

**28 Montagu Street  
Charleston, S.C.**

*An Architectural Overview*

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*Introduction*

A two-story, timber-framed dwelling located in the post-Revolutionary suburb of Harleston Village, 28 Montagu Street has undergone two major alterations and has had a large rear wing added since it was constructed in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. It has had a succession of owners since it was first built, few of which appear to have resided there for any length of time. Throughout most of its history, it has provided rental income for its various owners. In 1947 the building was subdivided into four apartments, an arrangement which remains today. Despite the many changes made to the house and the transience of many of its occupants, 28 Montagu still retains much of its original decorative finish. Its unusual original plan can also be traced from evidence in the foundations and elsewhere. It is this combination of early woodwork and interesting plan that mark the house as an important landmark in this neighborhood.

From documentary evidence, the house at 28 Montagu Street appears to have been constructed sometime after August 1809, when the trustees for Mrs. Elizabeth Groning, the wife of East Bay Street merchant, Lewis Groning, purchased a 53- by 192-foot lot on the north side of the street for \$1600. A month earlier, the Gronings bought the adjoining property to the east for \$4800. The discrepancy in the price of the two, similar sized lots suggests that a house already stood next door at 26 Montagu.<sup>1</sup> It is unclear as to whether the Gronings built and lived at 28 Montagu in the mid 1810s or whether their residence was next door. By the end of the decade, they had moved to New Street and then other locations in the 1820s. If the Gronings lived at 28 Montagu at all, their tenure there was very brief before they turned it into rental property.



Rather than the standard single house plan with a side piazza and entrance off it, the plan of 28 Montagu takes advantage of the wide frontage of the lot. Built close to the eastern edge of the property to allow carriage access along the western edge, the house has its long façade parallel to the street. Measuring approximately 40 feet in length across the front, the five-bay, two-story frame

<sup>1</sup> The documentary research for this property was undertaken by Sarah Frick for the Historic Charleston Foundation, 2005.

dwelling stands on low, four-foot high cellar walls and is capped by a shallow hipped roof. A center gable, supported by small consoles and lit by an elliptical fan window, accentuates the center of the house just above the eaves. The one-story piazza stretches across the full width of the house, but is a later, antebellum addition, which now masks much of the front façade.



Entrance to house was originally by way of a seven-foot wide staircase that rose to a landing at the central doorway on the main floor. Remnants of the brick foundations for this staircase, which are bonded into the front wall of the house, survive in the crawl space beneath the later piazza. Even though the cellar wall was not very high, the bricklayers distinguished the importance of the front of the house by laying it in Flemish bond with a tucked v joint while the side and rear walls of the foundations are laid in English bond.<sup>2</sup> Two small window openings crowned by flat jack arches and formerly enclosed with diagonally set horizontal wooden bars provided light for the front of the cellar. An additional barred opening on the west foundation wall provided

additional light for this low cellar space. The fact that there were no means of heating the cellar, the low headroom, and the absence of any finishes such as lath or whitewash suggest that this space was used for little more than simple storage. Two small, enclosed unlit spaces at the back of the main block were segregated from the main cellar and supplied additional storage for goods and materials.

The original framing members of the house consist mainly of sash sawn pine. The studs, posts, and down braces of the first story are mortised, tenoned, and pegged into the groundsills. Where they survive in the front rooms, the original random width floorboards are gauged and undercut. There has been wholesale replacement of much of the framing in the back pile of the house, where originally there were two small unheated rooms connected by a slightly shallower piazza that was supported on piers. Nearly all the framing of the walls of the back rooms that faced onto the piazza as well as the piazza framing have been replaced once if not twice. However, the sills remain in place as well as the tenons and pegs of the original framing members in place, making it easy to trace original door openings and other framing members even though they were removed long ago. From this evidence, it is quite clear that door openings led from the two unheated back rooms onto the central piazza (see plan). There are a number of reused studs and other pieces (probably from the back wall that separated the front rooms and passage from the piazza) that form the floor framing of the area that was once the back piazza. However, the uprights forming the framing for the walls in this area are



<sup>2</sup> The exterior surface of the cellar walls are covered with a red wash. When this was applied to the wall is unknown but must have been done before the piazza with it foundations was built since it would not have been seen following this addition.

