

# Edward T. Edwards House

244 Ashley Avenue

c. 1925

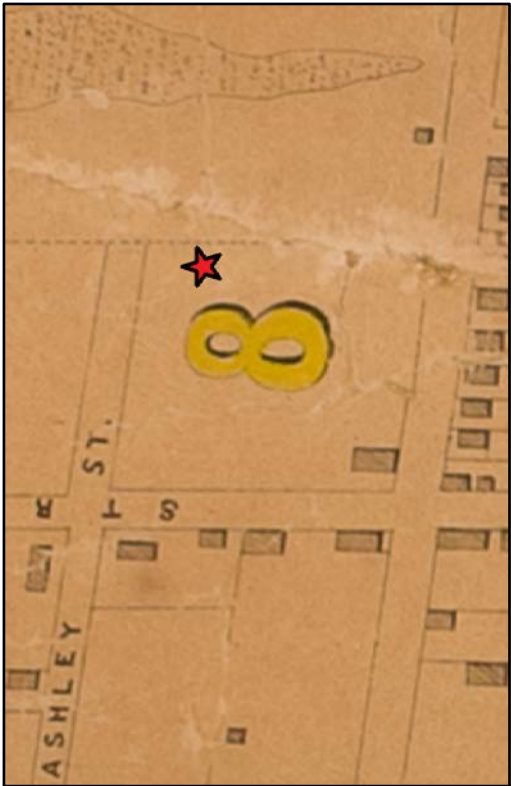
The house at 244 Ashley Avenue is a very attractive house with an interesting history, but the history of its peculiar lot is very complicated. The lot has three parts: a front section that leads to the house, a middle section on which the house was built in the 1920s, and a rear section that gave the house a backyard. While most lots in Charleston began as larger parcels which were pared down over the years, the property at 244 Ashley Avenue had the opposite experience: The lot grew to its current dimensions by having adjacent property pasted onto it over 150 years.

When the Bridgens and Allen Map was drawn in 1852, the only house on the entire block was 225 Rutledge Avenue at the corner of Spring Street. Ashley Avenue (still known as Ashley Street) dead-ended into Horsey’s Farm just short of where Bogard Street would eventually cross.

In the 1860 federal census, **Hannah Nelson**,<sup>1</sup> a free woman of color, lived on Ashley Avenue with her husband Martin Nelson<sup>2</sup> and several other people including at least some family members. By the time of the 1861 City census, three of the lots on the east side of Ashley Avenue belonged to her, a free woman of color, including the land that would become 244 Ashley Avenue. She occupied 242 Ashley Street herself; her sister, Binah Gadsden, lived next door at 244 Ashley Street; and 246 Ashley Street was used to house slaves.

In 1837, Ms. Nelson had bought her sister and nieces and nephews from Ann S. Smith, for whom they had been slaves, but she could not free them since state law forbade the emancipation of slaves. Instead, they remained Ms. Nelson’s own slaves. Ms. Nelson wanted to provide for her nieces upon her death but, since they were slaves, she could not do that either. So, she had planned to leave the nieces (as slaves) and her own sizeable estate to three Charleston men she trusted to care for them. Estate planning was wise given Ms. Nelson’s wealth; at the start of the Civil War, she had about \$20,000 which she had made from selling eggs and dairy in the Market and living frugally. Ms. Nelson made appropriate plans, but the Civil War rendered those plans moot.<sup>3</sup>

**Ms. Nelson** later married Denmark Vesey, Jr., son of the famous slave revolt leader and, after the Civil War, became the matron for the Old Folks’ Home for elderly black Charlestonians. In March



<sup>1</sup> b. abt. 1800

<sup>2</sup> b. abt. 1790

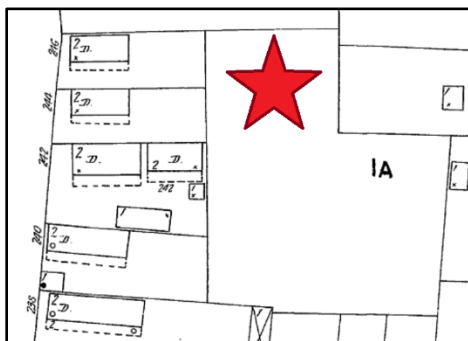
<sup>3</sup> “A Remarkable Will Case,” Daily News, March 28, 1873, at 1

1870, her advisor, Samuel Bennett, called upon three witnesses, and Mrs. Vesey signed a new will in his office. When she died January 1, 1872, her nieces and nephew were shocked to learn that they had been cut out of her will almost completely; the sisters were given the right to reside in a shanty on Hassel Street for as long as they lived, and her nephew got \$20. Mr. Bennett, on the other hand, received a house on Spring Street, the properties on Ashley Avenue, and the rest of Mrs. Vesey's property.

