

# A Brief Property History of 31 Meeting Street



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Historical Research Methods

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The photo shows a newspaper article from 1959, detailing the opening of 31 Meeting Street to the Public for the first time.

<sup>1</sup> Photograph of a newspaper article from The News and Courier, c. 1959. From verticle files located at the special collections room, Adlestone County Library, Charleston, SC.

## Introduction

31 Meeting Street is an excellent example of Charleston architecture and history. Built in 1792, the single house has withstood the natural disasters, famines, fires, and wars. Even though the house has undergone major renovations and changes through the years, the home has maintained its historical integrity. Serving as the home of the Poppenheim family of Charleston suffragettes for many years as well as the Bennet family who still owns it to this day, 31 Meeting Street is not just a historical monument to the past, it is also a home that has adapted to an ever changing Charleston. 31 Meeting Street acts as a great representation of Charleston as a whole, built in the classic Charleston single house style and sitting upon the legendary Meeting Street with a rich history that can withstand the decades.

Below: 1901 Sanborn Map for Charleston, 31 Meeting Street is circled

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<sup>2</sup> Sanborn Map of Charleston, 1901. From the South Carolina Room, Charleston County Library, Charleston, SC.

## A Brief History of Charleston

Charleston, South Carolina is a coastal city on the east coast of the United States. In 1663, King Charles of England granted eight Lord Proprietors land in the area in what would become Charleston, and in 1669 the first colonists made their way to the continent. By 1680, Charles Town had officially been established. Charleston quickly became the capitol for the Carolina colony<sup>3</sup>, and also a prominent port city. The town in its early years was a walled city fortification. This was because its seaside location made it a target by countries such as Spain and France who attempted to take the colony away from the British. Not only were European attacks a threat, but also attacks from native Americans in the area and pirates. In 1680, the first plans for Civic Square appeared, which would later become broad street, on land intersecting meeting and broad street<sup>4</sup>. In addition to the establishment of the new city, one of the most interesting happenings in Charleston occurred in 1718 when Edward Teach, also known as Blackbeard, and his men sieged Charleston. Blackbeard and his pirates sieged Charleston for nearly a week until their bribery requests were met by Charleston leadership, sending them sailing up to North Carolina.<sup>5</sup>

By the late 18th century, Charleston had become one of the largest port cities in America, and had establish economic wealth through rice and tobacco crops, almost all cultivated by enslaved African American people. Over time, distraught Charlestonians began to grow frustrated with the mother country of Britain due to a lack of representation. After the tea act of 1773 enraged colonists, South

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<sup>3</sup> Poston, Jonathan H. *The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City's Architecture* (Columbia, South Carolina. University of South Carolina Press, 1997) p. 13

<sup>4</sup> Poston, Jonathan H. *The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City's Architecture* (Columbia, South Carolina. University of South Carolina Press, 1997) p. 16

<sup>5</sup> Eastman, Margaret M. R., and Edward FitzSimons. *Hidden History of Old Charleston* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2010.)

Carolínians would declare their independence from Great Britain. Fort Moultrie was created in 1776 to defend against British attacks, but by 1780 Charleston fell to British rule.<sup>6</sup> The British finally lost the war and left Charleston by 1782, as they overestimated the investment of loyalists in the colony and because they failed at any attempt to enact any sort of government within the colonies. Militia attacks using guerrilla warfare can also be accredited to the British failure. This ushered in a new time for Charleston, and it is after the British defeat that the name was officially changed to Charleston. The next seven decades would see a booming economy for Charleston, all due to the success of the importation of rice, indigo and tobacco through plantation life, made possible only by the enslavement of human beings for backbreaking manual labor. Mounting tensions grew due to southern colonies' refusal to give up their slaves, claiming the states' rights had a precedent over the federal government, and in 1861, South Carolina was the first state to secede from the union. Also during this year, Charleston experiences its most detrimental fire yet, which could not have come at a worse time, as all the young men who were capable of putting the fire out were away at war.<sup>7</sup>

The civil war time period spearheaded confederate ingenuity, as the first submarine to ever successfully sink a ship was the *HL Hunley*<sup>8</sup>, based from the Charleston harbor. Despite this, the war was ultimately lost in Charleston by 1865, and economic suffering soon followed as the city struggled to make sense of how it would venture forth into an unknown future. The years that followed were an uncertain time for both whites and blacks, and in 1886 an earthquake devastated the city<sup>9</sup>. Thanks to wealthy white women from prominent families, Charleston became leaders for historic

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<sup>6</sup> Fraser, Walter J. *Charleston! Charleston!: the History of a Southern City*. (Columbia, South Carolina, University of South Carolina Press, 1991.)

