

5 Alexander Street



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Introduction

The city of Charleston, South Carolina is one of the nation's finest examples of America's colonial past. A living city that has incorporated historic construction and tradition into its everyday life, each street is lined with traces of the victories and defeats of a 300-year-old city that millions travel to experience each year. Each street, lane and alley serve as extensive branches of a larger family tree, as family lineages and younger generations still hold proud the homes and businesses their ancestors created and developed centuries earlier along the coastline and lush lands of the peninsula. Behind each door lie stories of families, of natural disasters and wars, and of architectural progression and preservation. The historical discoveries of America's best-preserved city are endless.

The research and information compiled in this report has been conducted through an Historic Charleston Foundation internship and is the result of the desire to uncover and understand the history and people that shaped No. 5 Alexander Street. It discusses the architectural development and family ownership that possessed the residence from its origins as an original lot granted by King Charles II's Lord Proprietors to becoming a oceanfront residence for some of Charleston's most influential businessmen. In a section of the city so rich in both colonial and modern history, this paper is written to showcase a building that has help defined Ansonborough for the past two hundred years. Before one can truly understand the history behind No. 5 Alexander Street, one must be familiar with the history of the Holy City and the neighborhood in which the structure resides.

The Walled City of Charles Town

Charleston, South Carolina began as a piece of uncharted territory, fertile land shaped by winding waterways and a lush coast line untouched by the civilized hand. This land soon became the desire of foreign influence, and in 1663, King Charles II of England granted land known as Carolina to eight of his proprietors, many of whose names can still be seen through the towns and counties of the Charleston area today. By the 1690s, this southern peninsula had already welcomed its first colonists and was divided into lots, granted to those appointed by the King's Lord Proprietors. (Fig. 1) These lots defined the urban design of the town's original streetscape, creating the foundation of Charleston's city plan as we see today.

As the most southern English capital in the American colonies and with the constant threat of the nearby Spanish and French, by 1704 Charles Towne became the only English walled city in North America.¹ (Fig. 2) Built to protect the most intensely developed area of the colony, these walls bounded Charles Town for the first fifty years of its existence and controlled the societal and architectural development. As the need for the city's fortifications declined, the walls were taken down and by 1740, Charles Town was once again a peninsula able to expand and progress to the lands once ostracized by

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¹ Butler, Nic. "Rediscovering Charleston's Colonial Fortifications." Walled City Task Force. 2010. <http://walledcitytaskforce.org/>.

wasn't until 1903 the street became an extension of the Alexander Street that already existed in Mazyckborough.

After the death of Christopher Gadsden in 1806, lots were continuously leased and developed, as Gadsden's Green had become home to a sprawling city and a region of most desired. An early nineteenth century newspaper advertisement described Gadsden's Green as "...situated in one of the most desirable and healthy situations in the neighborhood of Charleston" with "having a full view of Bar and Shipping," and "commanding view of the Harbor,"⁴ and on June 11, 1807, after a suit involving the Gadsden family and Christopher Gadsden's estate executors, fifteen lots of land went up for sale, including those on current day Laurens and Alexander Streets.⁵

In 1813, an advertisement for No. 1 Middle Street in the *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser* described a waterfront property, suitable for a family and comparable to the breezy atmosphere of Sullivan's Island. Several eighteenth and nineteenth century newspaper articles marketed the corner of Lauren and current day Alexander Streets as perfect for a merchant hoping to watch his ships, a planter wishing for an airy environment to keep a garden or crops, or a large family hoping to find a sanitary and healthy part of the city to raise children. Now surrounded by urban sprawl and two hundred years of land and building development, Ansonborough sits enclosed, several blocks from a coastline it once looked after.

In the late 1960s, the beginnings of an urban renewal project targeted the area in an effort to revitalize the neighborhood, and Alexander Street was cut in two, making room for the Gaillard Auditorium and an extension of George Street. Today, the south parcel of Alexander Street is only a fragment of Gadsden's Middle Street.

Despite its changing history and modern threats, the corner of Laurens and Alexander Streets is home to some of the most significant late eighteenth and early nineteenth century houses that survive in the area. No. 5 Alexander, with its towering piazza and unique building history, has survived periods of neglect and urbanization. It is a hidden treasure in Charleston's historic district and will remain a symbol of the city's past for future generations.

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⁴ "For Private Sale." *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*. March 23, 1813.

⁵ RMC, Charleston, S.C. Deed Book E9, p. 148.

48 Laurens Street: An Architectural Survey

Historic Charleston Foundation Archives

Built ca. 1811 to 1812, No. 5 Alexander Street is a frame Charleston single house, three stories in height, with a narrow rear wing extending the north elevation. The main gabled roof has pedimented ends, and the rear wing has a plain gable. A two-tier piazza with a hipped roof extends along the south elevation and wraps around the rear of the main house. A separate two and one-half story frame kitchen house is attached to the rear hyphen by a one-story connector added in 1970.

The south elevation within the porch has beaded weatherboard siding, while the east façade is clad in plain weatherboards, leading to the speculation that the façade was rebuilt in the later 19th century. The piazza screen wall has flashboard siding, and the entry surround has a dentiled cornice above fluted pilasters. Both levels of the piazza have Tuscan columns and turned balustrades. Window openings have 9/9 sash, and the single entry doors have simple transoms. The house has a low foundation of brick piers and newer brick infill.

