

The Robert William Roper House, Charleston, South Carolina

BY KENNETH AND MARTHA SEVERENS



Charleston's houses, which have contributed so much to the city's historic character, followed well-established types. The distinctive "single house," with its narrow end façade on the street and longer side elevation running deep into the lot, created an introspective environment, with the notable exception of the Robert William Roper House, 9 East Battery, where a combination of tradition and progress yielded Charleston's most monumental residence. Although it is in the single house format, it is cast in a bold neoclassical style more characteristic of contemporary public buildings. The house stands on land the city initially intended as a public park, and it commands an unsurpassed view over the harbor.

KENNETH SEVERENS is a professor of New England studies at the University of Southern Maine in Portland and the author of *Charleston Antebellum Architecture and Civic Destiny*. MARTHA SEVERENS is the curator of collections at the Portland Museum of Art.



Pl. I. Front door of the Roper House.
Except as noted, photographs are
by William Squires.

Pl. II. Miniature of Robert William Roper
(1800-1845) by Charles Fraser (1782-1860).
Collection of John Laurens III and Patty Laurens
Adams; photograph by courtesy of the owners.



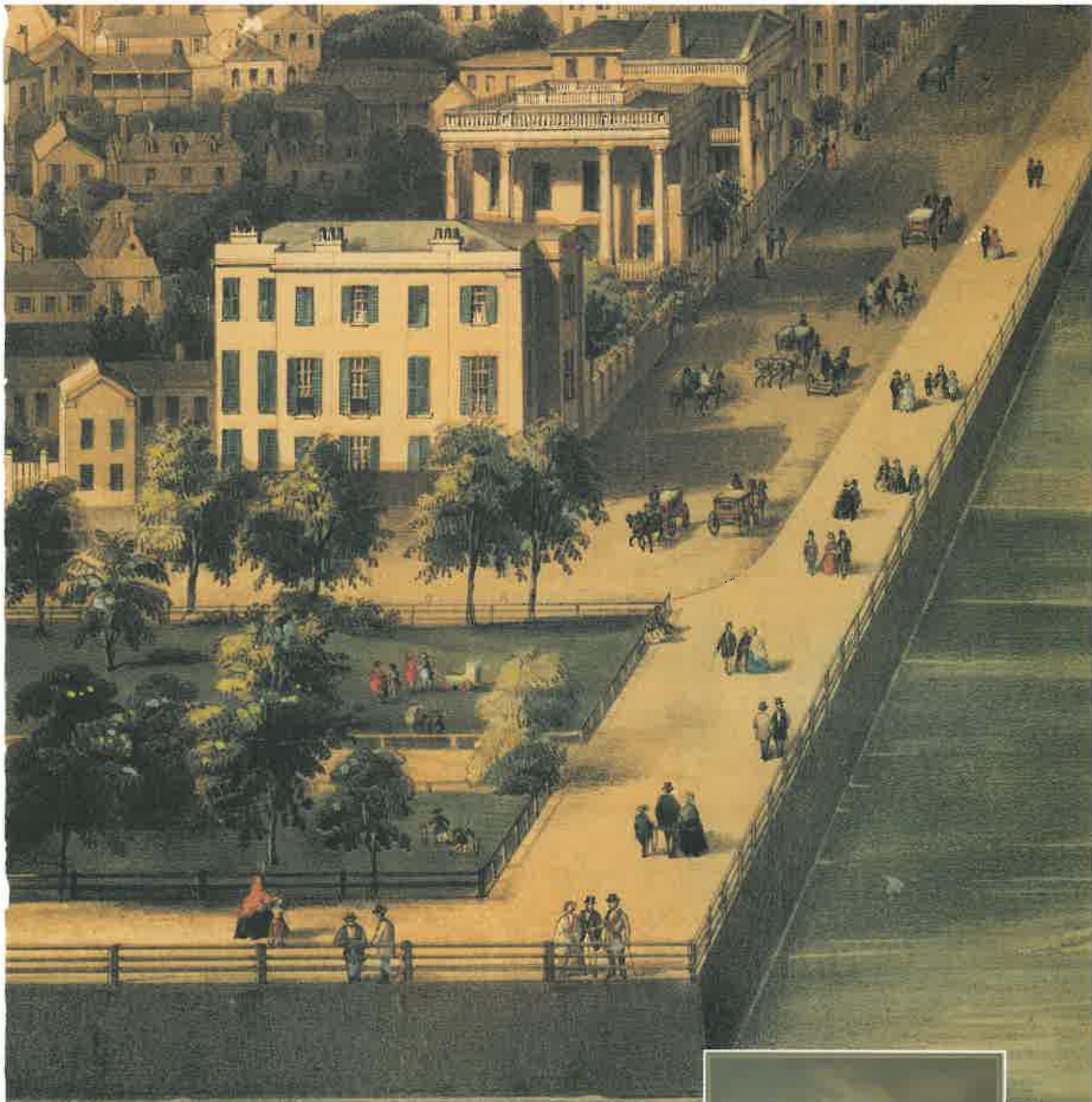


PL. VI. Side chair.
Norfolk, c. 1790.
Black walnut and
holly; height 34 $\frac{1}{2}$;
width 18 $\frac{3}{4}$; depth
17 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches.
Colonial
Williamsburg
Foundation;
Lorenz photo-
graph.



PL. VII. Armchair.
Norfolk, c. 1790.
Mahogany and yellow
pine; height 35
 $\frac{1}{2}$; width 23 $\frac{1}{4}$;
depth 18 inches.
Chester Museum,
Norfolk, Virginia.
Moses Myers House
Collection.

PL. VIII. Side chair
attributed to
Norfolk, c. 1790.
Mahogany; holly
ebony; and oak;
height 35; width 20
 $\frac{1}{4}$; depth 17 inches.
MUSA, on loan to
the Colonial
Williamsburg
Foundation;
Lorenz photo-
graph.