<sup>7</sup> Molloy, Robert, and E. H. Suydam. *Charleston, a Grocious Heritage*. (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1947).p.45

<sup>8</sup> Walker, Sally M. *Secrets of a Civil War Submarine: Solving the Mysteries of the H.L. Hunley*. (Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, 2006.)

<sup>9</sup>Poston, Jonathan H. *The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City's Architecture* (Columbia, South Carolina. University of South Carolina Press, 1997) p.4

preservation during the turn of the century. During the second world war, Charleston acted as an important naval base as well. Race relations continued to be tense, which led into Jim Crow laws in the 1950s and 60s. Residents of Charleston remember hurricane Hugo in 1989 to this day, and all of the tremendous damage it had done to the city. Most recently Charleston has become a booming tourist attraction thanks in part to Mayor Joe Riley. Charleston is a city that has seen its share of devastation in the form of war, natural disasters, and illness. The city has also seen great economic growth, cultural changes, and the development of characteristics that now idealize the American south. It is because of these reasons that Charleston is like no other.

## **The Charleston Single House**

Charleston Architecture Charleston has a distinct architecture that is uniquely its own. This architecture consists mainly of the Charleston Single House. The houses that adorn the iconic rainbow row are Charleston singles, and most all notable figures from Charleston history lived in them or built them. The Charleston Single house is usually both side and front gabled. The single house has a narrow side that typically has three gables, and a longer side that is five or six gables<sup>10</sup>. These homes also have piazzas on the front that can be either one or two 3 stories. The piazzas on the single houses are additions most of a time, this is due to builders lack of familiarity to the intensity of the Charleston heat, as they were only accustomed to European climates. These houses were built to suit the early layout of the city, which consisted of long and narrow lots.<sup>11</sup> The Charleston singles were also built cleverly to catch the breeze from the nearby sea. The Charleston Single house can be seen in a variety of styles, for

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<sup>10</sup> McAlester, Virginia and Lee. *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York, New York. Knopf, 2015)

<sup>11</sup> Poston, Jonathan H. *The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City's Architecture* (Columbia, South Carolina. University of South Carolina Press, 1997) p.12

example Greek Revival, Romanesque, and Victorian. What stays consistent is the layout of the home. The entrance from the front gable opens to a staircase with a room on either side, and the upper floors are consistent with the lower floor plan. This is where the term "single" house comes from, because from the street view, the structures only appear to be one room wide. These houses are suspended over a basement, and each of the main rooms of the house have accompanying fireplaces. To the rear of these structures are additional smaller structures. They include servant's quarters, slave quarters, a kitchen, or carriage house.

### **31 Meeting Street Architectural Description**

31 Meeting Street in Charleston, South Carolina is a Charleston Single house in form. In its style the house is Greek Revival. The North facade has three bays. From the North facade, the structure has a two story bay window that begins on the first floor. There is a door on the third floor that leads to a small porch that is supported by the bay window beneath it. From the east facade, there is a two story piazza that is present on the first and second stories. The roof is flat pitched and the home is side gabled. The windows visible from the North facade on the first and second floors are double hung sashes and the panes are two over two with thin muntins. From the third floor there are three windows with shutters on each bay.









journal for women's club members called Keystone<sup>16</sup>. To understand the gravity of the Poppenheim's contributions, one must understand the climate of the South during the time they became activists. Women were raised to be poised and accomplished at domestic tasks. Raising children, running a household, and keeping up appearances to maintain socialite status are the priorities that would have been taught to the Poppenheim sisters. Along with pressures from their traditional southern background, their mother encouraged them to steer clear of politics. The Poppenheim sisters got their education in New York at Vassar College, far away from the social climate of Charleston.<sup>17</sup> Mary attended Vassar college first as she



