

“TURNING SHAMBLES INTO SHOWCASES:”  
HERBERT A. DECOSTA, JR’S ROLE IN THE  
ANSONBOROUGH REHABILITATION PROJECT  
IN CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Graduate Schools of  
Clemson University and the College of Charleston

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Science  
Historic Preservation

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by  
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In short, the living room section of the lengthy estimate prepared by Herbert DeCosta illustrated the aesthetic changes made to the interior of 58 Anson Street that contributed to the historic presentation of the property.

Along with the decorative alterations and basic repairs, DeCosta also updated the plumbing and electrical systems in the house and provided for the installation of a new heating and air conditioning system. Herbert DeCosta's restoration of the exterior and interior of 58 Anson Street produced a dwelling that was both historic in its appearance and its details and modern in its equipment.

### **Comprehensive Rehabilitation: 82 Anson Street**

Much of DeCosta's work in Ansonborough encompassed all categories of stabilization and maintenance, exterior restoration, and interior renovation. Taking the buildings from the basic stabilization phase through all of the steps of exterior and interior restoration, Herbert DeCosta helped to realize the vision of comprehensive rehabilitation as set forth by Historic Charleston



**Figure 4.41:** 82 Anson Street indicated in pink. Map drawn by author.

Foundation. These major rehabilitation projects transformed the neighborhood from its near slum status to one of the most desirable and well-maintained sections of Charleston. In the remarkable example of 82 Anson Street, Herbert DeCosta provided for the comprehensive restoration of the house while incorporating elements of new structural

design (*figure 4.41*). Hired by the Historic Charleston Foundation in 1967, DeCosta served as the contractor for the rehabilitation and restoration of the exterior and interior of the historic structure and as the designer and builder of an addition. Described by HCF's executive director Frances Edmunds as "our most ambitious restoration," the successful revitalization of this structure illustrates the quality of work and the preservation ethic of Herbert DeCosta.<sup>42</sup>

Constructed in 1799 by merchant Josiah Smith for his daughter Mary, the three-story brick dwelling on a high basement is a massive example of a Charleston single house. Built with grand proportions, the house possesses large rooms, spacious hallways, wide porches, and high ceilings. Its interior exhibits delicate woodwork with subtle details that remain indicative of the early Federal period in Charleston. A two-story, free standing kitchen house stood behind the structure and was eventually connected to the main building by a small wooden hyphen.<sup>43</sup> Over the next 150 years, this simple but elegant house changed ownership a number of times, and its gradual decline into a tenement house paralleled the neighborhood decline in the twentieth century.

Prior to its renovation in 1970, the house served as a single family dwelling for wealthy members of Charleston's society, a boarding house, a two-family dwelling, and eventually as the Oakman Apartments (*figure 4.42*). Purchased by Clarence Oakman in 1938, the property was divided into eight or nine apartment units in the main house while additional dwelling spaces were carved into a separate one-story structure on the

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<sup>42</sup> Frances Edmunds, "Miss Mary Smith's House," dated March 22, 1970, HCF, Property Files, Box 5, 82 Anson folder.

<sup>43</sup> The architectural description of the structure relies heavily on Jack Leland's article, "'Traveling' House Rests on New Site," *Charleston Evening Post*, November 30, 1970.

property. Described in an article in the *Charleston Evening Post* as a “rabbit warden,” the crowded tenement served as home to as many as forty-one people before its rehabilitation.<sup>44</sup> An entrance was carved into the western façade of the building that led into the basement, and a staircase was cut through to the main drawing room. Partition walls were constructed throughout the house to accommodate the large number of tenants, and the



**Figure 4.42:** 82 Anson Street before its move and rehabilitation. Courtesy of HCF Photograph Collection.

piazas were enclosed to provide “delectable” baths, kitchens, and dinettes for the various units.<sup>45</sup> In spite of the virtual architectural homicide to the frame of the building, much of the interior woodwork and other details remained intact. The age of the structure, its history and architectural significance, and the fatality of its future inspired HCF to take excessive measures to save the building from demolition.

Currently positioned on the corner of Anson and George Streets, this structure stands in its second location. Originally constructed to the north at 86 Anson Street in the

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<sup>44</sup> Jack Leland, “‘Traveling’ House Rests on New Site,” *Charleston Evening Post*, November 30, 1970.