Pl. III. Detail of Panorama of Charleston, by John William Hill (1812-1879), 1851. Hand-colored lithograph, 24 1/4 by 42 inches. The Hooper House (see Pl. I) is depicted at the right, just behind the large house on the boulevard. Early, only four out of five columns are shown. Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston, South Carolina; photograph by courtesy of the museum.

Right: Pl. II. Charleston Hotel, Meeting Street, Charleston, S.C., by D. More, drawn by John H. Rofford (c. 1815-1871) and lithographed by Benjamin B. Day & Company (c. 1841-1853), c. 1850, 25 by 18 inches. Gibbes Museum of Art, Carolina Art Association Collection; photograph by courtesy of the museum.



With prosperity in the mid-1830's Charleston embarked on an ambitious program of municipal improvements, including the establishment of White Point Garden on the South Battery.¹ The southeastern tip of the peninsular city had been an amorphous area, irregular in boundaries and contour, and vulnerable to storm surges. When the city purchased this land and erected a high battery wall of cut stone in 1836, the city council envisioned an L-shaped public garden from Atlantic to Church streets, until the financial panic of 1837 forced a revision of the plan.²

To generate revenue sufficient to develop the South Battery section of the park, from East Battery to Meeting Street (eventually to King Street) the city decided to subdivide the East Battery into house lots with the prediction that they "will produce a beautiful row of ornamental buildings along the whole line of East Bay Battery."³ Robert William Roper bought two of these house lots from the city in the spring of 1838, agreeing to the city's "condition that no house less than three stories high shall be erected thereon."⁴ Later that year "several of [the house lots were] enclosed, and on some of them preparations for building have commenced."⁵ A city directory of 1840 listed Roper as residing at the corner of South and East Bay,⁶ indicating that his house had been built and that it was the first house erected on the newly platted and subdivided land.

