

Miss Frost Tells Story Of Her Restoration Work

To The News and Courier:

So much has been written lately in kindly spirit about my restoration work of old Charleston houses, and my efforts to save the beautiful architecture of Charleston (all of which I greatly appreciate) that I think it not amiss to correct some of the misapprehensions set forth in the recent articles about the properties on East Bay between Tradd and Elliott streets. To go for a few moments into my Tradd street restoration, the houses that I restored on East Tradd street from a distressing state of delapidation, were Nos. 6, 8, 10, (No. 12 I bought but sold it unrestored; the buyer restored it); No. 19 Tradd street; Nos. 21 and 23 (two houses which I converted into one house, now known as No. 23 Tradd street; No. 49 Tradd street, known formerly as "Rackets Hotel" from the number of tenants in it; this house has such an attractive stairway that I was asked to sell it during the restoration period, which, of course, I refused, having consistently declined to sell the wood work, or to remodel the old house; I only restore them, a very different treatment from remodeling. No. 54 Tradd street, said to have been, and I think undoubtedly true, the original postoffice in early 1800. The marble step to the front door on the street has been worn thin on the edges, caused (I was told by former generation), by the constant passage of people going in and out for their mail; the postmaster lived in the dwelling rooms above. The balcony to this house is another of those mute and sad evidences of the vandalism that has been committed against these old homes; it was sold to me from another house, where I do not know, for it had already been taken down. No. 61 was the largest and handsomest of the Tradd street houses that I restored; this had very beautiful wood work, and I labored hard to buy the house to save that wood work, coddling the not too tidy children in the house so as to gain the good will of the owners; I regret and grieve to say that after my great efforts to save this house, some of the wood work was sold out of the house after I parted with it.

I also restored a tiny house on Ford's court, the smallest I ever tackled. It was so cunning that after selling it and undertaking the restoration for the purchaser, I had a house warming for it, as I also had for the largest, No. 61.

I next broke into St. Michael's alley, also a street of sad neglect and delapidation, once famed as the location of the law offices of some of our most noted attorneys of ante-bellum days. The street is one block long, named for the historic church of the Archangel St. Michael. It is the continuation of Elliott street (named for a distinguished citizen). Here I restored Nos. 4, 6 and 8 St. Michael's alley; the latter being the law offices of the Hon. James L. Petigru, one of our most able and distinguished attorneys. I am told that in the room to the right as one enters young students of law would sit about a

house which was the home of a famous lawyer. In his library on the second floor, the front door was so far gone that the contractor refused to repair it, so I had it sent to the mill and duplicated. This house is now happily owned by three delightful Charleston ladies who value it most highly; it gives me much pleasure to think that it is in safe and loving hands. Nos. 4 and 6 met an equally satisfactory fate. The owner of one of them told me that I must have had her in mind in restoring it, for it suited her so well when she came to Charleston as a bride.

I operated a little on the west end of Tradd street, converting an unsightly store into an attractive dwelling, but the west end of Tradd street is more modern and did not appeal to me.

At the time that I started all this work very few people besides myself were, apparently, interested in the saving of the beautiful homes of our city, but I had friends among the contractors and plumbers who kept me posted as to things that were about to be destroyed. Through the kind offices of my good friend, Mr. Julius E. Smith, of 91 Broad street, I learned that Colonel James Armstrong, of blessed memory, had taken a lovely fireplace out of his old home on Laurens street, why he did not say, but he said he thought the colonel would sell it to me. I telephoned the colonel and told him of my information and its source, and asked if I could buy the fireplace. His reply over the telephone, in his accustomed and well known good humor, was "My dear child, I will be only too glad to give it to you." It now adorns the fireplace in one of the drawing rooms in our old home at 27 King street.

Also through the kindness of the same friends I learned of two handsome iron balconies that had been taken down from somewhere on State street. Why they were taken

down or which houses they came from, I have never learned, but they were offered to me for \$50 apiece; very few, as I said, being interested in such things at that time. I bought them and placed them in our yard at 27 King street.

Meantime, after I had completed all that I was able to do in the way of restoration of East Tradd street, I was offered six houses on East Bay between Tradd and Elliott streets, together with considerable frontage on Bedon's alley to the rear, including two charming little old English brick two-story houses. These houses have had a very different fate from the Tradd street ones, and from the plans I had for them in buying them. Having sold all my Tradd street houses, mostly at considerably less than it had cost me to buy and restore them, I bought the East Bay properties for future income, with no intention of ever selling them. I intended to restore them and to keep them for investment. Dealing as I did in all this work almost wholly with borrowed capital, the interest charges became too heavy. They were all under purchase money mortgages, so that borrowing on second mortgages to restore them was at the time impossible. Then came the five years of deep depression when it was unwise and impossible to borrow. I finally had to start selling off sufficient of the buildings to relieve the pressure from the mortgages. The only ones I was able personally to restore were the two little houses on Bedon's alley. After restoring them I sold them to Dr. Edwin L. Kerrison. Still finding myself unable to finance the complete restoration as I had planned, I sold No. 97 East Bay to Mr. Dunham, of Long Island, and a little later I sold No. 95 to Mr. John McGowan. That left me still holding on precariously to four houses on the front, Nos. 91, 93, 83 and 87. No. 83 needed some immediate repairs and in doing this necessary work, the house having such distinct atmosphere and charm, my contractor and I became so fascinated by the possibilities that I could not stop work, and in order to continue the restoration, I had to sacrifice Nos. 91 and 93. So that now I am holding on tight to only two, Nos. 83 and 87, with the selfish consolation for my disappointment, that I still hold the two best in the block.

Meantime the two balconies had been reposing in our yard all this time, one for over twenty years, waiting to be used in the restoration of these houses. Both of the original balconies at Nos. 83 and 87 had been taken off before I came into possession of the houses. One, that from No. 87, I saw being hauled down East Bay on a truck and I asked my contractor who had bought it and he told me, but I will not mention the parties. The other of my two balconies, in an all-guarded moment I agreed to sell to Mrs. Punnett, at No. 1 Tradd street, the lovely one she now has on the front of her house. I regretted my decision to sell it and tried to buy it back, but she held me to it, knowing it was

other one, and I had an offer of \$100 for it because it would have gone to Florida and this I was not willing for. I was holding both of them for Nos. 83 and 87 East Bay. The one that I retained for all these years is now adorning No. 83 East Bay, the house that is now in process of restoration.

This account of my years of effort at restoration may seem a bit too personal for the public eye, but it may be of interest to some, and will serve to correct what was a somewhat, though unintentional, misrepresentation, in that it was said that the sale of the last two and the restoration of No. 83 represented the consummation of my hopes. On the contrary, it represented the miscarriage of my plans and a bitter disappointment to me that I was not able to restore all my holdings, and to keep them. I have never commercialized my restoration work, or my love of the old and beautiful things of Charleston. A friend once told me that I had too much sentiment to make money, and I think it is partly true. At any rate it has been a great pleasure to be able to take some small part in their restoration and preservation of our old homes, and to point the way to others who were more blessed in their financial ability to carry on the work. It has been a privilege to make my contribution toward such an important and worthwhile work.

This, briefly, is the story of my effort to preserve the old Charleston as I know it; this letter may be too personal for publication. It may be considered too egotistical for me to even think of putting it in writing; but if it will point the way to others to join us in the fight to preserve the old-time and old-world beauty of Charleston I shall not have labored or written in vain.

SUSAN P. FROST.

Charleston.

23 Tradd