The kitchen house has 6/6 sash in the short window openings, a center entry, and two gabled dormers at the south elevation. It retains two large brick chimneys, and a short stair hall window at the north elevation.

The interior of No. 5 Alexander Street retains its historic plan and much of the historic wood trim: dentiled cornices, shallow mantelshelves with dentil work and reeded paneling, simple door and window surrounds. Few alterations resulted from the ca. 1975 rehabilitation. Missing stair rails and newels were replaced, the east stairhall window was infilled, and the ground floor piazza enclosure was reworked as a breakfast room. The kitchen house was rehabilitated as a separate residence in 1970. The existing flooring was replaced with salvaged historic flooring, and most interior partitions and openings were rebuilt. The early stair with its treads, newels, and pickets was preserved, and all four fireboxes were retained with exposed brick finishes. The entry surround is a later addition.

No. 5 Alexander Street is a very good example of an early nineteenth century frame Charleston single house with an attached dependency. In setting, size, scale, mass and material, the building contributes to the surrounding Charleston Historic District. It was rated as Category 3: Significant in the 1973 Feiss-Wright Inventory of Charleston, described as "good architectural quality, vernacular, appealing, curious, interesting, to be retained and protected."

Less than two years later, an advertisement in the *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser* on August 29, 1812 requested the sale of No. 1 Middle Street and explained the property as having six rooms, a piazza all around, “most desirable situation, having full view of the Bar and Shipping” with a coach house with room for two carriages, a

¹⁰ RMC, Charleston, S.C. Deed Book E9, p. 148.

stable for three horses, kitchen, wash and pantry, pigeon and fowl houses with a well and garden with fruit trees. An article in the same newspaper on January 30, 1813 described the property similarly, except as having four rooms with fireplaces, two garret rooms and a small garden in the front of the house, causing questions about the amount of floors and the location of the auxiliary buildings to arise. By the mention of four rooms two garret rooms, was the roofline altered and a third story added to the residence since is original construction? Was the side yard, now housing small garden, crowded with out buildings during the first decades? Further research and study of the building material may provide answers.

Chancognie eventually sold the lot in February of 1813 for nearly \$2,000.00 more than he bought it, confirming the idea that Chancognie constructed a new residence on the lot.¹¹ As directories never show Chancognie actually living at No. 1 Middle Street, Chancognie may have had a business strategy of purchasing the lot, redeveloping the property with a nicer residence and renting the space, only to sell it for a much higher price. No. 5 Alexander Street, today, may not have been a sister property of No. 48 Laurens Street after all, but rather a business indenture for a nearby home owner who saw potential profit.

Today, the exact construction date of old No. 1 Middle Street is somewhat unknown and existing history records do not provide details on any specific dates to which the house was erected. The August 1812 advertisement published in the *News and Courier* confirms that the structure on No. 1 Middle Street was built between Chancognie's purchase on March 11, 1811 and August 29, 1812. Advertisements for his other property may provide some insight as well, as an 1813 article advertising the sale of No. 48 Laurens Street in the *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser* further confirms a construction date of a new house on No. 48 Laurens Street around 1811-1812, the same time frame in which he bought No 1 Middle Street. The article stated that the "whole of the buildings is about three years old..." on the adjoining property, and due to similarities in many aspects of both homes, such as the interior woodwork, Chancognie could have hired the same carpenter for both homes. Whether he built the houses on both properties at the same time or the house on Laurens Street first, records confirm that the house that now standing at No. 5 Alexander Street is an original Chancognie construction.

Based on research, Chancognie came to South Carolina from France by the turn of the nineteenth century and was soon naturalized as an American citizen. He was involved in maritime relations and had a counting house at No. 5 Fitzsimmons Wharf, the current location of the U.S. Customs House on East Bay Street, up until 1816 when Chancognie starts to disappear from city documents and records. Based on newspaper articles and descriptions of this year, Chancognie was selling everything from the "neatest furniture" inside his residence on Laurens Street to his business on the Charleston coast.¹² Perhaps Chancognie had further business to take care of in France.

The idea of purchasing No. 1 Middle Street for rental purposes was a common theme of the early owners of the residence. In 1813, 60-year-old Keating Simons, a Revolutionary war hero and prominent planter, purchased the property for his 27-year-old son, Maurice.¹³ For the next fifteen years, Maurice Simons, titled as Register of Mesne

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¹¹ RMC, Charleston, S.C. Deed Book F8, p.375.

¹² "Advertisement for Sale." *City Gazette And Daily Advertiser*. May 12, 1815.

¹³ RMC, Charleston, S.C. Deed Book F8, p.375.