Born in 1800, Roper traced his paternal ancestry to the Norman invasion of William the Conqueror

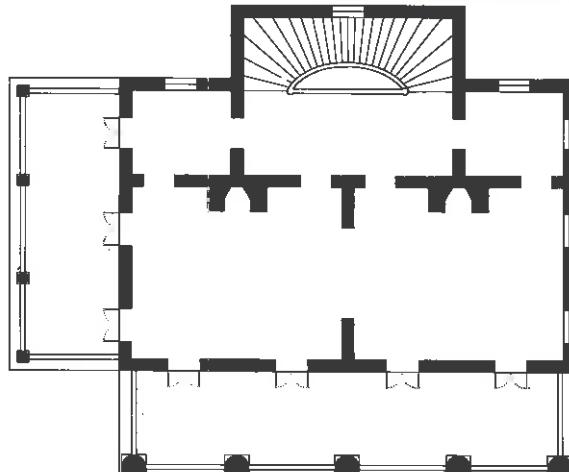
and claimed direct descent from Margaret Roper, a daughter of Sir Thomas More (1478–1535). The first Roper came to South Carolina about 1725, and Roper's father, Colonel Thomas Roper (d. 1829), was a prosperous planter.⁷

Robert William Roper seems to have been self-educated. According to a contemporary Charlestonian, "he was a very intelligent man and improved himself by much reading; somehow, he never received credit for as much intelligence as he really possessed."⁸ In 1824 and 1825 Roper was a state legislator from the parish of

Saint Paul's, where one of the family plantations was located. Even before his purchase in 1826 of Point Comfort Plantation on the Cooper River in what is today Berkeley County he had emerged as a champion of scientific agriculture.

Roper's first published work was a challenge to the plantation system, presented pseudonymously to the South Carolina Agricultural Society in 1825. He espoused a Jeffersonian agrarianism that viewed agriculture as the basis of wealth, especially in the South, but he chided planters for ignoring "the principles and science of agriculture."⁹ His most radical suggestion was to elevate the status of overseers to professional agriculturists. Four years later he proposed that the South Carolina Agricultural Society establish an agricultural institute for the dual purpose of educating overseers and making that job sufficiently respectable to attract younger sons of planters.¹⁰

In 1832 Roper was elected a member of the South



*Pl. V. Robert William Roper House,
9 East Battery, Charleston, South
Carolina, begun in 1838 and completed
c.1840. The front door is at the far
right and faces east.*

*Fig. 1. Plan of the second floor of the
Roper House. The rendering is by
Adams Pinckney.*

Carolina Agricultural Society, and the following year he was named orator, which required him to make a major presentation to the Society in 1834.¹¹ His address was an encyclopedic essay that included a history of agriculture and discussions of English and Scottish agricultural improvements, plant life, soils, manures, crop rotation, and climates. Noting that all of South Carolina's staple crops—rice, indigo, tobacco, and cotton—were exotic, he recommended greater self-sufficiency by growing potatoes and other foods then being imported from other states. Roper's own rice plantation undoubtedly prospered under his enlightened supervision, and with a substantial inheritance from his father, he began to build his imposing Charleston house in 1838.

Circumstantial and stylistic evidence suggest that Charles F. Reichardt may have been the architect. He had arrived in Charleston in the spring of 1836, and early newspaper references mentioned his training with the great German neoclassical architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel and work in New York City, probably in the sphere of Ithiel Town, Alexander Jackson Davis, and Isaiah Rogers.¹²

