

75 King St.

Post = 1000 + 2 COWS

Renovation reveals home's 5 kitchens



ROBERT BEHRE/STAFF

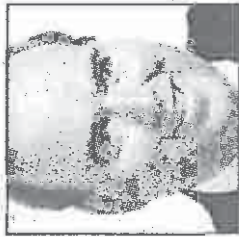
These ovens are believed to part of a third kitchen in the house at 75 King St. A recent renovation revealed hundreds of artifacts in a hidden space above the smaller beehive oven (right).

The renovation of the 18th-century home at 75 King St. started simply enough, with the idea of removing some gas logs from its fireplaces, redoing a kitchen and master bathroom and applying some new paint. Like a lot of projects, it got out of control.

"We found an earlier house inside this house," says Richard Marks, the contractor who worked for new owner Antony Merck.

Before starting, both knew the 3 1/2-story stucco-over-brick house was one of the older surviving homes in the city, dating from about 1750.

Because of its age and because



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it was relatively unaltered over time, the house ranks in the top rung of the city's four classifications of architectural significance.

As work progressed, the house gave up some surprising secrets. The southern facade, which now has five bays — typical in the Georgian era — originally had six bays. Also, Marks' crews found evidence of doors that had been covered up and walls that once divided the house.

The evidence indicates the building likely was a tenement in the early 18th century, before its owner either came into good fortune or sold it to someone else, and it was converted into a more symmetrical Georgian house.

"Most people see a building this

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early and think it was built this way," Marks says. "You don't think of it having a period before this. This house had its most major renovation before this was a country."

Marks says the logic behind the tenement configuration remains a mystery, a good subject for future research. Since Merck was interested in using the house as his home, it made no sense to try to return to that original, divided plan.

Later, owners made much more subtle changes, such as switching window sashes on the first floors to a more Federal-era design, where the glass panes are larger and the mullions thinner. The older sashes remain on the third-floor windows. Also, some of the house's mantels were replaced in the Federal and Greek Revival styles.

Marks' crews removed 1,756 ceramic tiles on a first-floor fire box, conserved them by removing salt and reapplied them with a protective seal that would prevent them from soaking up water and salt from the brick fireplace.

They also discovered the house has had at least five kitchens in its history, including a fireplace in the original tenement believed to be used for cooking, a large hearth in a mid 18th-century kitchen house now linked with a 20th-century hy-

phen, a more elaborate series of ovens on the other side of that kitchen house, a new kitchen space added on the rear 20 years ago, and the kitchen that Merck inserted in a 50-year-old space created by linking the kitchen and main houses.

"You've heard of the House of Seven Gables? This is the House of Five Kitchens," Marks says.

Merck, who bought the house last year, says he valued it because of its lack of alterations, and the decisions were geared to keep it that way. It still includes much of the original woodwork.

As work progressed, Merck got a clearer understanding of its history, including a surprising cache of hundreds of artifacts that collected in a space above a beehive stove, a space that was bricked over about 50 years ago. The items, which Merck donated to the Charleston Museum, apparently fell through the kitchen house's second floor.

These items include coins, ceramics, pottery shards, pipe stems, marbles, nails, buttons and even scraps of newspaper.

"There was a day when I walked in here around noon and said, 'OK, guys, the scholarly, historical research is over,'" Merck recalls with a smile.

While the job of removing the gas fireplaces and converting them

back to burn wood became much more involved than Merck anticipated, he seems clearly pleased with the result.

"What we ended up with is a comfortable house with — and I mean this nicely — a hodgepodge of wonderful things from different periods," he says.

The history of the house indicates that builder William Elliott had it built sometime before 1740. It's considered one of the city's older single houses.

However, Marks says the house appears to have had an earlier door on the street side, and its piazza likely was added in the early 19th century, so the house's current appearance as more or less a typical single house is not original.

On the outside, the panes in a second-floor bathroom window tucked off the street were changed from clear to opaque (a change that had to go before a hearing of the city's Board of Architectural Review). Also, its former pink color is gone.

"It's been lime-washed now to represent what a real stone stucco color would have been," Marks says.

As a result of Merck's attention to detail, the Historic Charleston Foundation presented him with its Robert N.S. and Patti Foos Whitelaw Founders Award.

Similar awards were given to Spoleto Festival USA for its rehabilitation of the Middleton-Pinckney House at 14 George St.; to Laura and Stephen Gates for the rehabilitation of the Brantford-Horry House at 59 Meeting St.; and to Caroline and Raymond Seitz for restoration of the George Chisolm House at 39 East Battery. The foundation also gave the Samuel Gaillard Stoney Craftsmanship Award to Alan Coopersmith of Custom Painting and Wallcovering and to James Monty Hinson for his skills in furniture making and architectural woodworking, including the pulpit of the Edisto Presbyterian Church and the stairs of the Sword Gate House at 32 Legare St.