<sup>45</sup> Edmunds, “Miss Mary Smith’s House,” March 22, 1970.

area cleared for the municipal auditorium, this large brick building stood in the direct path of the extension of George Street eastward to East Bay Street. In spite of the excessive cost connected with moving a brick building, the Historic Charleston Foundation chose to finance the transfer of the structure approximately 100 feet directly down the street to the south (*figures 4.43 and 4.44*).<sup>46</sup>



**Figure 4.43:** 82 Anson Street before its move from its original location at 86 Anson Street at the end of George Street. Demolition because of plans to extend George Street encouraged the relocation of this structure. The original 82 Anson Street is the two-story structure to the right. Courtesy of HCF Photograph Collection.

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<sup>46</sup> Some sources state that the house was moved 100 feet, while others state that the distance moved was approximately 100 yards. Based on observation, 100 feet appears to be the more accurate estimation.





**Figure 4.44:** 82 Anson Street (foreground) in its original location at 86 Anson Street. Note the enclosed piazza and street entry, as well as the frame structures to the left. These residences were all demolished to make room for the new municipal auditorium. Courtesy of HCF Photograph Collection.

In order to acquire a new site for this structure, two of its less impressive neighbors were demolished to clear a double lot that would provide ample space for the house and a spacious garden. The original house at 82 Anson Street was a wooden structure and was described as being “handsomely faced with peeling red asbestos shingles” (*figure 4.45*).<sup>47</sup> The structure that occupied the northeastern corner of Anson

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<sup>47</sup> Edmunds, “Miss Mary Smith’s House,” March 22, 1970.

and Laurens Streets was a three-story brick building that was constructed around 1900 and housed the Finkelstein grocery store (*figure 4.46*). The upper floors of the structure were divided into apartments like many of its neighbors. Because HCF considered these two buildings to be architecturally inferior to the dwelling at 86 Anson Street, they chose to sacrifice both to provide a site for what HCF intended to serve as a gatepost on the northern boundary of Ansonborough.



**Figure 4.45:** Original structure at 82 Anson Street that was demolished to provide a site for 86 Anson Street. Courtesy of HCF Photograph Collection.



**Figure 4.46:** Finkelstein Grocery Store located at 78 Anson Street that was demolished to provide space for a garden for the new 82 Anson Street. Courtesy of HCF Photograph Collection.

Herbert DeCosta was consulted on this project in its earliest stages. Hired in 1966 to demolish the frame building at 82 Anson Street, the H. A. DeCosta Company worked on this project from its inception to its completion.<sup>48</sup> Following the demolition of the structures at 78 and 82 Anson Street, the brick structure at 86 Anson Street was slowly moved down the street by L. A. Chitwood, Jr., a specialist in house moving. HCF made

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<sup>48</sup> Although H. A. DeCosta Company was hired by HCF to demolish the building at 82 Anson Street, the company subcontracted the actual demolition to James Alston. ARC, H. A. DeCosta, Jr. Papers, Box 38, 82 Anson Street file.

the decision to move the main structure and to abandon the auxiliary buildings on the property.

Rolled down the street on logs, the house was positioned on its new site on top of steel beams with no foundation underneath. DeCosta described the dangerous job of reinserting a foundation under this house in his 2003 oral history interview with HCF: “We had to put a new foundation, new footings, and build the walls back up. We had to join the existing walls, the walls that were left, and that was really sort of a dangerous job because, see, some of that brickwork had fallen.”<sup>49</sup> DeCosta met with architect Sidney Stubbs of the Lucas and Stubbs architectural firm to discuss suggestions for measures required to make the building structurally sound. Seven recommendations were made:

1. Install earthquake bolts on north and east sides at first, second and third floor levels.
2. Repair cracks in brickwork that are structurally unsound and replace loose brickwork.
3. Install needles and shores under the tops of the second floor east windows and remove all masonry from between windows and ground floor doors in order to eliminate dangerous bulge in east wall.
4. Rebuild brick walls that were removed using steel lintels to reinforce jack arches in new brickwork.
5. Rebuild or tie in bulge where window was closed with bricks on north side.
6. Extend missing floor joists in first floor Stair Hall area in order to provide necessary tie-in for north masonry wall.
7. Install missing brickwork on ground floor of south side where same is needed to support brick wall above.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Herbert DeCosta, HCF Oral History Project, Transcription, 8.