Conveyance, resided at No. 1 Middle Street until the death of his father in 1834. The 1834 directory shows a disappearance of Maurice on Middle Street and there are no records that confirm his existence in Charleston until his death in 1845. Between the time Keating and Maurice disappear from No. 1 Middle Street records, New Jersey native and future member of the New York State Senate John H. Otis was recorded as boarding at the residence and in 1846, he was replaced by two customs officers by the names of John M. Righton and John M. Rinker. At the time of Rinker and Righton's duty as officers, which included managing the ports as inspectors of the imports weight and measures, the Customs House was housed at the Old Exchange Buildings before the 1853 construction of the East Bay Customs House we see today.¹⁴

No. 1 Middle Street remained in the ownership of the Simons family and in 1852, Robert Elfe, the Charleston city sheriff and former South Carolina State Senator, took his residence at No. 1 Middle Street.¹⁵ Robert Elfe was a relative of Rachel Elfe, wife of the late Maurice Simons and a well-known man along the east coast. Upon his death on May 28, 1953, both local and national newspapers, including the New York Times, announced his death.

According to tax assessment records, by 1852 No. 1 Middle Street consisted of two wooden buildings, with a third building added by 1854. Between the years 1853 and 1854, tax assessment increased, and continued to do so until 1855, most likely because of this added structure.

Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, the residence continued to pass down through the Elfe family. By 1860, Miss Maria Elfe and Miss Eliza Elfe, referred to as "the Missess" in the 1860 Charleston City Directory, lived at the address and by 1867, George Elfe, a planter, took over residence at the property. Due to great debts, however, the property was auctioned for sale in 1872 and sold by the executors of his estate.¹⁶ Tax records show that all auxiliary buildings included in the initial sale to the Elfe family did not exist at this time.

Living only a few doors away at No. 21 Laurens Street, George Lamb Buist of Buist & Buist attorneys at law on Broad Street bought the property in 1872 but continued to live on Laurens Street. (*Fig. 7*) Buist, like Chancognie, may have noticed this lot from his residence on Laurens Street as potentially profitable, for by the end of his three-year ownership in 1875, he sold the lot with three wooden buildings for \$6,000 more than he bought it for, yet tax assessment records do not signify any major changes to the property. No one was recorded as living in the residence within this time period and in an 1872 map of Charleston, No. 1 Middle Street appears to be three stories, contradicting the 1813 floor plan description of four bedrooms and two garret rooms. (*Fig. 8*) Whether it was simple repairs, an added story or a better housing market, George Lamb Buist made a profit from this property, just as others did before him.

In April of 1875, No. 1 Middle Street was sold from George L. Buist to John Conroy. For the first seven years of his ownership, neither him nor his family was recorded as living at a Middle Street address. In an 1882 plat from the City Engineer Plat

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¹⁴ Poston, John. *The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City's Architecture*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press. 1997. 109.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Thomas, W. H. J., "Lot was part of Large Grant." *Do You Know Your Charleston?*. *News & Courier*. December 7, 1970.

Book, not only does the documentation prove that the address had changed to No. 3 Middle Street during Conroy's ownership, but it questions the floor plan of the house severely. (*Fig. 9*) In this map, No. 3 Middle Street is recorded as only two stories, with a two-story outbuilding. Although this property is absent from the 1886 earthquake records that surveyed the structural damage done to the properties by the natural disaster, an 1888 Sanborn Map records the residence as three stories. Although the 1882 plat contradicts the earlier 1872 depiction of Charleston and the 1888 Sanborn Map, it confirms that that No. 5 Alexander may have been only two stories one point. (*Fig. 9*) Based on architectural studies of No. 5 Alexander Street today, it is believed that at some point before the turn of the twentieth century, renovations were done to the overall house, including the addition of a third floor, a new roof and the street façade was replaced. Could it have been that this residence suffered from so much earthquake damage that it needed to be drastically restored? Was it completed before the earthquake and John Conroy's purchase? Does the fact that John Conroy was a stevedore and the owner of John Conroy & Co. at the corner of Market and State Streets, dealers of "coal, wood, shingles and gravel" confirm the belief that the house was altered during his ownership? It is not whether or not the façade and height of the building was altered, but rather by whom?

It is in 1890, after the death of John Conroy, that his 28-year-old son, John and wife Mary, live at No. 3 Middle Street until John's death in 1918. During their residency, another one story auxiliary building is added to the rear of the property, whose ghost mark still remains today, and Middle Street disappears from Charleston city records. By 1907, the address changes to No. 51 S. Alexander.¹⁷

In 1919, John and Mary's children, Miss Mamie L. Conroy and John J. Conroy, are recorded at No. 51 S. Alexander and by 1923 the property changes hands once again. In November of that year, the heirs of Mary Conroy sold the property to Benjamin W. Donnell, owner of Donnell's Bicycle Store at 190 King Street, now the Audubon Gallery¹⁸ and by 1929, the address of this one hundred year residence changes address for the last time to No. 5 Alexander Street.

In the 1936 to 1938 directory, the Donnell's are one of only a few families in Ansonborough with a listed telephone number. No. 5 Alexander was still defined by a three-story dwelling with a side and rear porch, complemented by a two-story kitchen house and one-story garage, and by 1942, the house became a rental property once more. From 1942 to 1945, Ameal Milligan, a painter of Roper Hospital, and wife Lottie, along with five children, lived at No. 5 Alexander before it was sold to George Seignious in April of 1945 for a time frame of one year.

