

Unpretentious Exterior Conceals Mahogany Paneled Room

By ROBERT P. STOCKTON
Special Writer

The unpretentious exterior of the small house at 60 Church St. conceals the existence of a Georgian drawing room, fully paneled in mahogany, with mantel and woodwork of the same material.

The drawing room woodwork and paneling was an unbelievable "splurge" at a time when mahogany was an expensive wood normally used only for furniture and for decorative effect in houses.

Some of the city's finest Georgian mansions — the Miles Brewster House, the Branford-Horry House, the Heyward-Washington House — employed mahogany only on a small scale, in bits of fretwork and other decorative details.

In some 18th century houses, such as at President George Washington's home at Mount Vernon, Virginia, rooms were paneled in common woods, such as pine, and "grained" to resemble more expensive mahogany.

Why a small house such as 60 Church St. should have a complete mahogany room is something of a mystery.

Records of the property and research by attorney John J. Kerr and this writer indicate the house was probably built by James Verree, a house carpenter, sometime before 1771.

Verree, then living in Burlington, N.J., sold the property to Stephen Duvall for 2,400 pounds currency, by

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deeds of lease and release dated Aug. 31 and Sept. 1, 1771.

Verree had bought the site on March 5, 1754, from William Chapman Jr., of James Island, a planter, and his wife Mary, for 600 pounds currency.

The page of the deed book on which that transaction was recorded is ripped, and some of the property description is missing. However, it is believed that the lot which Verree sold in 1771 was part of a much larger lot which he purchased in 1754.

According to tradition, Verree also built 56 and 58 Church St., to the south of 60 Church St. There are similarities among the three structures.

Since Verree was a house carpenter, it is possible that he used the front room of 60 Church as a sort of display of his skill.

The mahogany room was not only ostentatiously expensive, but also stylish in its design, in such details as the frieze of the mantel, where an arabesque fret is inlaid with pale wood.

There is a tradition that a sea captain built the house and paneled the drawing room with mahogany collected in his travels. Duvall, who purchased the property in 1771, was

a mariner, and that is possibly the source of the tradition.

Duvall apparently died intestate and the property was devised to Mrs. Catherine Duvall. She died by April 11, 1821, when her will was proved.

In November 1821, Jervis Henry Stevens, executor of her estate, petitioned the Court of Equity for the sale of Mrs. Duvall's house and lot on Church Street.

The property was sold at auction on June 22, 1822, and John Fraser purchased it for a high bid of \$3,900.

Fraser sold the property on Feb. 27, 1829, for \$2,000, to Joseph H. Waring, as trustee under the marriage settlement of Ann Ball Waring and Laurence Ryan.

After Ryan's death, his heirs asked the Court of Equity for sale of the property. It was offered for sale at public auction on March 7, 1844. An advertisement of the sale in the Charleston Courier describes the "Lot of Land, with the buildings, thereon, situate in Church street ... and known as the residence of the late Laurence Ryan."

The deed of conveyance for the sale has not been found recorded, but the property was apparently purchased by William Roper Brailsford, who, on the date of the public auction, mortgaged the property to Edward R. Laurens, master in equity, for \$4,168.

The Courier ad had stated terms of the sale as "one sixth cash; the balance on a credit of three, four, five and six years with interest payable quarterly, secured by bond and mortgage of the property, the buildings to be insured by the purchaser, and the policy assigned."

Brailsford's heirs sold the property on March 26, 1847, to Miss Eliza Oliveria Cromwell. Miss Cromwell kept a "noted primary and grammar school" in the house, according to family tradition.

Miss Cromwell died in 1886, and in 1916 her nephew, Robert Elliott Mellichamp, sold the property to Louise J. Small.

It passed through other hands until 1941 when it was purchased by Kate Louise Hanahan. Miss Hanahan operated The Little School, believed to have been the city's first pre-school, at the location.

After her death the property was devised to her brothers John Hans-



Interior Of Drawing Room At 60 Church St.

Staff Photo by Tom Spain

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Charleston new home for Siddons

By BILL THOMPSON
 Of The Post and Courier staff

Enough writing. This year Anne Rivers Siddons just wants to play with her house.

The new one, on Church Street in Charleston's historic district, far from the home in Maine she and her husband enjoy in summer, and at a distinct remove from the city with which she has always been identified — Atlanta.

"I want to look at my house," Siddons says wistfully. "I want to fiddle around in Charleston and learn it. I don't want to sit down and write a book right now. I've never had time to just delight in a house and this is a house I think you ought to delight in."

Come November, the popular novelist will get her chance. While maintaining the Victorian farmhouse on Maine's Penobscot Bay, and with plans to keep a small place in the Georgia capital, Anne and Heyward Siddons will make the Holy City their permanent residence.

"It's a simple old house built in 1758," says Siddons, whose latest book "Low Country" was released by Harper-Collins on Wednesday. "It looks like a Georgian house, but like one of the plain old Georgian homes. We can't wait to move in."

Not that the process will be easy. Siddons has lived in the same Atlanta home for 30 years. Everything of lasting significance that has happened to her as an adult has occurred within its walls.

"Yet I think, 'How silly; it's just wood.' When the women's magazines talk to me about the move, they ask the silly question, 'How does it feel to you, as a woman, to be leaving the house in Atlanta?' I say 'Talk to my husband. He's grieving just as hard as I am over leaving it.' It's just assumed that I would be more sentimental, and he would be the one ready to forge right ahead."

