best time to prepare an outline to use to begin writing.

The History of a Large-Scale Writing Project

What I set out to determine was what architects and builders needed to know to create Charleston. I hoped to write a book that might be useful for creating architecture of equivalent quality.

Over a period of more than a decade, I tried to discover what all of the styles used for early Charleston architecture had in common and how it had been possible to maintain so consistently high a level of design and construction. I found that regardless of what style was preferred at any given time or what building type was being designed, all of Charleston’s early architects were trying to accomplish essentially the same thing. They were trying to create well designed buildings, and they took for granted that to do so, it was necessary to know a great deal about architectural history. None was intentionally ignorant. I found that all of Charleston’s early architects were more interested in improving on designs that they admired rather than in simply being different.

continued on page 87

The main reason my Charleston book took so long to write is that I like nothing better than to solve a problem. As I mentioned in the preface, I got started on it because I wondered why the Fireproof Building wasn't fireproof, and the short answer is that it wasn't intended to be entirely fireproof. It didn't take me long to discover this, and in the process, I also learned something else I had wondered about: why the building was better designed than it was constructed. I did all of the research and wrote an article on design and construction of the Fireproof Building during a two-week Christmas vacation, but I worked on this project about 16 hours a day. I needed to complete the article quickly to meet a deadline for an issue of the South Carolina Historical Magazine. If I had written the other chapters as quickly as the first one, I would have had the book finished in less than a year, but that was in 1979, and my next deadline wasn't until eleven years later.

My next deadline was when I needed to complete a thesis for a master's degree at UCLA in 1990. At the time I was writing about Charleston, but living in Los Angeles. I had taken my research notes, books, photocopies of articles, and photographs with me to California, and while there I had access to copies of all of the books that had been available to Charleston architects during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I was eventually able to write a much more comprehensive book about Charleston in Los Angeles than I could have in Charleston. I was able to look at every illustration in every book known to have been in Charleston, and by using available microform sets of architecture books, I was able to consider virtually every one of the several thousand architecture books that were published from 1490 to 1860. While doing so, I learned much I wouldn't have known about architecture and discovered the design sources for numerous Charleston buildings. Knowing the sources of design enabled me to determine how well the sources had been adapted.

Over a period of years, I also read the texts of the most influential books that had been written by architects for architects, and I tried to determine which earlier architects deserved credit for the most influential ideas and to determine how those ideas reached Charleston. This information has also proved useful for other writing projects.

My principal mistake in writing this book was that I did not set a series of deadlines for myself. After publishing the first chapter on the Fireproof Building, I should have worked on one chapter at a time, and I should have tried to get each chapter published as I finished it before turning to another chapter. This plan would have given me a series of goals that I could have used as deadlines.

My master's thesis was about the Neoclassical architecture of Charleston, and it was limited to buildings that were designed before 1826. I chose the year 1826 because that was

when the Fireproof Building was completed. My chapter on the Fireproof Building was to be the last chapter in my book because it marked the transition from the Neoclassical tradition and the Greek Revival. Before this building was constructed, all Charleston buildings had been designed in the same style, and that style had remained largely unchanged since the Renaissance. After it was built, every style imaginable began to be introduced in rapid succession—Greek Revival, Gothic, Romanesque, Italianate, and so forth.

My plan initially was to write a book that dealt exclusively with a coherent group of buildings that had all been designed in essentially the same style. I wrote only about Charleston from 1670-1826. I wrote primarily about seven buildings, and I divided them into sections on houses, religious buildings, and public buildings. This was a good arrangement, and I should have kept it.

Soon afterwards, I was awarded a sabbatical by the **Getty Center**, where I was working at the time, and I had a whole year to turn my thesis into a book. So far as I was concerned, the manuscript was close to being ready to submit for publication. I didn't intend to write any more chapters. I intended only to rewrite the chapters I already had and to collect the illustrations I needed for publication. During my sabbatical, I returned to Charleston and revisited many of the places where I had done research, and since I had extra time, I decided to do extra research. As I looked for more material about the period before 1826, I kept finding good unpublished material about the period after 1826, and I wanted to make use of this additional material. I thought that with an entire year off, I could easily expand my book to include the period from 1826-1860. That would only add 35 years to the 157 years I had already written about, and I assumed that adding only a few more buildings could be done more easily than what I had already accomplished. I decided to start searching for primary sources on buildings of the Antebellum Period including information that the buildings themselves provide.