Louis Lucas, an African American pipefitter on the Charleston Naval Base, purchased No 5. Alexander for \$4500 in 1945.¹⁹ For 15 years, the Lucas family, including Louis's wife and three children, called this building home during a time when African Americans faced many obstacles and violence, especially in the South. They experienced the hostility of segregation and finally the beginnings of the Civil Rights

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¹⁷ *Charleston City Directory, 1907*. [microfilm] South Carolina Room. Charleston County Public Library. Charleston, SC.

¹⁸ *Charleston City Directory, 1923*. [microfilm] South Carolina Room. Charleston County Public Library. Charleston, SC.

¹⁹ Thomas, "Lot was part of Large Grant."

Closing

A city rich with historical evidence of times past, both on the streets and within the century old structures that line them, Charleston prides itself on family tradition and commemoration of those who have come before us. From street names to plaques on exterior street fronts, everyday Charlestonians acknowledge the accomplishments and legacy of the men and women who formed and defended a city threatened by wars, natural disasters and modern development. Recognized for successes in unique aspects of Charleston's culture, No. 5 Alexander Street saw a diverse group of powerful and influential individuals throughout the centuries, all of whom called this land on the corner of Laurens and Alexander Streets their own.

Throughout the structure's two hundred year existence, the walls of No. 5 Alexander saw the lives of planters, painters, families and single women unfold, as each changed the history and landscape of the building that stands there today. Whether it was a space to rent to locals and relatives or a place to call home, this property was been desirable to a group of owners that played influential roles in the development of America's Holy City.

Appendix

5 Alexander Timeline

- 1803:** Physician Thomas B. Smith was living at No. 1 Middle Street.
- 1806-7:** George W. Annely, a Charleston merchant, was recorded living at No. 1 SW Middle Street.
- 1807:** Martha Gadsden, Charles Gadsden and Mary Morris filed suit against the executors of Christopher Gadsden estate, Phillip G. Thomas, Morris and William Drayton, claiming that the gifts and legacies under Gadsden's will exceeded the actual income and proceeds of the estate.
- June 11,** *City Gazette and Advertiser*: Lots 32-42, according to Joseph R. Purcell's 1806 Plat of Christopher Gadsden's estate, are for sale. No. 5 Alexander was Lot 41.
- June 18:** Lot 41 was sold to Joseph Yates through public auction.
- 1809:** George Wilding Annely was still residing at No. 1 Middle Street. Owner Joseph Yates was living at No. 11 Church Street.
- Mar. 11, 1811:** Simon Jude Chancognie purchased this lot of land at No. 1 Middle Street.
- 1811-1812:** Chancognie re-developed the property (most likely constructing a new house on the lot) and shorted the lot by 15' to the South for his next-door residence.
- Aug. 29, 1812:** *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*: No. 1 Middle Street was posted for sale with the following description: six rooms, a piazza all round, "most desirable situation, having full view of the Bar and Shipping" with a coach house with room for two carriages, a stable for three horses, kitchen, wash and pantry, pigeon and fowl houses with a well and a garden with fruit trees "for immediate possession."
- 1813:** The buildings consistently served as the rented home of George W. Annely. The directories show a merchant named John Lewis also living at No. 1 Middle Street.
- January 30, *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*: No. 1 Middle Street, at the corner of Laurens and Middle Streets, along with Chancognie's Lauren's street residence, is still for sale as owner is "leaving the state in the early spring." The property is described as 45 feet by 100 feet having four rooms with fireplaces, two garret rooms, a side and end piazza and cellar beneath; kitchen, pantry, fowl house with a large

stable and carriage house; small garden in the front of the house with fruit trees and a well.

February: Chancognie sold the lot with a wooden dwelling to Keating Simons.

- 1816-1830:** No. 1 Middle Street served as the home of Keating Simons's son, Maurice Símons, a Charlestonian factor and Register of Mesne Conveyance.
- 1835-1836:** Maurice Simons is not recorded in directories. W. Simonson, planter, resided at No. 1 Middle Street.
- 1840:** The property is still rented out, as John H. Otis called No. 1 Middle Street his home.
- 1849:** Customs officers John M. Righton and John M. Rinker are recorded residents at No. 1 Middle Street.
- 1852:** Robert Elfe, the Charleston city sheriff and relative of the Simons family, took his residence No. 1 Middle Street.
- 1856:** No. 1 Middle Street was passed down through the Elfe family as Mrs. Maria Elfe and William Elfe lived at No. 1 Middle Street.
- 1852-1856:** No. 1 Middle Street was owned by Miss Maria Elfe. The property consisted of two wooden buildings in 1852, with a third building added by 1854. (From the years 1853-1854, tax assessment went from \$2600 to \$3000 and 1855 \$4500).
- 1859:** “Misses Elfe” resided at No. 1 Middle Street.
- 1860:** Miss Martha Elfe and Miss Eliza Elfe lived at No. 1 Middle Street.
- 1866:** The 1866 Directory of Charleston does not record any Elfes listed at this address.
- 1867-68:** George Elfe, a planter, took over residence at the property.
- 1870-71:** There are no Elfes recorded in the City of Charleston directories.
- 1872:** It was sold as part of the Estate of George Elfe to George Lamb Buist.
- 1874-1875:** Attorney George L. Buist never resided at this residence. He recorded at No. 21 Laurens Street and No. 207 Meeting Street.
- April 1875:** It was sold from George L. Buist to John Conroy.