The relatives filed a lawsuit against Mr. Bennett, claiming that the will was invalid. At the trial, experts testified that the will was in Bennett's handwriting and that Hannah did not know what it said. The jury found that the will was not her last will and set it aside. Because the status of Hannah Vesey's estate was not finally settled by the South Carolina Supreme Court until 1875, no additional improvements were probably added until that time.<sup>4</sup>

Over the next several years, the exact title to specific pieces of Mrs. Vesey's lands becomes hazy. The deeds to the property contain identifiable errors including incorrect references to the owners of neighboring property. The actual size of the lots seems to have changed too; there is no explanation other than a simple mistake, but at least two of the lots were trimmed by 30%. This much seems certain: On February 19, 1877 (but not recorded on June 27, 1881), the children of Binah Gadsden divided up the Ashley Avenue property that had belonged to their aunt among themselves:

- Ann Brown (late Ann Mathews) received a 40 by 40 lot that was the west half of 242 Ashley Avenue (then numbered 52 Ashley Avenue).<sup>5</sup> Her brother, Titus Gadsden, received the rear half with a three foot wide right of way along across Ann Brown's property.<sup>6</sup>
- **Betsey Price** got the middle section at 244 Ashley Avenue in which her mother had lived that was 40 feet wide on Ashley Avenue and 80 feet deep.<sup>7</sup>
- Rosanna Holmes received the northern part that was 42 feet wide on Ashley Avenue and 80 feet deep.<sup>8</sup> This portion later became 246 Ashley Avenue.



**Edward Theodore Edwards** (sometimes known as Theodore E. Edwards) bought the properties at 244 and 246 Ashley Avenue. First, Ms. Holmes sold 246 Ashley Avenue (inexplicably reduced to 28 feet wide) for \$174.45 on March 14, 1895.<sup>9</sup> Second, Richard Bee bought 244 Ashley Avenue from the estate of Ms. Price<sup>10</sup> for \$600 on November 3, 1900,<sup>11</sup> and then sold the property (inexplicably narrowed to 28 feet wide) to Mr. Edwards on May 21, 1903.<sup>12</sup>

The lot at 244 Ashley Ave. was shown on the 1902

<sup>4</sup> The case was appealed, but the decision stood. *Bennett v. Mathewes*, 5 S.C. 478 (1875).

<sup>5</sup> Deed book A19, page 205

<sup>6</sup> Deed book U18, page 212

<sup>7</sup> Deed book O18, page 163

<sup>8</sup> Deed book A19, page 203

<sup>9</sup> Deed book A22, page 236

<sup>10</sup> Martin Price and Margaret Price were the actual sellers on behalf of the estate of Betsey Price.

<sup>11</sup> Deed book O23, page 299

<sup>12</sup> Deed book C24, page 221



Sanborn maps as only 28 feet wide with a small two-story single house. Eventually that house was removed and the lot would become the access to the existing 244 Ashley Avenue, built on a large parcel that filled much of the center of the block. Walter P. Boylston, who had bought 235 Rutledge Avenue in 1905, sold a portion of the irregular lot to black Mr.

Edwards on April 9, 1906, for \$350.<sup>13</sup> A plat drawn for the sale from Mr. Boylston shows the segment that was sold to Mr. Edwards; it nearly doubled the length of 244 and 246 Ashley Avenue.

No details have been found about the earlier structure at 244 Ashley Avenue other than that it was a two-story wooden single house. The building was likely a very simple house; sporadic entries in city directories indicated that it was home to several black laborers and their families, often with several families living in the house at the same time. Among the occupants, Margaret Price and Richard Bee both lived there for several years each; other occupants seem to have been short-term renters.

Mr. Edwards lived in 246 Ashley Ave. starting in 1904, the same year that the neighboring house at 244 Ashley Ave. disappeared from the city directories. No evidence of a building permit has been found yet, but stylistically the house at 246 Ashley Avenue is consistent with other houses built at the turn-of-the century; it is clearly not the single house seen in the 1902 Sanborn maps. Mr. Edwards likely demolished both 244 and 246 Ashley Avenue and built 246 Ashley as his own residence, doubling the size of his lot in 1906 by adding the Boylston property.

The house at 246 Ashley Avenue was very likely not just his own house, but his own creation. Mr. Edwards was one of the leading black contractors in Charleston. He was the contractor for many of the notable houses on the lower peninsula. He ran a detailed ad on November 24, 1914.<sup>14</sup>

In 1920, Mr. Edwards passed the reins of his business to his son, and his career took a very different turn. Instead, Mr. Edwards became the first president of the Charleston Mutual Savings Bank and held that post for the rest of his life.<sup>15</sup> The plans to start the black bank had begun in 1919,<sup>16</sup> and the charter was granted in

## E. T. Edwards

### Contractor and Builder

Phone 2784-J      246 Ashley Ave  
Charleston, S. C.