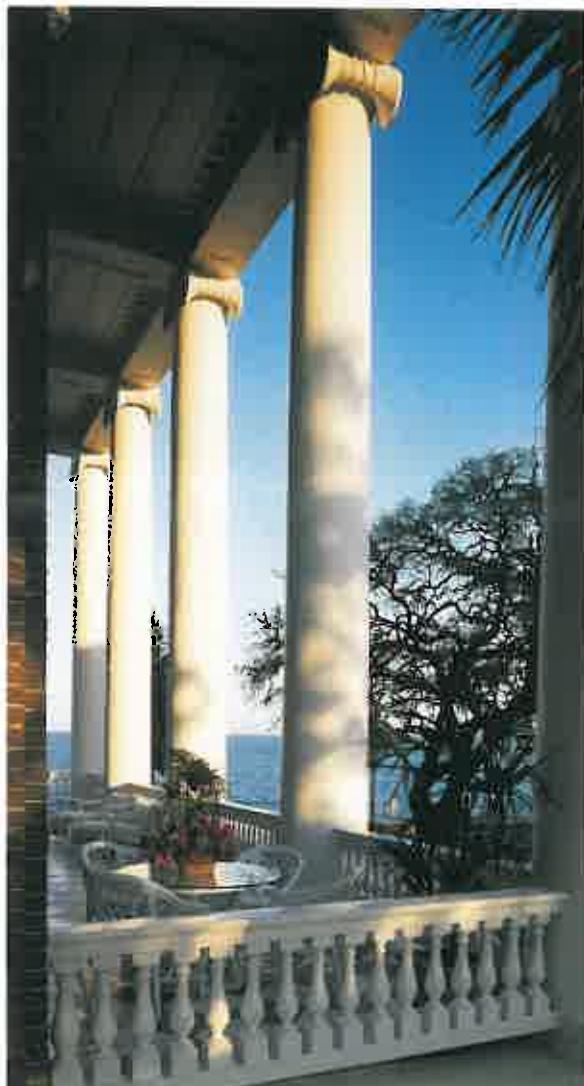
Reichardt came to Charleston to design and supervise the construction of the Meeting Street Theater (1835–1837; now destroyed) and the Charleston Hotel (1836–1839; now destroyed). The neoclassical monumentality of these buildings expressed Charleston's aspiration to become the "Queen City of the South," a popular epithet of the late 1830's, when the city gravitated toward south-

ern nationalism. With the subdivision of the East Battery in 1837 Reichardt also furnished plans for White Point Garden on South Battery.

The most persuasive argument for Reichardt as the architect of the Roper House is stylistic: the colossal five-columned piazza along the south side reflects similarly monumental colonnades on Reichardt's Meeting Street Theater, Charleston Hotel, and Guard House (1838–1839; now destroyed).

True to the format of the single house, the narrow end of the Roper House faces on the street and the long side recedes into the depth of the lot. Both the side piazza and the entrance bay are slightly recessed in an attempt to give symmetry to the narrow street façade. The side piazza, with its five columns, frames the four windows on both the second and third stories. A three-story piazza originally extended across the entire back of the house before it was altered by later additions.

The interior organization of the house is also orderly, especially on the second floor, where a double drawing room has similarly sized and evenly spaced windows and doors. The double drawing room is entered on the side away from the piazza through a stair hall with two small, square anterooms at either end. (The rear anteroom was enlarged at the expense of the stair hall earlier in this century.) Every detail of the plan reveals a consummate interest in geometry—the concern of an architect who had "imbibed a kindred spirit with those of Greece," as Roper once wrote in an article on the prospects of an



Pl. VI. The porch of the Roper House looking across Charleston harbor toward Fort Sumter.



Pls. VII, VIII.
Views of the
double drawing
room on the sec-
ond floor.

American art.¹³

The fusing of neoclassical ideas with the Charleston single house did not sacrifice the functional requirements for living in a subtropical climate. The large, high-ceilinged rooms facilitated air circulation, as did the tall, triple-hung windows that rise from floor level. The piazzas on the south and west, cooled by ocean breezes, could be used for entertaining and they shade the house from the heat of the sun.

Interior moldings were inspired by architectural



handbooks. The window and door surrounds of the double drawing room, for example, contain inverted and horizontal anthemions very similar to those illustrated in Minard Lafever's *Modern Builder's Guide* of 1833.¹⁴ In contrast to the bold columns of the side piazza, with their Greek Ionic capitals and unfluted shafts, the interior classical details are rendered with the delicacy of the Federal style.

