

What does Charleston have that we don't have? Other than the shopping, Fort Sumter, and a Whole Foods Market?

Answer: Plantation houses that are open to the public on a regular basis.



People like plantation houses because they are emblematic of our region. Whether that's good or bad is a topic for another column. But just think about it. If someone were to come up to you and ask where they could go tomorrow to see a plantation house, what would you tell them?

Charleston has destinations like Drayton Hall and Middleton Place that are on a lot of visitors' must-see lists. But we don't have anything comparable here.

We have tons of plantations in our four-county region – Beaufort, Jasper, Hampton and Colleton – but they are open to visitors only once a year. If that. And sometimes, despite having paid a king's ransom for tickets, you don't even get to go in the house; it's just the grounds that are open for viewing.

So if a casual visitor shows up on some random weekend and wants to see a plantation house, are they are out of luck?

Actually, we do have one plantation house that is open – for free – almost every day of the year. It's the Frampton House, in Point South.

I worked there for a year and I love this place. The upstairs serves as headquarters for the Lowcountry & Resort Islands Tourism Commission. These are the people who, on behalf of the entire region, place "Come Visit the Lowcountry" ads in national magazines like Southern Living and Reader's Digest. They also serve as a sort of conduit between local entities and our state's Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

But downstairs is where all the action is. Visitors can drop in until 5:30 daily to see a lovingly restored house, get information on area attractions, shop for unusual gifts, and, best of all, enjoy access to some of the cleanest bathrooms on I-95.

Visitors can also study a giant reproduction of a Civil War era map that shows the Frampton Plantation and surrounding properties, as well as the Confederate earthworks that sprinkle the countryside.

One of these earthworks, the Frampton Line, is behind the house, so visitors can walk around back and see it for themselves.

The grounds also feature giant live oaks and magnolias, a picnic area, dog walk areas, and a gazebo that serves as the starting point for the Lowcountry Revolutionary War Trail.

General Sherman and his troops burned down the original Frampton House, and its outbuildings, in 1865. The Frampton family did the Scarlett O'Hara thing and brought the plantation back to life, thanks to their secret stash of buried silver. John Frampton finally got his act together and built a new house in 1868. It's probably not as imposing as the original one was, but they had to work with what they had.

After many decades of hard use, Frampton House was transformed into the sales center for Sea Pines Resort. At this time the entire Point South area was supposed to become some sort of tourist node, with a plantation house and a little farm and real estate information. When I was a child I was eager to go out and take a look, but was sorely disappointed when I saw just an old, run-down house (we had plenty of these in Beaufort already), and a goat in a pen. There may have been some chickens, too.

Eventually Sea Pines moved on to posh quarters on Hilton Head Island, and Frampton

House fell into greater disrepair. Then, one day in 1993, it was slated to meet its fate at the hands of a bulldozer.

It was really close to I-95 and would make an ideal site for a gas station. Yes, there was plenty of old farmland and acres of trees and bushes all around, but was the old house they planned to whack.

Thankfully, the developer, Wymann Boozer, decided to spare the house and donate it to the Lowcountry & Resort Islands Tourism Commission.

Since then, the commission's director, Jim Wescott, and his staff have worked hard to make the house whole again. In fact, though he is too humble to say so, Jim has made his commitment to stabilizing and restoring the Frampton House his life's work.

This is a great house with great stories of human determination. Sherman's destruction, Frampton's rebuilding. Modern-day encroachment, preservation-motivated salvation.

But it takes a lot of money to maintain a historic house like this. This money doesn't come from state or local governments, either. There are three sources of funding for the upkeep of the house: 1) the donation box; 2) the coins visitors throw in the fountain; and 3) modest profits from gift shop sales.

The first two line items don't add up to much, so it's the shopping that keeps this place going.

Sojourners on I-95 provide a steady trickle of customers, but it's not enough. Frampton House needs a lot more local support. So next time you need to do some shopping, think about heading out to Point South. And let visitors know that we do, indeed, have a plantation house that is open to the public here in the Lowcountry.

Who needs Charleston anyway?