No previous book on Charleston architecture had focused on building types, sources of design, types of materials, or methods of construction, and I needed more detailed information about design, material, and construction than had been published. What I hoped to find was information that would enable me to write essays on buildings that were both as well designed and as well documented as possible. The main questions I asked myself about each building are ones I try to get anyone writing about architecture to attempt to answer.

On design, the most basic questions that need to be asked are: Who designed the building and when was it designed and constructed? Do any drawings, specifications, and building accounts survive? What were the functional requirements? What were the principle design sources and how were they used? Was the building constructed as designed? Did the architect change the design during construction? Does the building itself show evidence of change? Are early photographs or descriptions

of the building available before any alterations were made? Was the building equally well designed in all respects? How could it have been better designed?

On construction, the most basic questions that need to be asked are: What materials were used for the foundations, walls, and roof? What methods of construction were used? What structural principles were used? Was the building as well constructed as it was designed? How well has the building held up?

I was unable to answer all of these questions about every building, but I tried to answer as many as possible to determine how a building initially looked, why it was designed and constructed as it was, how well it functioned initially, and how adaptable it has proven to be.

My initial goal was to create a book with at least one major example to represent each of the principle building types during each period. I kept this goal, but added the additional goal of providing an overview of how buildings were designed and constructed in Charleston. I began the book by summarizing the most important design concepts regardless of when they were used in Charleston and for what type of building.

Although I planned to use a well designed and well documented building as the basis for each chapter, I had to use a different basis for some chapters. No Single House was adequately documented, and it was necessary to make a field survey of the approximately 2,400 examples which are found on the eighty miles of Charleston's early streets. Since very few buildings had survived earlier than 1740, and I had to treat most of the period from 1670-1740 as one chapter and to compare the earliest buildings throughout the Lowcountry. I had to write about Adamesque buildings as a group because I could find no well documented example. There was also insufficient documentation to write about any one bank or rice mill, and the small amount of information I was able to find on these building types had to go into appendices.

Another goal was to create a book that could serve as a model for the study of other localities. I am still convinced that the best way to write about any city is to consider individual buildings in detail and then to show how these buildings are typical and exceptional.

I went back to Los Angeles with more than enough material for another book, and I ended up writing a largely different book. My thesis had about 400 pages of typed text, and the completed manuscript had nearly 1,000 pages of typed text—more than enough text for two books even without illustrations. My thesis had about 250 illustrations, and the completed manuscript had about 700 illustrations. By adding every style of architecture being used from 1826-1860, I more than doubled the size of the manuscript and produced a book that was repeatedly turned down by publishers as too expensive to publish.

Despite all the research and writing I did

continued on page 88

ATG Special Report
from page 87

from 1980-1994, I published only one article about Charleston. I made several presentations using the new information I had found on Robert Mills, on the Single House, and on the sources of design concept, but I did not submit any of this material for publication. The reason I did not is because most scholarly journals refuse to publish articles that are about to appear as chapters in books, and I kept thinking my book would soon be published.

About a decade ago, a publisher accepted the manuscript provisionally, but the provision was a large subvention, and although I applied for two grants, I got neither. I can't help but think that too little consideration is given to accomplishment in the grant-making process.

In addition to spending much of my available time for twenty-five years on this project,

I spent about \$10,000 on the illustrations. At nearly 700 illustrations, this works out to about \$14 each. It is not uncommon to be charged \$20 to print a negative, \$50 for a print from a museum, and \$100 or more for permission to publish. One source of illustrations required that two copies of the book be provide in addition to the payment of fees. Many institutions that formerly tried to promote scholarship are now trying to get all they can out of it. When all copies that were printed are sold, I will not break even.

For a quarter of a century, I received almost no credit for the most research I have ever put into a project until **Pete and Connie Wyrick**



took on the publication and produced a book in a style that far exceeded what I could have done on my own or what I ever expected any publisher would be able to do. They deserve all of the credit for the finished product. Considering the results, I am not sorry my Charleston book took so long to be published, but I should also have tried to get parts of it published as I completed them. 🍷

(Based on a lecture given at the Charleston County Library, 18 February 2004.)