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Thirty-five years' experience in the Building and Construction line makes me capable of handling any job. Ask any of my customers.

I have constructed many buildings, of all kinds, and refer you to them for reference.

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## Let Me Figure With You

<sup>13</sup> Deed book D22, page 77

<sup>14</sup> Evening Post, Nov. 24, 1914, at Dev. Supp. 4

<sup>15</sup> "E.T. Edwards Is Dead," News and Courier, Jan. 1, 1933, at 3A

<sup>16</sup> "Colored Men Organize Bank," News and Courier, Aug. 27, 1919, at 10

January 1920.<sup>17</sup> Technically, Charleston Mutual Savings Bank was the first black bank in Charleston, but the People's Federation Bank at 218 St. Philips Street is often given that honor; Charleston Mutual

Savings Bank received its charter in January 1920, about three months before the People's Federation Bank was chartered.<sup>18</sup> However, People's Federation Bank opened at 218 St. Philips Street a few months before Mr. Edwards' bank opened at 542 King Street. Regardless, Mr. Edwards' bank outlasted People's Federation Bank and closed at the end of 1937, only after fully paying out all the accounts.<sup>19</sup>

By 1925, Mr. Edwards had the existing house at 244 Ashley Avenue built on the rear of his combined lot, and he and his wife, Angie (nee Miller), were living in the new house by 1926. The house at 246 Ashley Avenue became a rental property. Mrs. Edwards (right) died at the new house on June 27, 1927, and Mr. Edwards conveyed the new house to his daughter, **Eva Edwards**,<sup>20</sup> on March 19, 1928. The house, at that time, included the Boylston property on which the house was built and the old 244 Ashley Avenue lot was access to the street.<sup>21</sup> Mr. Edwards remained at the house and died on December 31, 1932.<sup>22</sup>

Ms. Eva Edwards married bartender and trumpet player with the U.S. Navy Julian Lebrilla,<sup>23</sup> and they occupied the house for the next several decades. When Mrs. Lebrilla died in 1979, she left the house to her children Rosita L. Kenney (nee Lebrilla), Julian C. Lebrilla, Carmen L. Vann (nee Lebrilla), and Carlos E. Lebrilla.

The heirs sold it to **Leopold F. Napotnik and Patrick L. Pernell** on May 27, 1983, for \$47,000,<sup>24</sup> removing the house from the Edwards family's ownership for the first time in more than 120



<sup>17</sup> "Charters Granted," Evening Post, Jan. 20, 1920, at 13

<sup>18</sup> The People's Federation Bank which was issued a charter on March 15, 1920.

<sup>19</sup> "Negro Bank in Liquidation," Evening Post, Dec. 31, 1937, at 2

<sup>20</sup> (b. Dec. 27, 1904; d. May 15, 1979)

<sup>21</sup> Deed book U33, page 219

<sup>22</sup> "E.T. Edwards Is Dead," News and Courier, Jan. 1, 1933, at 3A

<sup>23</sup> (b. Nov. 26, 1897; d. Feb. 23, 1982)

<sup>24</sup> Deed book S131, page 276

years. On May 26, 1983 (recorded September 2, 1983), landscape architect and planner Patrick L. Pernell sold his interest to school teacher Leopold F. Napotnik with the assumption of a mortgage with a balance of about \$42,000.<sup>25</sup> On October 29, 1987, Mr. Napotnik conveyed it for \$76,000 to Patrick L. Pernell.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, in 1990, 244 Ashley Avenue's lot assumed its existing dimensions. The lot was expanded on June 21, 1990, when Adolph G. Hollings conveyed the backyard to Patrick Pernell for \$12,500.<sup>27</sup>



Mr. Napotnik died on May 13, 1991, while living at 244 Ashley Avenue,<sup>28</sup> but Mr. Pernell remained in the house until selling it in 1996. The next sales of the house were to relatively short-time owners. On September 20, 1996, Patrick L. Pernell sold the house to **Robert E. L'Esperance and David M. Larsen** for \$158,500.<sup>29</sup> On October 2, 1999, **James H. Rogers and David M. Larsen** bought it for \$58,250.<sup>30</sup>

**Earl E. Jackson and Suzanne Leda Jackson** bought the house for \$325,000 on August 28, 2000.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Deed book V132, page 356

<sup>26</sup> Deed book A170, page 55

<sup>27</sup> Deed book H194, page 112

<sup>28</sup> News and Courier, May 14, 1991, at 2-B (obituary) (b. Dec. 3, 1944)

<sup>29</sup> Deed book L274, page 231

<sup>30</sup> Deed book K336, page 661

<sup>31</sup> Deed book U353, page 572