<sup>50</sup> Herbert DeCosta to Frances Edmunds, May 6, 1968, HCF, Property Files, Box 5, 82 Anson Street folder. A duplicate copy is available at ARC, H. A. DeCosta, Jr. Papers, Box 38, 82 Anson Street folder. Of special note, hand-written question marks are penciled beside numbers two and seven on both copies.





the agent promised to “leave them [the porches] intact, if possible.”<sup>51</sup> The plan to retain the original porches was reflected in an early estimate prepared by the H. A. DeCosta Company. This extensive estimate, prepared on April 27, 1967 before the building was moved, included the following plans for the piazza:

- Remove weatherboarding, new flooring and partitions that have been added.
- Replace porch bearers that have been removed from first floor porch.
- Replace rotten and missing beams on south side of first floor porch.
- Cut off ends of porch flooring of first and second floor porch floor and install edge.
- Install used columns with new bases and turned sections on bottom.
- Furnish new columns, where old columns are not obtainable.
- Install bottom and top rails of correct design with rectangular balusters.
- Restore exterior fascias and mouldings under ends of flooring.
- Restore flooring where same has been cut out for bathrooms.<sup>52</sup>

A similar estimate dated November 13, 1967 outlined DeCosta’s plans to restore the porches to their original condition. Modern partitions, siding, and wall finishes were removed, and existing historic elements were restored. He removed new flooring to reveal the old flooring and made repairs to fill in spaces left from the installation of plumbing on the porch. In the case of the wooden columns, their degraded condition required that they be replaced. Instead of purchasing or building new columns, DeCosta used historic columns that had been removed from another property in town. As discussed previously in this chapter, DeCosta also performed the restoration on the Blake-Grimke House located at 321 East Bay Street for HCF as part of the Ansonborough project. In this case, large porches were a later addition to the building,

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<sup>51</sup> L. A. Chitwood to Mrs. S. Henry Edmunds, August 31, 1966, HCF, Property Files, Box 5, 82 Anson Street folder.

<sup>52</sup> H. A. DeCosta to Mrs. S. Henry Edmunds, April 27, 1967 HCF, Property Files, Box 5, 82 Anson Street folder.

and the decision was made to remove the piazzas in an effort to return the building to its original manifestation. However, the Doric columns from this building fit the style and scale of the restored porches at 82 Anson Street. The reuse of these elements illustrates DeCosta's appreciation for historic materials and his knack for recycling historic items for new uses.<sup>53</sup>

These two estimates offer an example of Herbert DeCosta's respect for the historic integrity of a building. He removed non-historic materials, like the partitions and new flooring, to provide a more accurate depiction of the piazza's original appearance, and he recycled historic materials from other properties to replace elements that had deteriorated beyond repair. However, later documents indicate that the contractor encountered additional and unforeseen obstacles during the work on the porch. Rotten plates, sills, and flooring were all discovered and had to be repaired or replaced. Additionally, DeCosta found that some of the original bearers under the first floor were missing and had to be replaced. Finally, the reused columns from the Blake-Grimke House proved to be in a more deteriorated state than anticipated, and new bases and extensive repairs were required to make them useful.

Although DeCosta had explained how difficult it was to estimate this type of work accurately, he expressed his concern for the increase in price over the estimate he produced. In his letter outlining the reasons for the raise in cost, he stated that "we do not like to have actual costs greatly exceed our approximate costs and especially so without

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<sup>53</sup> H. A. DeCosta to Mrs. S. Henry Edmunds, November 13, 1967, HCF, Property Files, Box 5, 82 Anson Street folder, and W. H. J. Thomas, "House Built for Spinster," *News & Courier*, November 30, 1970.

any previous notice to the owners. This is just not doing business in the best manner.”<sup>54</sup>

DeCosta’s dedication to his customer was only surpassed by his dedication to providing the highest quality workmanship possible. In spite of the complications encountered in the process, the H. A. DeCosta Company completed the piazzas by the end of January 1969, and their restoration was the first major and highly-visible step toward the successful rehabilitation of this property.

With its improved piazzas and stabilization complete, focus turned to the exterior of the house. The conversion of the property into a multi-unit apartment altered the facades, and major adjustments were required to restore the elevations to their original appearance. Prior renovations that divided the structure into apartments left an atypical entrance door on the western street façade.<sup>55</sup> Blasted through the brick, this door led directly from the street and into the raised basement of the building. DeCosta removed the door from this site and rearranged the entrance to its natural location on the building’s south façade. The restoration of the door in its original position required the acquisition of new doors; however, the frame and transom from the earlier door were in good condition and were simply repaired. Through this restoration, both the Anson and Laurens Street facades were returned to a more historically accurate composition.