Left: Louisa Poppenheim at Vassar College

Circa 1887

was

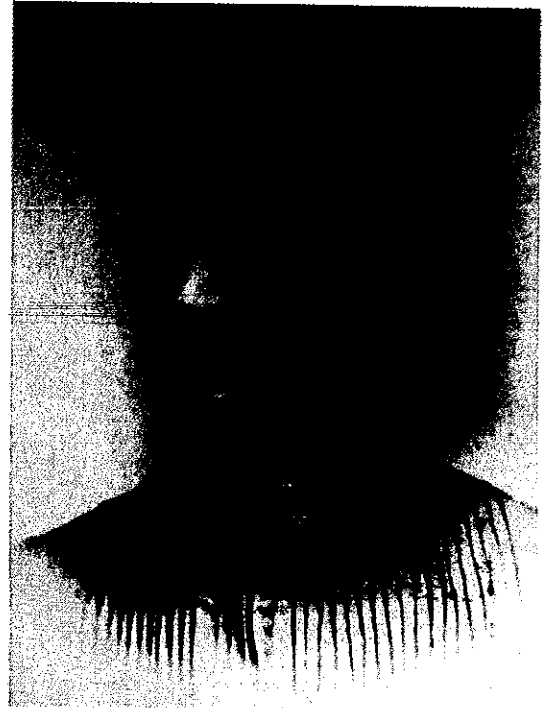
two years older, and Louisa followed after. Once the sisters were in school, they experienced a life much different<sup>18</sup> from what they were accustomed to in Charleston. Mary, in December of 1882 described a happy scene in a letter to her mother, "The other day I saw girls skating on the lake. A great many of them had tumbles serious and all but they did not mind it and would sit on ice and laugh. There is a

<sup>16</sup> 9 Endres, Kathleen and Lueck, *Therese Women's Periodicals in the United States: Social and Political Issues* (Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press 1996) p. 145

<sup>17</sup> 13 Johnson, Joan Marie. *Southern Women at Vassar: The Poppenheim Family Letters, 1882-1916* (Columbia, South Carolina, University of South Carolina Press, 2002). P. 26

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, Joan Marie. *Southern Women at Vassar: The Poppenheim Family Letters, 1882-1916* (Columbia, South Carolina, University of South Carolina Press, 2002). P 55

splendid hill here where the girls slide down on sleds.”<sup>19</sup> Life was not always happy at 11 Vassar college for Mary and Louisa, as they experienced intense homesickness for Charleston. In February of 1883, Mary writes her mother “You should not be lying<sup>20</sup> awake thinking of me but just wait until I do come home, oh, wont I feel happy and lively!”<sup>21</sup> Interestingly enough, their mother Mary sent palmetto trees to them at school at Vassar so that they would feel more at home and “graduate under the shadow of the palm tree”.<sup>22</sup> More importantly, it was their time away in the North that would inspire their activism. Mary, in a letter home to her sister Louisa, said that she saw herself as a “second Susan B Anthony”<sup>23</sup> This kind of dream and aspiration was in direct disobedience to her mother’s wishes. In a letter to



Above: Mary Poppenheim at Vassar College  
Circa 1889

Mary in 1883, Mrs. Poppenheim tells her to “avoid anything having to do with a party that savors women’s rights.”<sup>24</sup> . Despite their mother’s best efforts, the Poppenheim sisters would remain leaders in women’s groups for the rest of their lives. Mary tells Louisa in a letter in 1902 of women’s national leadership, “What men can never do their women can or could do for they are the atmosphere of the

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<sup>19</sup> Mary Barnett Poppenheim to Mrs. Poppenheim and Cristopher P. Poppenheim, December 5th 1882. *Mary Barnett and Louisa Bouknight Poppenheim Papers* (Durham, North Carolina, Perkins Library, Special collections, 1980)

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, Joan Marie. *Southern Women at Vassar: The Poppenheim Family Letters, 1882-1916* (Columbia, South Carolina, University of South Carolina Press, 2002) p.55

<sup>21</sup> Mary Barnett Poppenheim in a letter to Mrs. Poppenheim, February 20th, 1883. *Mary Barnett and Louisa Bouknight Poppenheim Papers* (Durham, North Carolina, Perkins Library, Special collections, 1980)

<sup>22</sup>13 Johnson, Joan Marie. *Southern Women at Vassar: The Pappenheim Family Letters, 1882-1916* (Columbia, South Carolina, University of South Carolina Press, 2002). P. 26

<sup>23</sup> 14 Johnson, Joan Marie. *Southern Women at Vassar: The Poppenheim Family Letters, 1882-1916* (Columbia, South Carolina, University of South Carolina Press, 2002). P.1

<sup>24</sup> 15 Johnson, Joan Marie. *Southern Women at Vassar: The Poppenheim Family Letters, 1882-1916* (Columbia, South Carolina, University of South Carolina Press, 2002). P.1

future into which must be born the American citizens of the future"<sup>25</sup>. In 1899 the sisters founded *The Keystone*, a journal that chronicled 16 women's club activities monthly. The women also traveled the south to various women's meetings, encouraging their involvement in the fight for women's equality. The women would continue work in various women's clubs until their deaths, Mary in 1936 and Louisa in 1966.<sup>26</sup> Neither sister married or had children, but maintained a close relationship with their other two sisters and their nieces and nephews. The sisters lived together in 31 Meeting Street until their deaths.