Roper lived in the house with his wife, Martha Rutledge Laurens (1800–1868), until his death in 1845, by which time he was prominent on the state as well as the local level. In 1841 he was elected vice president of the South Carolina Agricultural Society, and from 1840 to 1843 he represented the Charleston parish of Saint Philip and Saint Michael in the state legislature, where he also served as the chairman of the committee on agriculture.

While Roper's house expressed the buoyant civic optimism of the late 1830's—in his words, "making Charleston the commercial emporium of the south"¹⁵—in the next decade he came to believe that South Carolina must first improve her agricultural resources, primarily through diversification, as the only road to commercial prosperity. To this end he promoted a geological and agricultural survey of the state. Aware that South Carolina rice and cotton were encountering increased competition in world markets, he also proposed that the state develop cotton manufacturing to reduce economic dependence on the North.¹⁶

Roper died of malaria in the spring of 1845, at the

height of his influence. Eulogized as "a large and successful planter, and enlightened agriculturist,"¹⁷ he left his wife his 560-acre Point Comfort Plantation with ninety-six slaves and the East Battery house. Having no children, she sold the house in 1851. Victorian alterations were made by Rudolph Siegling, who purchased it in 1874, and in 1929 Solomon Guggenheim, the New York City art collector and founder of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in that city, bought the house as a winter home.

The present owner, Richard H. Jenrette, acquired the house in 1967 and began an exemplary restoration of the kind he has accomplished at his four other historic properties: a town house in New York City; Edgewater on the Hudson River;¹⁸ Ayr Mount in Hillsborough, North Carolina;¹⁹ and Cane Garden, a sugar plantation on Saint Croix.

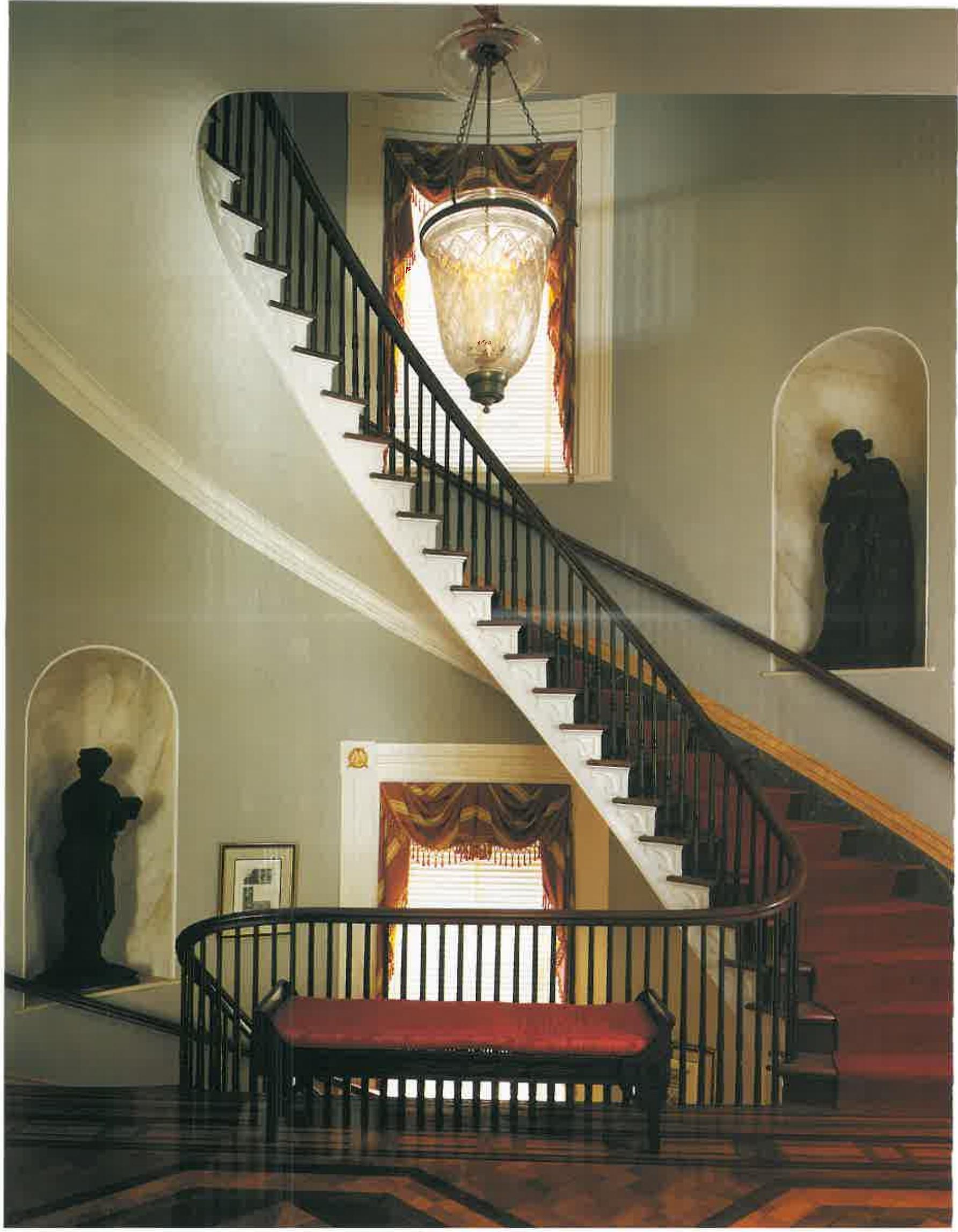
The restoration of the Roper House has included stenciling floors, marbleizing walls and baseboards, renewing plasterwork, and gilding interior ornament. The house is furnished with Jenrette's fine collection of neoclassical furniture, chiefly from New York, and paintings, several of which are of Charleston significance.