Herbert DeCosta also worked extensively on the windows of the structure. The most obvious transformation occurred on the north side of the house where two windows

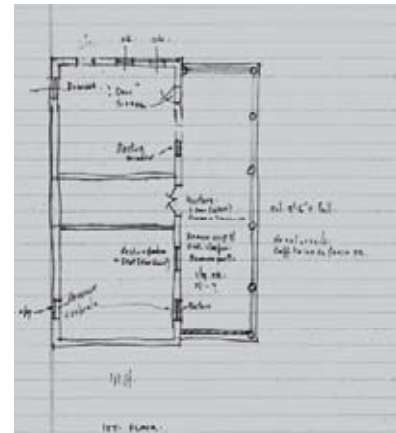
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<sup>54</sup> H. A. DeCosta to Mrs. S. Henry Edmunds, January 13, 1969, HCF, Property Files, Box 5, 82 Anson Street folder

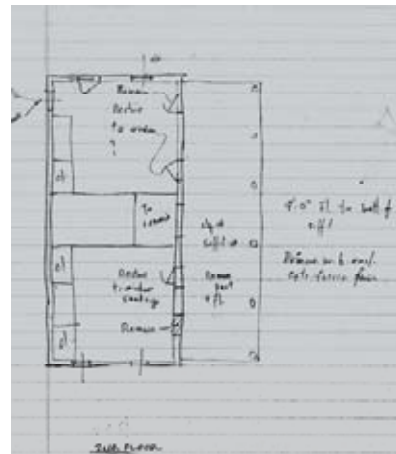
<sup>55</sup> In an article written for the *Preservation Progress* 22 (March 1977), Gene Waddell describes a typical Charleston single house as “a separate, multi-story dwelling one room wide and three across including a central entrance and stair hall. It also typically, but not necessarily, has its narrow end to the street, a piazza along one of its longer sides, and back wall chimneys.” (As quoted in Posten’s *Buildings of Charleston*, 37.)

were enclosed with brick (*figures 4.48 and 4.49*).

Although the reasoning behind this method was not determined through research, floor plan sketches and notes on the project indicate that at least one window was bricked to accommodate a closet and another may have provided space for a china cabinet. While the closing of the windows altered the original fenestration of the structure (and would not be an appropriate decision today), the reuse of the removed window frames in the restoration of other windows illustrated DeCosta's consistency in reusing historic fabric. The frames of the filled windows were removed and reused on the south façade of the house. In many cases, the windows on the south side had been converted into doorways to provide access from the main house to the enclosed porches that made up the living spaces of the apartments. In his early estimate for the rehabilitation of the property, DeCosta included specifications in three rooms for this reuse. In both the front and rear room of the first floor and in the



**Figure 4.48:** Sketch of second floor plan showing details by H. A. DeCosta Company. Courtesy of ARC, H. A. DeCosta, Jr. Papers, Box 38.



**Figure 4.49:** Sketch of second floor plan showing details by H. A. DeCosta Company. Courtesy of ARC, H. A. DeCosta, Jr. Papers, Box 38.



rear room of the second floor, the estimate stated, “Remove window frame and sash from north side and install in existing door opening on south wall.”<sup>56</sup> The window was then to be bricked under with restored paneled jambs on the exterior while a window seat was constructed on the interior. In some cases, existing doorways remained to provide access to the piazza. DeCosta took advantage of the historic fabric available to him and developed a fenestration pattern that more closely reflected the original appearance of the structure.

Due to the division of the house, the interior of the structure required a great deal of work to return it to its original function as a single family home. DeCosta removed the makeshift staircase that ascended from the basement through the first floor drawing room and refurbished the central staircase in the main hall to correspond to the recently restored entryway. The original staircase with its mahogany railing survived in the structure. However, alterations were made to the space to make room for



**Figure 4.50:** Restored stair hall at 82 Anson Street. The door to the coat closet designed by DeCosta is visible on the left. Courtesy of HCF Photograph Collection.