- 1889:** The property is listed as No. 3 Middle Street with no Conroys registered at this address.
- 1890-93:** The Charleston directories of 1890-93 record John Conroy of John Conroy & Co. living at No. 3 Middle Street.
- 1899-01:** John and Mary Conroy resided at No. 3 Middle Street in city directories.
- 1907-17:** Directories from the first half of the twentieth century show John and Mary Conroy residing at No. 51 Alexander Street, along with John J. Conroy, a clerk at Bradstreet Co.
- 1919:** Miss Mamie L. is recorded as living at No. 51 Alexander Street, along with John J. Conroy.
- Nov. 1923:** The heirs of Mary Conroy sold the property to Benjamin W. Donnell.
- 1934-1938:** B.W. and Ethel D. Donnell resided at No. 5 Alexander.
- 1942-1945:** City directories show that Ameal and Lottie Milligan, along with five children under 16, lived at No. 5 Alexander.
- April 1945:** Donnell sold the property to George W. Seignious.
- Nov. 1946:** George Seignious then sold the property to Louis Lucas, an African American pipefitter on the Charleston Naval Base.
- 1946-61:** Based on Charleston City directories, Louis and Helen M. Lucas, with their three children, lived at No. 5 Alexander, along with Louis and Maebell L. Powell and their two children, also an African American family.
- 1960-65:** There were three buildings on the property.
- 1965:** Historic Charleston Foundation bought the property as part of the Ansonborough neighborhood initiative.
- 1968:** This property is listed as “vacant” in the Charleston directory.
- Feb. 1968:** The property was sold to Richard Jenrette.
- 1969:** During this year, the property was recorded in tax records as consisting of two buildings on the property. It was sold to Patricia O’Keefe.

- 1970:** Mr. and Mrs. Roy Cole bought the property and renovated the kitchen house as their own residence.
- 1975:** Sandy and Donna Logan bought the property and completed the rehabilitation of the main house.
- Nov. 1987:** Robert M. and Benita B. Schlau bought the property.
- Oct. 2004:** Christopher K. Phillips, Jr. and Martha G. Phillips bought the property.
- Aug. 2007:** Franklin W. McCann and Alexandria W. McCann bought the property.
- Oct. 2007:** Georgia H. Meagher bought the property.

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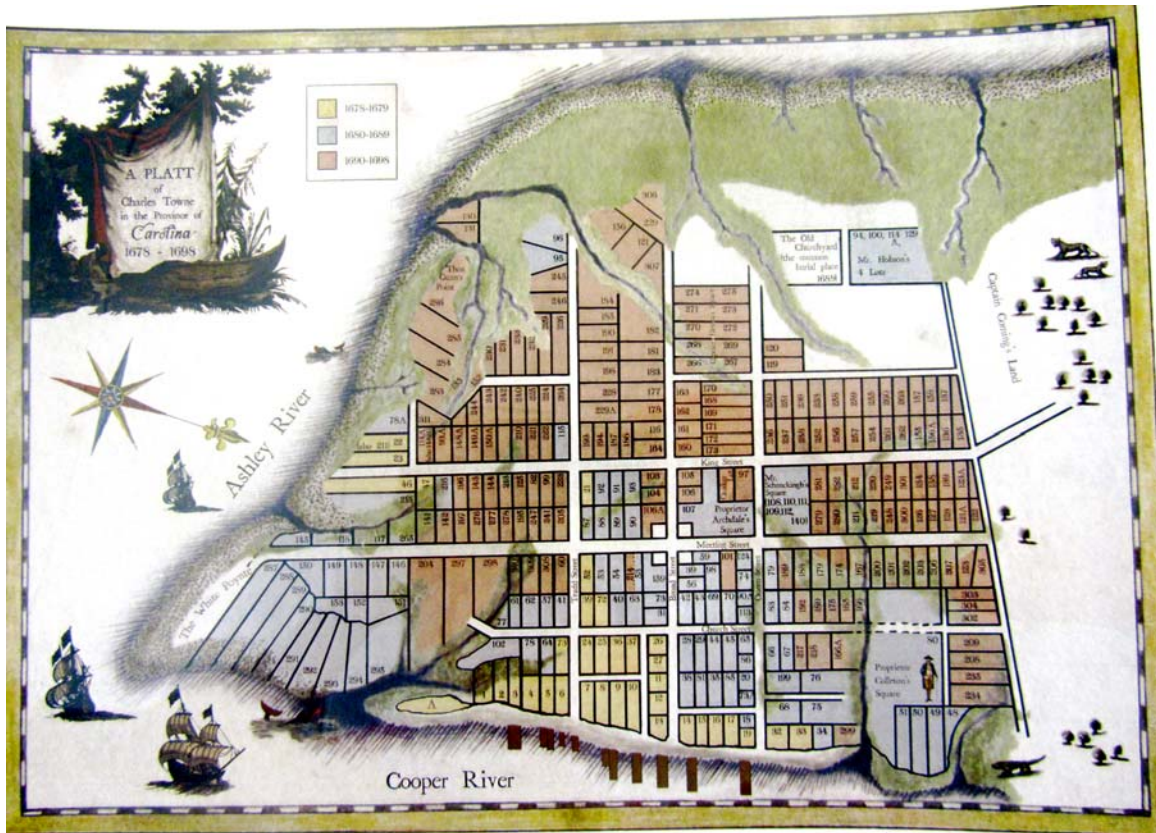


Figure 1: "A Platt of Charles Towne in the Province of Carolina, 1678-1698." Maps of Charleston County. South Carolina Room. Charleston County Public Library. Charleston, SC.