From the street one enters a hall with an oak floor painted in marquetry patterns. The reception room in the front has marbleized walls on which are displayed James Malton's (1761–1803) aquatint views of Dublin, appropriate to Charleston at the time the house was erected because the city had metropolitan aspirations analogous to Dublin's. On a nineteenth-century French Aubusson



Pl. IX. The staircase reflected in a girandole looking glass in the ground-floor hall.

Pl. X. The dining room.





Pl. XI. The stair leading to the third floor.

Pl. XII. Detail of a French chair of c. 1820 in the ground-floor reception room.

Pl. XIII. French clock of c. 1810 in the second-floor stair hall.



rug in the center of the room is a robustly carved and splendidly gilded early nineteenth-century mahogany card table. Other fine objects in the room include an English Regency sofa and a mahogany desk-and-bookcase attributed to Joseph Meeks and Sons (1829–1835) of New York City.

In the dining room, behind the reception room, are another nineteenth-century Aubusson rug and a Boston mahogany table and chairs, above which hangs a chandelier installed during the Sieglings' residency. On the back wall, above an early nineteenth-century American mahogany pier table, is an elaborate girandole mirror with four candle sconces dating from about 1820. Both rooms open onto the arcade under the piazza and are at ground level, expressing supreme confidence in the new battery sea wall of the mid-1830's. Actually, the storm surge of hurricane Hugo in September 1989 drove four-and-a-half feet of water into these rooms, but other than superficial discoloration, it caused little damage to the house.

Along the graceful curving stair to the second floor are niches with cast-metal figures representing female personifications of the arts. At the top of the stairs is one of the finest pieces of furniture in the house, an early nineteenth-century French tall-case clock with signs of the zodiac and a bust of Napoleon.

The climax of the formal sequence of rooms is the large open space of the double drawing room on the second floor, which has taller ceilings and more elaborately ornamented door and window surrounds than the rooms on the ground floor. The walls have been marbleized in illusionistic panels, but the green marble Greek revival mantels are original. The chandeliers were installed by the Sieglings. The carpet is copied from one in the Senate chamber in the old North Carolina State Capitol in Raleigh. The mahogany side chairs and sofas are attributed to Duncan Phyfe of New York City.