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<sup>25</sup> 16 Mary Barnett Poppenheim in a letter to Louisa Poppenheim in 1902, *Mary Barnett and Louisa Bouknight Poppenheim Papers* (Durham, North Carolina, Perkins Library, Special collections, 1980)

<sup>26</sup> Johnson, Joan Marie. *Poppenheim, Mary Barnett, and Louisa Bouknight Poppenheim*. South Carolina Encyclopedia, June 20, 2016. <http://www.scencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/poppenheim-mary-barnett-and-louisa-bouknight-poppenheim/>.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson, Joan Marie. *Southern Women at Vassar: The Poppenheim Family Letters, 1882-1916* (Columbia, South Carolina, University of South Carolina Press, 2002)p. S5

<sup>28</sup> Two photographs of the Ladies Benevolent Society Pamphlet circa 1913. From verticle files located at the special collections room, Addlestone Library, Charleston, SC.



These images show annual pamphlets from the Ladies' Benevolent Society, published in 1913. The front page lists Mary Poppenheim as the Secretary and Chairman, and Louisa Poppenheim is represented on the committee

*Committee on Publication of Centennial  
Pamphlet*

MISS MARY B. POPPENHEIM, Secretary, *Chairman*

MRS. GEORGE E. GIBBON

MISS LOUISA B. POPPENHEIM

MISS CATHERINE P. RAVENEL, Superintendent *Ex Officio*

### 31 Meeting Street Chain of Title

Date	Book + Page	Grantor	Grantee	Type	Comments
Oct 28, 1791	E-6, P. 48	John Deas	James Ladson	Last Will and Testament	John's wife Elizabeth acts as executrix of Dea's will and sells the property.
Nov 2, 1815	M-8, P. 284	Judith Ladson	Jerimiah Yates	Last Will and Testament	Judith Ladson acts as executrix of Jerimiah's will and sells the house. *House built by Ladson in 1793*
May 1, 1833	P-11, P. 19	Jerimiah Yates	Charles Furman	Release	Yates purchases home and property for \$5,700
July 17, 1844	Y-10, P. 715	Charles Furman	Fred Smith (executor)	Sheriff's Sale	Fred Smith acts as executive for EM Beech's will.
April 3, 1877	E-17, P. 115	Bowen Sheriff	Christopher P. Poppenheim	Sheriff's Sale	Lot Sized Mentioned at 105 X238
March 3, 1958	L-19, P. 18	J. Palmer Gillard Jr	Mary Reed Lilly Bennett	Sheriff's Sale	Christopher Poppenheim left his house and properties to his daughter Louisa. When Louisa died in 1958 childless, the house went up for a sheriff's sale
December 30, 1983	D- 134, P. 328	Mary Reed Lilly Bennett	Craig Bennett	Love and Affection	15,000 dollar mortgage
Feb 27, 1984	H- 135, P. 154	Craig Bennett	Craig M. Bennett Jr.	Love and Affection	Purchased for one dollar
Feb 2, 1990	N-190, P. 285	Craig M. Bennett Jr.	Edward Jr. Bennett	Love and Affection	Purchased for one dollar

## Conclusion

31 Meeting Street in Charleston, South Carolina represents all the best characteristics about the city. Built in 1793 by Governor James Ladson, the structure is a classic Charleston single house, complete with a two story piazza and also a two story bay window. The house served as the home for women's suffragettes Mary and Louisa Poppenheim after their father purchased the house and property in 1877. The Poppenheim sisters went on to found the *Keystone*, a women's club magazine. The women also traveled around the south and later the country to encourage other women to get involved in the fight for women's rights. 31 Meeting has maintained the historical fabric of its outside façade, but further research must be made to survey the interior of the home. 31 Meeting Street represents Charleston in the best way, as it housed advocates for equality and change, and has stood tall despite the many disasters in Charleston's history.

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