Figure 2: Detail from the 1711 "Crisp Map" of Charles Town. . <http://walledcitytaskforce.org/>.

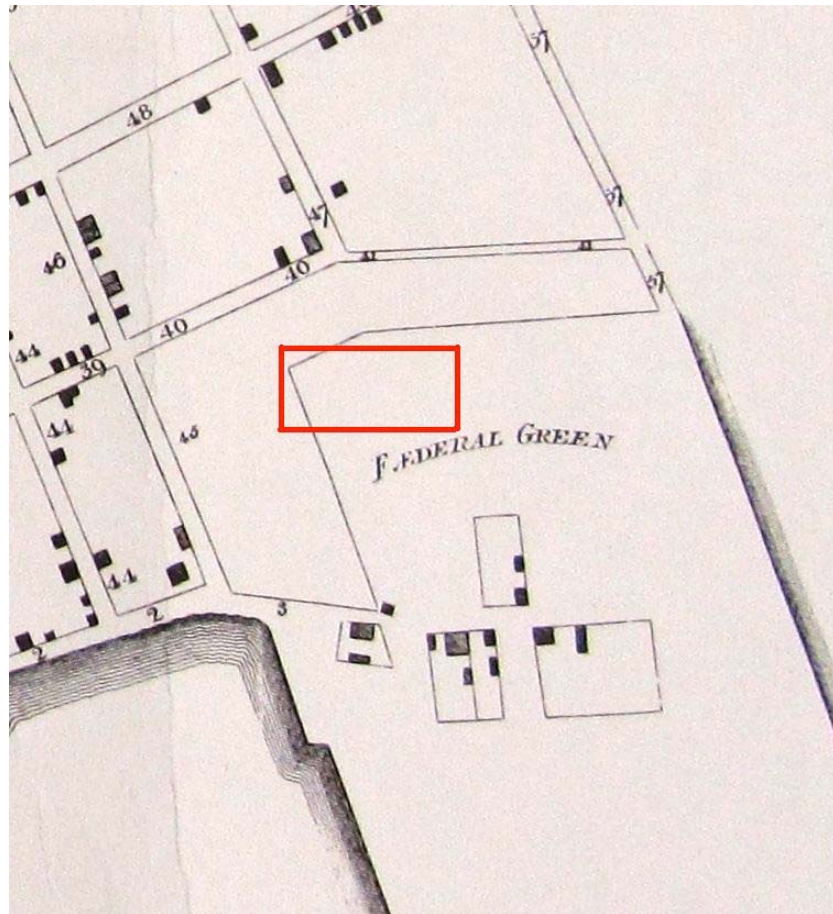


Figure 3: Detail from "Charleston 1788 Ichnography Map." South Carolina Room, Charleston County Library.

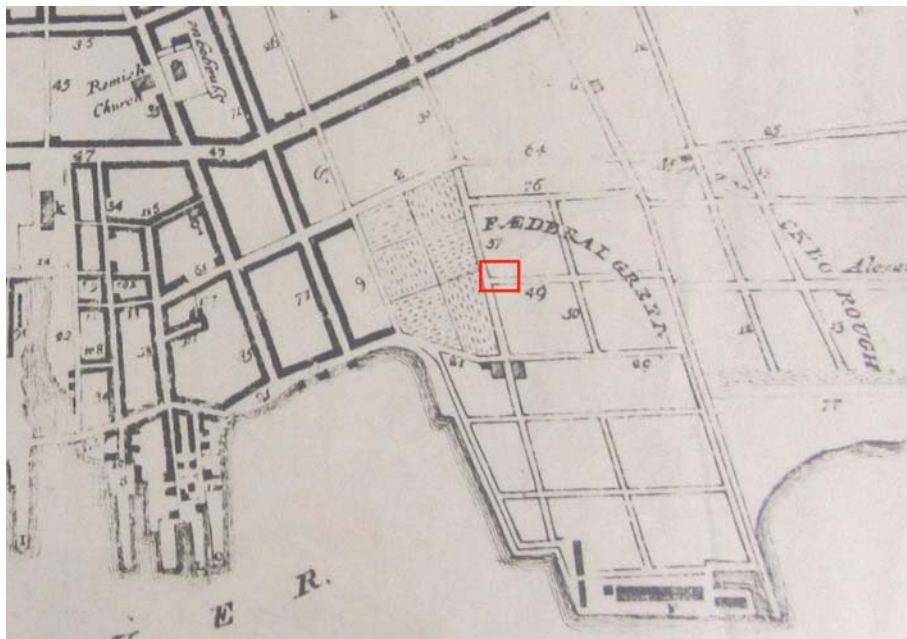


Figure 4: Detail from "Plan of the City of Charleston, South Carolina," 1802. South Carolina Room, Charleston County Library.