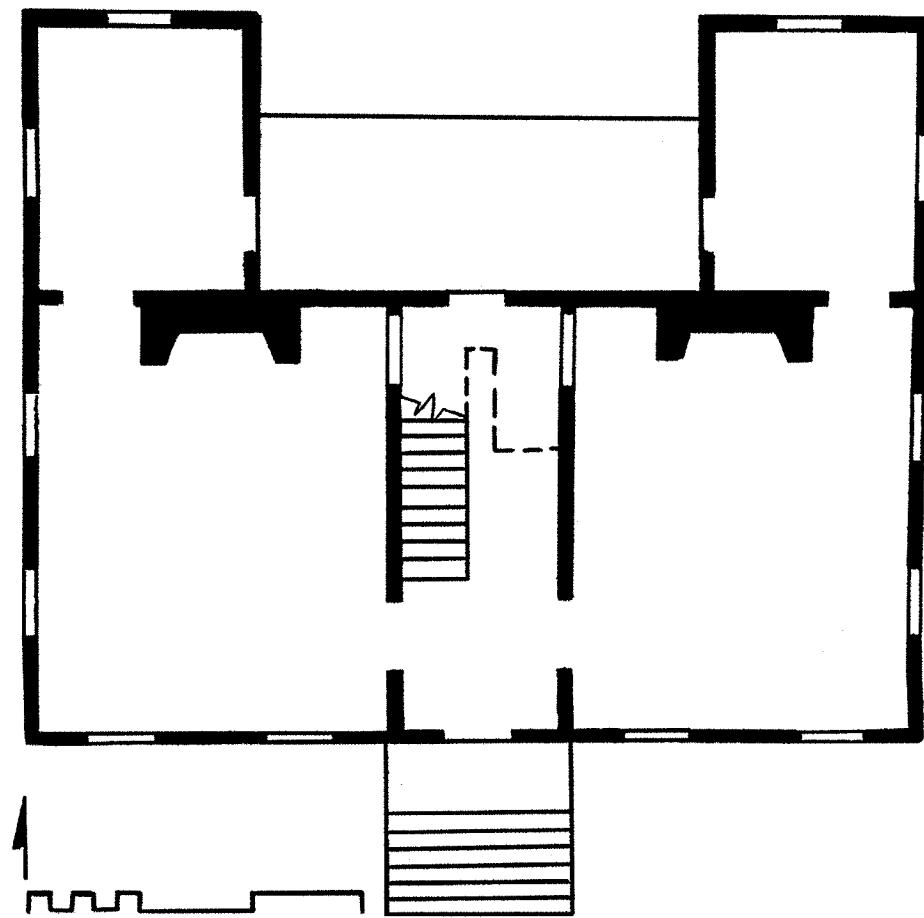
circular sawn and fastened with cut nails, indicative of a late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century rebuilding of this back portion of the house, probably for the second time.

#### *Original Plan*

Impressive as the two-story, five-bay front façade was, the house provided only modest accommodations for its occupants. It had four heated rooms—two ground-floor entertaining rooms and two bedchambers on the second floor. It also contained a narrow stair passage, two small unheated spaces behind the entertaining rooms, and an eight- by twenty-foot piazza in the back of the house located in the space between the two back rooms. As noted earlier, the cellar was too shallow for anything more than occasional storage.

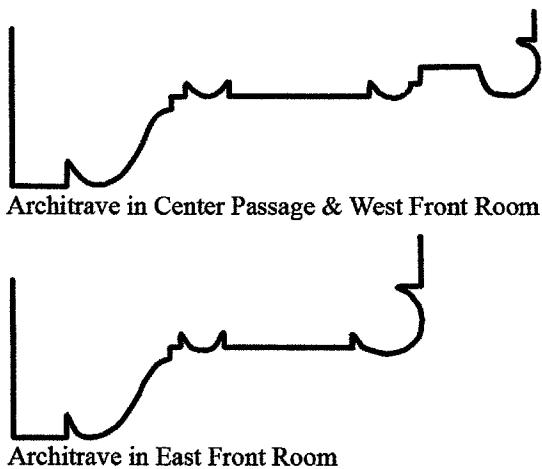
Presumably, there were service buildings at the back of the house in the deep lot. An 1882 Sandborn plat depicts a two-story wooden kitchen located on the eastern boundary at the midpoint of the lot. That building survived into the twentieth century, appearing on a 1902 Sanborn map though it had disappeared by 1944 when yet another Sanborn image shows a much smaller one-story structure further back on the property. Whether the two-story frame building was contemporaneous with the house or later is unknown, but it is clear from the plan and finish of the dwelling that there was no kitchen inside house when it was first built.