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<sup>56</sup> Herbert A. DeCosta, Jr, to Mrs. S. Henry Edmunds, April 27, 1967, HCF, Property Files, Box 5, 82 Anson Street folder.

essential alterations. In a letter to benefactor Charles Woodward, Frances Edmunds described DeCosta's plans for these improvements as "quite ingenious."<sup>57</sup> Two stairs led down to a coat closet on the left and to an access door on the right that provided access "to the basement stairs that will remain open inconspicuously, but that can be closed and locked" (*figure 4.50*).<sup>58</sup>

In addition, DeCosta removed partitions to open the floor plan, and repairs were made to the plaster walls and ceiling details. Fortunately, a majority of the period details on the interior of the house were intact at the time of the renovation. The original mantels adorned the formal rooms, and first period



**Figure 4.51:** Restored interior, 82 Anson Street. Courtesy of HCF Photograph Collection.

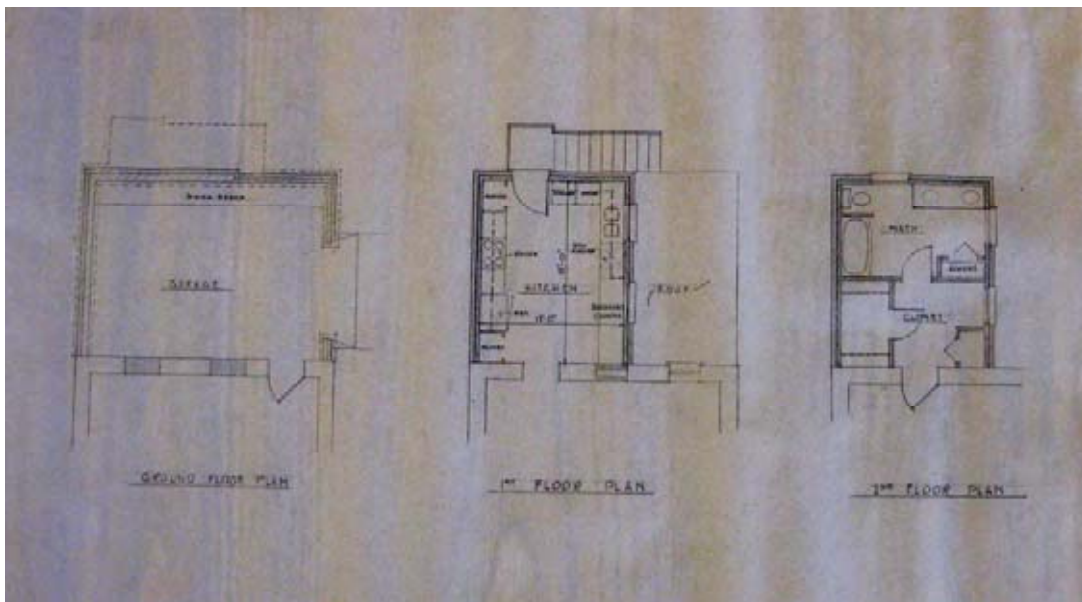
wainscoting and a carved dentil cornice remained as reminders of the house's former elegance (*figure 4.51*). Using a method widely accepted at the time, DeCosta burned the woodwork to remove built up layers of paint before fresh coats of paint were applied. Where portions of these details had been removed, DeCosta seamlessly integrated new elements to match the existing features.

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<sup>57</sup> Frances Edmunds to Charles Woodward, April 25, 1969, HCF, Property Files, Box 5, 82 Anson Street folder.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

In addition to the restoration of the historic portion of the house, DeCosta designed a two-story addition on the east (back) side of the building. This modern addition provided a garage at ground level, a “spanking new and delightfully antiqued” kitchen on the first floor, and a dressing room and bath on the second floor (*figure 4.52*).<sup>59</sup> Paying close attention to the details of this addition, DeCosta successfully supplied the house with modern amenities in a secondary structure which is considered the most appropriate solution for historic structures.