Figure 5: Joseph R. Purcell. Plat of the Estate of Christopher Gadsden. RMC, Charleston, S.C. Plat Book C, p. 3.



Figure 6: Miniature of Joseph Yates; painted by Edward Greene Malbone, 1802. Photo courtesy of the Gibbes Museum of Art.

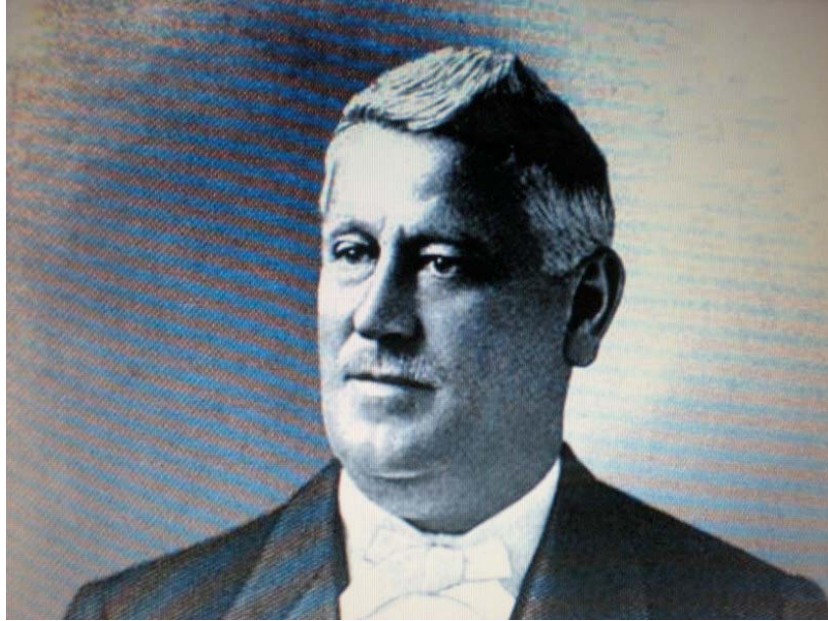


Figure 7: George Lamb Buist; Photos courtesy of the www.findagrave.com.

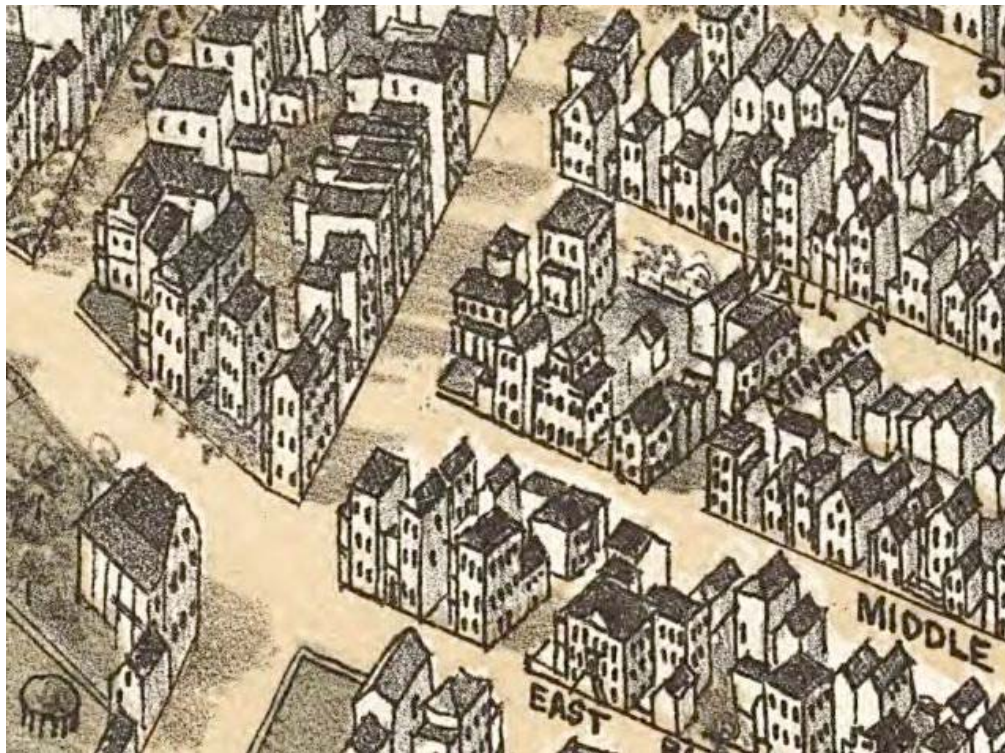
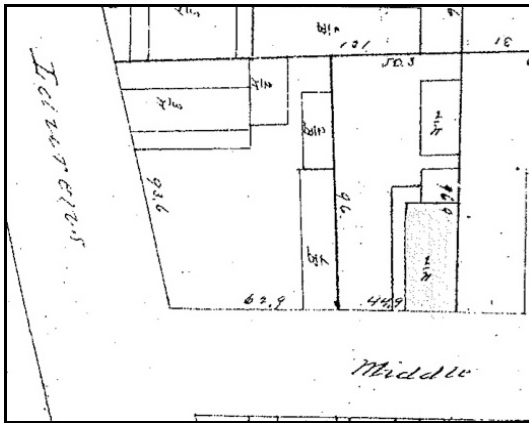
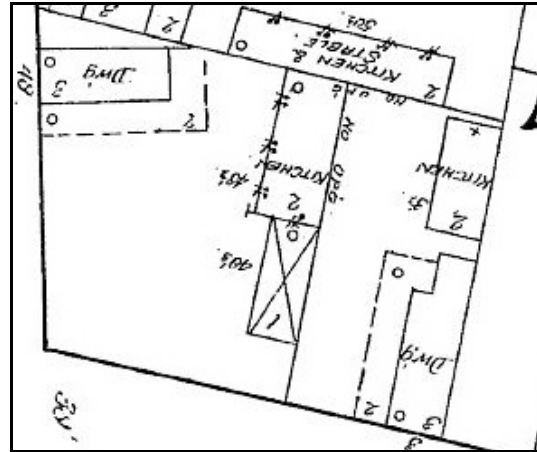