The front door opened into a narrow, seven-foot wide stair passage. It must have been a relatively dark space as there is no evidence that it was ever lit by a transom light—the front door architrave survives and shows no indication of having been altered to accommodate such a feature. The passage is now blocked by a modern partition wall with no access to the back of the house, but originally there was a central doorway at the back of the passage that opened onto the rear piazza. Evidence for this doorway and the position of the back passage wall (which was slightly deeper at 19 feet 3 inches than the present, c. 1947 wall), survives in the ground-floor sill where there are sawn-off tenons in mortises spaced approximately 4 ½ feet apart that would have formed the doorposts. The stair originally ran up along the west partition wall to a landing at the back of the passage, turned, and ascended to the second floor along the east wall. This configuration would have been similar to the present staircase, which is a late-nineteenth century replacement. Patches in the second-story floorboard at the termination of the stairwell indicate a slightly different spacing for the earlier balusters. Doors located directly across from one another opened into the two main entertaining rooms from the center passage.



Original Plan

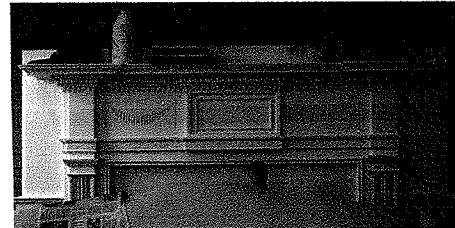
The two ground-floor entertaining rooms (probably the dining room and parlor) are the same size—15 feet 7 inches in width and 19 feet 3 inches in depth. They also match in plan, being the mirror image of each other. Two windows (now with late-nineteenth century double-hung sash) light the front wall and two, similar sized windows light the exterior side walls. At the back of each room in the center of the partition that separates the front from back spaces, stands a well proportioned fireplace, whose cheeks jut out into the room. On the outer side of the fireplace, a door leads to the back room. The door into the room on the passage partition is matched at the back of the room near the fireplace by another door of identical treatment. This back door is something of a false door used to balance the symmetry of the wall. Although the door was originally hinged and opened, if it did lead to the back of the passage, it was an awkward route at best given the low height of the stair landing. There is a finished trimmer in both the east and west rooms that blocks the doorway at about the five-foot level, masking the framing of the original carriage and landing. It is a curious and unsatisfactory solution if that were the intention. If it were never intended to be opened, then the passage side of the doorway would probably have been plastered over. Unfortunately, later alterations in this part of the house make it difficult to determine the original configuration.



If the plan and arrangement of the apertures are identical, the two front rooms are significantly different in finish with the west room clearly the better appointed space. Both have flat six-panel doors, flat-panel wainscoting, molded surbase, and nicely finished chimneypiece. However, the west room finishes are more elaborate. The wainscoting and doors have astragals in the panels whereas those in the east room do not. The east room has single, quirked cyma architraves with an unusual bead just below the cyma. The west room and the passage have double architraves

with a pair of matching flush beads forming the center element of the architrave. The mantels, typical of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, have decorative pilasters supporting a broad three-part frieze with a multiple molded shelf. The west room mantel has swags in the frieze bracketing the central projecting panel.

If the front two rooms served as the dining room and parlor, then it is not clear how the two, small unheated rooms that opened off these spaces on the fireplace wall functioned. Were they used as informal sitting rooms or as service spaces? They measured approximately 11 ½ feet in depth and 8 ½ feet in width. Doorways from the front rooms provided access to them as well as doorways from the shallower back piazza that occupied the space between these two rooms at the back of the house. It is also unclear how these rooms were finished. Except for some of the random-width, tongue-and-groove flooring and a door architrave, none of the original finishes for these rooms (which were expanded in the antebellum period and rebuilt in the late nineteenth century) survive. A window on the outer side wall and another on the back wall probably lit these rooms.