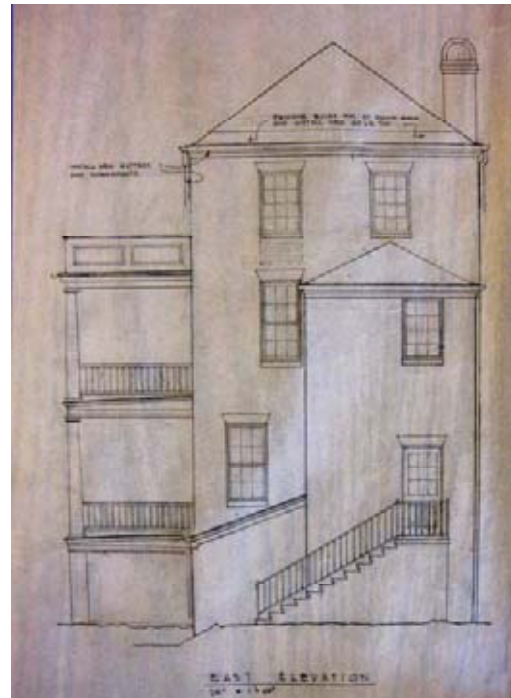


**Figure 4.52:** Proposed plans of the addition to 82 Anson Street. Plans by H. A. DeCosta Company, drawn by J. Cobbs and checked by H. A. D. (Herbert DeCosta). Dated May 21, 1969. Courtesy of ARC, H. A. DeCosta, Jr. Papers, Box 200.

<sup>59</sup> Leland, “‘Traveling’ House Rests On New Site.”

Smaller in scale than the main dwelling, the addition was designed in such a way to mimic the proportion of the former kitchen house that has been moved with the structure (*figure 4.53*). Using new Waccamaw brown brick that closely matched the locally made brick of the main house, this addition blended into the main structure effortlessly. In addition to matching the color of the brick, DeCosta also constructed the addition using the same English bond pattern as that of the historic portion of the property. Finally, DeCosta designed the garage door openings on the basement level of the addition to arch slightly across the top. This

detail imitated the traditional openings of carriage houses and was praised by HCF supporter Charles Woodward. The scale of the addition, the materials used, and the details of the design combined to produce an addition that was both aesthetically pleasing and historically congruent with the neighborhood (*figure 4.54*).



**Figure 4.53:** Elevation of east façade of 82 Anson Street with addition. Plans by H. A. DeCosta Company, drawn by J. Cobbs and checked by H. A. D. (Herbert DeCosta). Dated May 21, 1969. Courtesy of ARC, H. A. DeCosta, Jr. Papers, Box 200.



**Figure 4.54:** Elevation of south façade of 82 Anson Street with addition. Plans by H. A. DeCosta Company, drawn by J. Cobbs and checked by H. A. D. (Herbert DeCosta). Dated May 21, 1969. Courtesy of ARC, H. A. DeCosta, Jr. Papers, Box 200.

The last major project in the rehabilitation of the house involved the construction of new steps from the garden to the first floor piazza and the main entrance of the house (*figure 4.55*). Using the same Waccamaw brick utilized in the construction of the garage addition, DeCosta designed a grand set of stairs to provide an appropriate entry from the garden to the house. The original plan for the steps called for “brick steps with a W. I. [wrought iron] Railing and stucco treads and risers colored to simulate sandstone.”<sup>60</sup> However, HCF chose to eliminate the stucco treatment in an effort to economize and to keep this project from going further over the intended budget. In spite of this change, the

<sup>60</sup>Herbert DeCosta, Jr to Mrs. S. Henry Edmunds, February 27, 1970, HCF, Property Files, Box 5, 82 Anson Street folder.

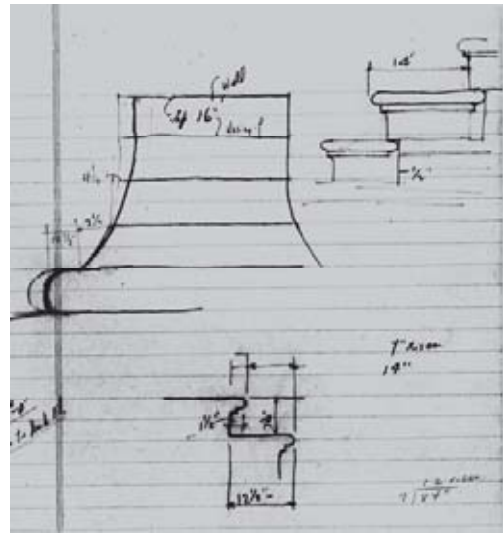


brick steps supplied the proper exterior presentation to this handsomely renovated house. Today, to the untrained eye, these steps provide an integral part of the architectural language of Charleston piazzas and entries.