The title of the new book, in which Edisto Island figures prominently, is pure happenstance, Siddons insists, not the result of shrewd marketing.

"Our move here just happened. There's no connection with the novel. We found the house when we found the house, that's all. My family had never moved much, but it finally occurred to me, 'Why can't I move if I want to?' And my husband grew up in Georgetown, so it feels like

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home.

"Church is not the grandest street, perhaps, but it certainly feels like Charleston probably was a long time ago. There was a house whose lines I just loved and it looked to be in wonderful shape. There was a for sale sign and I knew I had to have a look. We walked in and we knew it was right."

Siddons, who until recently averaged a book a year, has slowed the pace of late. Book publicity for "Low Country" will be limited to a scant four days, most of it on the phone. Today, relaxing in the parlor of the Lodge Alley Inn, she is savoring one luxury of success — time.

"For being a good girl I got 18 months between books on my current contract. Between writing and touring this gives me some life left over and a chance to get fully reacquainted with Charleston."

Siddons has had friends in the area for years, and she has always embraced the city and its people fondly. But why, as a seventh-generation Atlantan, did she contemplate a move in the first place?

"I've always wanted to live here. I remember visiting Charleston when I was very small around Christmastime, walking around and looking into people's windows and getting some sort of strange feeling that this is where I was supposed be. I've always been pulled to the city. The resonance, the weight, of all those lives and all those years remains very attractive to me. Twenty or 25 years ago, when I began to know some of the people here, the place never felt strange to me. It always felt right. And it couldn't be more different than upland Georgia."

Siddons is in thrall to the coast, she says. But why Charleston over another Old South venue, such as Savannah?

"Savannah doesn't feel as much like a real place to me as Charleston. People may say of Charleston that it's a stage-set city, but I never thought of it that way. Williamsburg is that, but Charleston is real. Savannah — cold is maybe not the word — but I feel like I'm looking at a collection of beautiful tombs. Maybe it's because I don't ever see much street life in all those squares, and anywhere you go in Charleston the streets are just as alive as can be. That's one thing that really drew me here."

Another of the things that delighted Siddons when she first began to get to know people in the city was how the reality of Charleston exploded so many of the stereotypes that have haunted it. And, of course, there was the city's



Staff Photo by Stephanie Harvin

Anne Rivers Siddons looks forward to setting up a home in Charleston.

enduring beauty.

"You can see the mint julep on the veranda sort of thing, but I found a remarkable amount of energy and eccentric crankiness. The most compelling thing, though, is very simple: It's just so beautiful. The one thing I ask of Charleston is that it just let me look at it. I'm not accustomed to seeing beauty everywhere I look."

Siddons has long been associated with Atlanta, and not just because several of her best-selling novels, including "Peachtree Road" and "Downtown," are set therein. She also has penned books set in Maine ("Colony"), Italy ("Hill Towns") and California ("Fault Lines"), among others. How long, one wonders, will it be before readers start associating her with Charleston?

"I never felt like an Atlanta writer and I don't think I'm going to feel like a Charleston writer. I'm going to feel like a Charleston resident. I don't know if people will begin to associate me with Charleston. But it is a useful shorthand, in a way. I think it was probably inevitable that I'd write something about the Charleston area one day. How could you not?"

"But to try and superimpose a particular Charleston view of the world on a book would be bad writing, and extreme hubris. Still, the Charleston view of the world interests me."

"Low Country," at base, is a story of a

wealthy developer's wife who opposes her husband's plans to build a resort on an unspoiled island which harbors wild ponies. As is customary, Siddons' heroine is a bird with a wing down.

"It's my woman-heal-thyself-beside-the-ocean book. And it's the shortest book I've ever written. I don't know why I feel that five years ago I would have gotten twice the length out of this. But I came to a place where I found that it was moving very rapidly, much faster than my usual books, I decided to let it go and see what would happen. It simply finished itself sooner. I can't account for that, except that maybe I've been writing too much."

"This book felt like it ought to be focused and smaller — a sensation I have never had. I've always had the irresistible urge to stroll along and examine the context. Maybe it's time to learn to leave some stuff out. This one is more focused, but no less complicated."

One character in the book was inspired by a tale told her by old friend Alex Sanders, not simply president of the College of Charleston but a raconteur of considerable finesse.

"We have a house party up in the mountains in October every year that we've all been going to for 20 years or so, and Pat (Conroy) and Alex are both members of that. We've all learned that by the second day, Alex is going to start telling stories. That's when he comes into his own."

"And it behooves you to be quiet and listen. Pat's gotten at least two books out of him and I've gotten one. I've also gotten a character in 'Low Country' out of one of his stories. He's just playing to the audience, but he is the richest source of material I've ever seen. Alex is one in a set of friends here that I treasure, and I hope to make many new ones. I will keep my friends in Atlanta as well."

Keeping her readers shouldn't be much of a challenge, though she's contemplating a curve ball of sorts. Siddons says there is a wonderful ghost story she has wanted to write for years. The time could be right after her current book contract expires.

Meantime, there's the (mostly) pleasurable task of deciphering Charleston's mysteries, of acclimating, of redefining herself.

"The more time I'm here I realize I'm just going to have to completely relearn how to be in the world. Part of that is exciting, and part of it is tiring, and part is daunting. I do know that I need to do this. But I know it's going to take me much longer than the rest of my life to learn it like I'd like to learn it."

Bill Thompson covers books and movies. Contact him at 937-5707.