

Letters: Charleston's sidewalks, roof tiles tell a story

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The center aisles in two of the City Market sheds are made from decorative bluestone. Many of Charleston's older sidewalks are paved with Pennsylvania bluestone that arrived as ballast on 18th century ships.

A Feb. 27 feature article on The Garden Club of Charleston began: "If the trees tucked along a serene slate path ..."

A path of slate? No. Slate is fragile; slate fractures. Slate is not used for sidewalks.

That wonderful blue-gray stone upon which we walk in downtown Charleston is [bluestone](#).

And all of our stones tell a story from afar.

Eighteenth century ships coming into Charleston from all over the world carried ballast. This weight in the bottom or hold of the ship stabilized the vessels at sea. The ballast was often rocks.

Our old sidewalks are paved with Pennsylvania bluestone, which arrived as ballast on ships from our important trading partner, Philadelphia.

Our brownstone, and that of New York City, came from Portland, Connecticut. It arrived on New England ships from Hartford and New Haven.

Our cobblestones are from England. Fort Sumter stands upon a man-made island of New England granite.

The most interesting stone origin story is our slate roofs.

After Hurricane Hugo, citizens imported roofing slates from Penrhyn quarry in North Wales because they wanted to match the old roofing slates.

The story of how Welsh slate was used on the roofs of our 18th century buildings goes back to the slave trade.

Bristol, England, was one of the largest slave-trading ports in the British Empire.

Slave ships left Bristol bound for Africa to purchase the “nameless enslaved,” then sailed across the Atlantic to Charleston.

Slave ships also needed ballast, and the most profitable item available near Bristol was Welsh slate.

These roofing slates, having journeyed in the holds of ships from Wales to England to Africa and across the Atlantic Ocean to end up on the roofs of Charleston, tell a story of the international slave trade.

Ruth M. Miller, Charleston