Important paintings also hang in the double drawing room: above the front chimneypiece is a "porthole portrait" of George Washington by Rembrandt Peale (1778-1860). On the opposite walls are portraits of Colonel (1745-1783) and Mrs. Thomas Grimball (1742-1813) by Jeremiah

Theus (1716-1774), Charleston's noted colonial painter. Below Mrs. Grimball's portrait is *View of Charleston*, engraved in 1739 by Williams H. Toms (c. 1700-c. 1750) after a watercolor by Bishop Roberts (d. 1739), showing the city from the water almost exactly a century before the house was built.

With the passage of a hundred years Charleston had developed into a sophisticated metropolis that envisioned itself the "Queen City of the South." What was in 1739 unprotected land unsuitable for house lots had been stabilized by the sea wall that made the Roper House possible in 1838. The Roper House proclaimed the ante-bellum destiny of Charleston and anticipated the fateful drift toward secession and civil war, which was witnessed from the piazza with the firing on Fort Sumter in 1861.

For their assistance in the preparation of this article we would like to thank Richard H. Jenrette, William L. Thompson, John Laurens, and Whitney Powers.

¹ For the civic improvements of the 1830's see Kenneth Severens, *Charleston Antebellum Architecture and Civic Destiny* (Knoxville, Tennessee, 1988), pp. 77-82, 105-108.

² *Charleston Courier*, February 1, 1837.

³ *Ibid.*, September 29, 1837.

⁴ *Charleston News and Courier*, March 17, 1975.

⁵ *Report Containing a Review of the Proceedings of the City Authorities* (Charleston, 1838).

⁶ *Charleston Directory, and Strangers' Guide, for 1840 and 1841* (Charleston, 1840).

⁷ Colonel Roper established the Roper Hospital with a bequest of about \$30,000 (see Severens, *Charleston Antebellum Architecture*, pp. 162-164). The Robert William Roper papers, in the possession of John Laurens, contain biographical information about the family.

⁸ "The Memoirs of Frederick Adolphus Porcher," ed. Samuel Gaillard Stoney, *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, vol. 46 (October 1945), pp. 207-208.

⁹ "A Well Wisher to Agriculture, To the President and Members of the Agricultural



Pl. XIV. Detail of one of the curtains in the double drawing room on the second floor.



Pls. XV, XVI, XVII. Views of the double drawing room on the second floor.



PL XVIII. View of the double drawing room on the second floor.



Society of Charleston, S. C.," *Carolina Journal of Medicine, Science, and Agriculture*, vol. 1 (July 1825), pp. 293-294.

¹⁰ "A Well Wisher to Agriculture, On the Necessity of Agricultural Education," *Southern Agriculturist*, vol. 2 (January 1829), pp. 1-7, and (February 1829), pp. 49-52.

¹¹ Minute Book of the South Carolina Agricultural Society (1825-1860), August 20, 1833, and August 19, 1834 (South Carolina Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia); and Robert W. Roper, *Address Delivered in Charleston before the Agricultural Society of South Carolina* (Charleston, 1834).

¹² For Reichardt's architectural career see Severens, *Charleston Antebellum Architecture*, pp. 97-116.

¹³ *Oration on the 66th Anniversary of the Battle of Fort Moultrie* (Charleston, 1842), p. 20.

¹⁴ (New York, 1833), Pls. 80 and 87.

¹⁵ "Report of the Committee on Agriculture, on a Geological and Agricultural Survey of the State, to the Legislature of South Carolina," *Southern Quarterly Review*, vol. 3 (April 1843), p. 450.

¹⁶ Robert W. Roper, *Address Delivered in Columbia before the State Agricultural Society* (Columbia, 1844).

¹⁷ *Charleston Courier*, June 14, 1845. Eulogies also appeared in the *Charleston Mercury*, June 14, 1845, and in the Minute Book of the South Carolina Agricultural Society, June 17, 1845.

¹⁸ See *ANTIQUES* for June 1982, pp. 1400-1410.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, May 1989, pp. 1190-1201.