The second floor contained two bedchambers that matched the size and arrangement of the two front rooms on the main floor. Because of their private nature, the trim of these two rooms are far simpler than the rooms below with single architraves, simpler mantelpieces, and no wainscoting.

An unresolved question is whether there were small back rooms on the second floor that matched those on the main floor. If there were, then they served as unheated dressing rooms for the front bedchambers. It is also likely that the ceiling height would have been lower in these rear rooms than in the front ones. However, because of the rebuilding and remodeling of these back rooms and the addition of a back wing in the twentieth century, it is difficult to tell if the modified double pile originally extended two

full stories in height. If it did then the framing of the roof structure would have been complicated. The original configuration in the front section of the house consists of a hipped roof whose ridge line runs parallel to the street. There were possibly lower hipped roofs fabricated at right angles to the front section of the house. However, if so, they were obliterated by later alterations that raised the roof to match the height of the front part of the house. Patches in the eaves on the sides of the house indicate where the cornice of the original front section returned at the juncture of the front and back parts of the house.

#### *Later Alterations*

In the late 1820s Mrs. Groning secured a loan for \$1200 to repair 28 Montagu Street. What these repairs entailed cannot be determined, but if the original builder was intending to sell her rental property, it must have become apparent that the unusual plan had its limitations. Either Mrs. Groning made some fundamental changes to the plan or the next owner, William Roach, who purchased the property in 1833, undertook the alterations. Again, because of substantial rebuilding that took place at the end of the nineteenth century or the opening decades of the twentieth century, many aspects of these antebellum changes have in turn been effaced, leaving only fragmentary evidence of this secondary phase of remodeling.

The front entrance staircase and landing were replaced by a one-story piazza. On the inside, the back rooms of the two rear wings were widened, enclosing the open space of the original back piazza. These rooms still had no heat source, though in later years, stoves were installed, whose pipes vented into the back of the chimney of the front rooms. The central passage was lengthened with doorways from the expanded back rooms opening into it. To unify the new work, a plaster cornice with distinct Greek Revival molding profiles was installed in the passage. New cornices may have also been added in the two front entertaining rooms, if they were not part of the original design. These alterations provided a fashionable piazza on the front of the house, expanded the back rooms, lengthened the center passage, and added a new small back piazza still located between the two wings.<sup>3</sup>



This antebellum remodeling was itself substantially reworked in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. By the late nineteenth century, 28 Montagu Street had once again been turned into rental property. The Roach family sold the house to William M. Dye, a railway postal clerk, in 1898. It is likely the Dye and his family altered the house once again, adding a new front door with a plate-glass window of the style produced by sash and blind factories at the beginning of the twentieth century. Dye also rebuilt the staircase with a new newel post, balusters, and handrail in the center

<sup>3</sup> The 1882 Sanborn map shows the house with the front piazza as well as a small piazza in the rear whose edge was flush with the north walls of the internally widened rear wings.

passage. He retrrimmed much of the house by adding Italianate architraves, sash and blind factory doors, and large plate-glass sash. The plan changed as well with the addition of a two-story wing at the back of the house. The small antebellum rear piazza was also enclosed and does not appear in the 1902 Sanborn map of the property.

Dye and his family lived in the house until his death in 1912. The property remained in the hands of his estate for the next thirty years and was leased to a couple of renters who occupied the house in the 1910s and 1920s and again in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In 1944 the Dye estate sold the house. By this time, the 1944 Sandborn map shows that the two-story frame kitchen had been demolished and a small one-story frame building, perhaps a garage, built on the back lot. Following a short succession of



two owners, William I. Holt purchased the property in December 1946 and transformed the house into four apartments. The rear northeast wing was built by Holt to provide space for the two apartments on the east side of the building. In order to provide for more space in the west apartment on the ground floor, the stair passage in the front of the house was blocked just behind the staircase. He also added partitions for bathrooms and kitchens throughout the house for the four

separate rental units. With only modest changes in the ensuing half century, Holt's reconfiguration of the house remains intact.

This architectural overview was based on a brief visit to the site in August 2005. With more time and access to spaces that were not available at the time, a firmer chronology of the later alterations and additions to the house could be developed. However, the basic story of the evolution of 28 Montagu Street is one of expansion and the rearrangement of an unusual plan to accommodate changing housing needs in a modest suburb in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the transformation of a single family house into multiple apartments in the middle of the twentieth century.