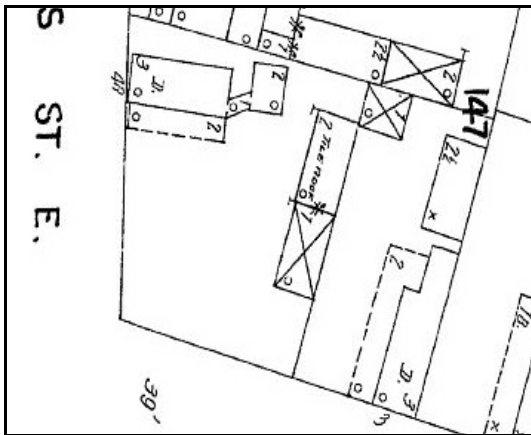
Figure 8: Bird's eye view of the city of Charleston, South Carolina 1872. Drawn and published by C. Drie.



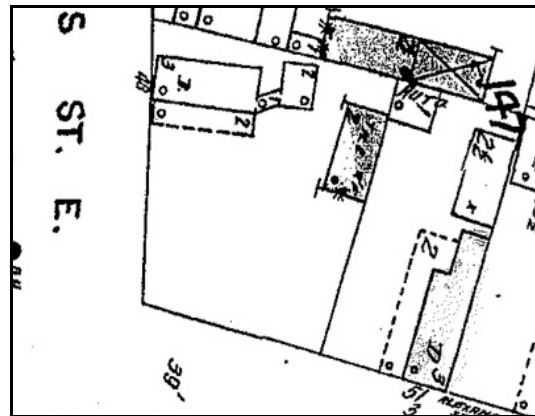
A. 1882



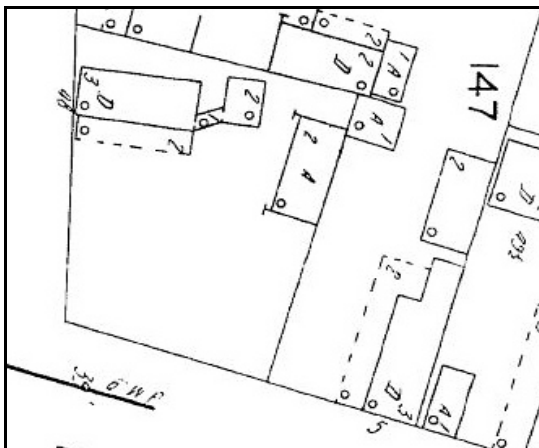
B. 1888



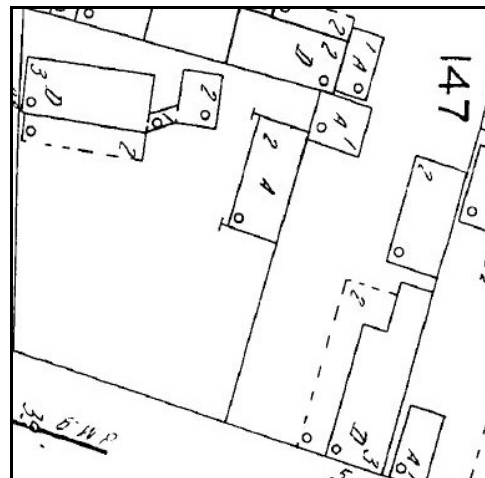
C. 1902



D. 1929



E. 1944



F. 1951

Figure 9: A. 1882 Plat from the City Engineers Plat Book. RMC, Charleston, S.C.; B-F. Sanborn Maps. Charleston County Public Library, Charleston, S.C. www.sanborn.umi.com. No. 48 Laurens Street recorded in upper left corner of each map.



Figure 12: Photograph by R. A. Nettles, *News and Courier*, 1961; Photo courtesy of the Photo Collections of the Margareta Childs Archives at Historic Charleston Foundation.