

Small Town South

by David Wharton



SMALL TOWN SOUTH
photographs and text by David Wharton

\$50.00 U.S. (trade discount)
Hardcover with jacket
160 pages with 116 duotone photographs
by the author
11.0" x 9.0" landscape/horizontal
ISBN: 978-1-938086-09-0

Forthcoming in Fall 2012

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Distributed by International Publishers Marketing

Since 1983 David Wharton has photographed the twelve states that define the American South, focusing his attention on rural and small town culture, vernacular architecture and landscape, the role of religion in Southern life, and the relationship between Southerners, their natural surroundings, and the communities they have built. *Small Town South* is the result of Wharton's extensive travels throughout the region.

No other photographer has devoted so much time and attention to recording this distinctive American place. The author's 116 duotone photographs, combined with his insightful text, convey an overall sense of what the small Southern town looks like at the turn of the twenty-first century. Wharton organizes his study into thematic portfolios that visually address themes such as decline and renewal on Main Street, the intersection of tradition and modernity, local commemorations of the past, the omnipresence of the church in town life, the difficulties of making a living in the New World economy, the display of public murals and memorials, and the iconographic unfolding of community values.

Many have likened Wharton's photographic eye and approach to the work of other photographic masters of the South, including Walker Evans, Eudora Welty, William Christenberry, Shelby Lee Adams, and Mike Smith. Just as we turn and return to those artists in reckoning with Southern history and culture, so, too, can we now look to David Wharton as a new pioneer photographer of the small town South in all its simplicity and complexity.

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"*Small Town South* by David Wharton is a black-and-white photography essay on small towns typical of the South in the United States. The photos are taken from unique points of view with the purpose of telling a story of yesterday and today. Each reveals something of the past, when some of these towns were thriving. But the photos are of today, showing, in some cases, that the town has fallen on hard times and many people have left, sometimes leaving advertising signs from yesteryear. The photos are a bit depressing and haunting in some cases, and not really beautiful, but are truly journalistic in their unique way of documenting and era gone and an era passing." —Bonnie Neely, owner of Real Travel Adventures and book reviewer for Amazon

"David Wharton brings a loving and insightful vision to common scenes of small towns in the American South photographed during the first decade of the new millennium. His subjects and his straightforward style immediately inspire a comparison to Walker Evans and other early photographers such as Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, and Arthur Rothstein who began exploring the same territory and similar subject matter during the 1930s. Wharton's photographs both delight and confound by showing us not only what has changed, but more subtly how much seemingly remains the same yet feels disconcertingly different from the quiet main streets of Depression-era America. Although Wharton's photographs are from 93 towns in a dozen Southern states, he does not attempt to create a comprehensive document of any specific town or state. Instead he focuses on the elusive flow of time and how we read time in a place. In so doing, he provides a provocative series of new photographs of the contemporary South and challenges how we might re-read the rich legacy of photographers who preceded him." —Thomas W. Southall, curator and author of *Of Time and Place: Walker Evans and William Christenberry*

"David Wharton's *Small Town South* is a slow, winding visual delight of detail and uniqueness, stitched together by the region's undying devotions to God, country, family, history, and commerce. These exquisite photographs are plainly seen, stripped of drama, yet they are rich in the quiet and complexity of place. Wharton shows us the familiar but only to a point. Though his images are not meant to provide answers to questions about the meaning of the South, they reveal many layers of small town life, giving us timeless glimpses of locales we want to know better." —Rob Amberg, author of *Sodom Laurel Album* and *The New Road*



"*Small Town South* is the single most comprehensive modern photographic survey of small Southern towns. Wharton's purpose, though, is not simply to provide an encyclopedic coverage of a particular kind of town landscape. Rather, he concentrates his vision on what makes these towns significant in the lives of the people who inhabit them, captures the spaces they create over time...Viewing this book, I felt an emotional tug running through it that might be likened to a poetic narrative—evocative rather than explanatory and where much is left to the reader's imagination, which is as it should be in such a beautiful book." —David Zurick, author of *Southern Crossings: Where Geography and Photography Meet*, from his review in *The Southern Register*

"In an age when many people's experience of the South is from a car window at 70 m.p.h. or through the packaged presentations at New South airports and convention centers, David Wharton beautifully slows our pace and shows us, to quote Faulkner, "the center, the focus, the hub" of the South through these small town spaces. Taking us to the town squares, storefronts, memorials, main streets, and churchyards of towns throughout the region, Wharton reveals distinctive layers of creativity, culture, and time through his wry eye and careful lyricism. Documentary art at its core, Wharton's captivating new book—refined and nuanced in all ways—reveals the cultural landscapes of the South that we must see and feel to understand fully our time and place."

—Tom Rankin, Director, Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University



Poplar Forest and Cy's Rollei (with Sally Mann and Evan Rogers)

"To anyone who's spent any time in, or just traveled through, a small Southern town, David Wharton's photographs will seem both familiar and new. These are places we've known, but perhaps never seen as Wharton presents them: often in 'the beautiful noon of no shadow,' in the words of one poet I admire. I love how these images accumulate, page by page, in a sense of irony and humor, persistence and loss. If Wharton's photographs themselves comprise a kind of poem, as he proposes in his introductory essay, it is an unusually moving one—something like an ode, but with an epic sweep." —Rob McDonald, Professor of English and Fine Arts, Virginia Military Institute, and author of four books of photography, including

"This limited-edition, horizontal-format book of photographs was beautifully produced by George F. Thompson Publishing and created by David Wharton (Director of Documentary Studies, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi in Oxford). The author suggests viewing the photographs as a long poem in nine stanzas, where each image relates to the next in ways that evoke but may not build a narrative. The print format, where blank facing pages alternate irregularly with single images printed on each page, also helps to create a sense of slow rhythm. Wharton's subject is the American South of small, empty towns, closely observed and mostly without commentary. The only text is at the back of the book, where each image is given its caption in a couple of sentences or paragraphs, small nonfiction stories about each place. The black-and-white images, of storefronts, signs, roads, and frame houses, have a flat clarity; they could be paintings or photojournalistic moments in which no drama is happening except what is always there. There is an incidental figure, an occasional old truck. His technique is to whisper rather than shout, and the book rewards slow looking. What the photographer draws us in to see has often been exploited for tragedy or kitsch, but Wharton is too wise and too wry; he knows this territory far too well for such easy commentary. Beneath what we thought we knew, he reveals a hieratic landscape. In Cherokee, Alabama, beside a blank brick building and an empty road, an unmarked sign says only, 'DANCE.'"

—Eithne O'Leyne, Editor, Reference & Research Books News of Book News, Inc.