To complete the restoration, the H. A. DeCosta Company constructed a pierce-brick fence along the Anson Street and Laurens Street sides. Making use of modern materials but with a more historic appearance, DeCosta built a new

concrete block wall on the northeast corner of the lot and altered an existing concrete wall on the east lot line. Both walls were stuccoed and topped with a stepping stone cap to accomplish the look of an old-style fence.<sup>61</sup>

This rehabilitation was unique in that Historic Charleston Foundation, with the financial assistance of one very dedicated investor, carried out the entire exterior restoration and the majority of the interior renovation before the house was sold. These actions differed greatly from the usual approach of stabilizing structures and performing basic renovations and allowing purchasers to use their own funds to complete the most elaborate stages of the restoration. This complete restoration honored the structure's location as the northern cornerstone of the neighborhood and its impressive architectural characteristics and provided a model for other restoration projects in the neighborhood.



**Figure 4.55:** Sketch of proposed stairs showing details by H. A. DeCosta Company. Courtesy of ARC, H. A. DeCosta, Jr. Papers, Box 38.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

The Foundation's dedication to the extensive renovation of this building illustrates the faith in Herbert DeCosta and the quality of his company's work by entrusting him with this project.

The rehabilitation of 82 Anson Street culminated the restoration work that Herbert DeCosta performed in Ansonborough (*figures 4.56 and 4.57*). Encompassing basic stabilization, exterior restoration, interior renovations, and compatible new design, 82 Anson Street serves as the best example of comprehensive rehabilitation in the entire Ansonborough Rehabilitation Project.



**Figure 4.56:** 82 Anson Street, west façade, after rehabilitation.  
Courtesy of HCF Photograph Collection.



**Figure 4.56:** 82 Anson Street, south façade, after rehabilitation. Courtesy of HCF Photograph Collection.

## 82 Anson Street



Photo by author.

**Client:** Historic Charleston Foundation

**Year of Work:** 1968-70

**Stabilization & Maintenance:** yes

**Exterior Restoration:** yes

**Interior Renovation:** yes

**Comprehensive Rehabilitation:** yes

**Notes:** formerly 86 Anson Street

Address	Avery Research Center	Historic Charleston Foundation
82 Anson	Formerly known as 86 Anson - brick structure moved to make way for Auditorium; 1967 estimate to FRE for extensive interior & exterior work on 86 Anson sketches of porches & plan; close up windows & restore; 1970 bill to HCF for cleaning; 3 slides = gorgeous; 1966 bill for "wrecking" 82 Anson; 1968 - estimates & bills for work & structural repairs; monthly bills 68-70; 2 photos - bad shape; letter from Charles Woodward to FRE about changes; sketches of fence; Phillip Simmons; article in Chas Evening Post about house being moved & mentions DeCosta's work; measured drawings	list of payments made to HAD for restoration = \$75,477.44; mentions demo by Chas Wrecking Co; 1966 - bought by HCF for \$40k; 1973 - sold to Kellogg for \$85k; invoices from HAD outlining work and increases; good quote from HAD about estimates and excess costs; lots of bills & estimates w/ good example of pres ethic; FRE letter to Chitwood discussing reuse of features from 321 EBay; correspondence about moving building
311 East Bay	notes about doorway styles; invoice to HCF for closing property; 1970 estimate for exterior work; 1962 estimate for exterior work including removal of hoods and brick parapet; before photos of entrance	Correspondence concerning moving property?; HCF sells to J. Ray Waits, Jr. in 1971 for \$20k; lots of correspondence regarding use of property; no information on HAD
321 East Bay	1968 - Grimke House; working for HCF and Lucas & Stubbs, architects; invoices to architects 1968; invoice to HCF 1977; construction schedule; full estimate; quotes from subcontractors; 1968 Building Permit - removing porches, exterior repairs, painting; slides; measured drawings and blueprints	HCF owns and leases to Southern National Bank of SC - 1968; 1969 "final" invoice from HAD to Lucas & Stubbs for \$68,845.60; 1967 estimate from HAD for exterior restoration; 1971 letter to FRE from Bank regarding repair work needed - note "called DeCosta"; history, chain of title; 1968 Evening Post article about HCF saving house from slums; DYKYC w/ photo of house before; letter from FRE to SCDAH donating scrapbook of renovations
328 East Bay	Andrew Moffett House; bills to HCF in 1968 & 70 for maintenance/repairs; 1968 estimate for roof repairs include 2 Amherst, Faber House, 311 East Bay & 328; 1986 estimate for repair to porches - no contract; measured drawings	historic research materials including report by Harlan Greene; HAD renovated porches in 1968; 1985 repair report references HAD's 1962 plan for house