THE RESTORATION OF THE MANIGAULT HOUSE

by Beatrice St. J. Ravenal

Early post-Revolutionary coloring of a strong and somewhat daring, if austere nature, came to light during the recent restoration of the Manigault House at Charleston, South Carolina. The dwelling, in Adam style, and architecturally among the most important in the South, was designed c. 1790 by Gabriel Manigault, rice planter and amateur architect, for his brother, Joseph. The decline of the neighborhood in the present century made the building a slum, which led a touch-and-go existence, being saved from destruction only by the work of several individuals and organizations. The Charleston Museum came into possession of the property a few years ago without, however, being able to rehabilitate it. Last spring, a housing shortage caused it to be sought by the U.S.O. for a woman's club house. By arrangement between the U.S.O. and the museum, several years' rent was made available immediately for the restoration.

This work has been accomplished under the direction of Mr. Albert Simons, of Simons and Lapham, who volunteered his services. Members of the building committee, besides Mr. Simons, were Mr. E. Milby Burton, director of the Charleston Museum, Monsignor James J. May, vicar general of the Diocese of Charleston, Mrs. Austin Parker, club director, U.S.O., and Mr. John D. Rooney as financial coordinator. The club house, how in operation, is sponsored by the Woman's Division of the National Catholic Community Service, Inc., in connection with the U.S.O.

Apart from its intrinsic beauty, the Manigault House is important as the earliest known example of the Adam style in South Carolina. Gabriel Manigault (1758-1809), well read and well traveled, escaped to an eminent degree the superficiality which betrays the amateur. The house reflects the style of the Adam brothers not only in the decoration which stems chiefly from the Louis XVI aspects of their work, but in the fundamentals of the plan which embraces curving rooms with easy intercommunications, and closet space. Manigault set it between a public park (which still remains) and what was then open country, with the axis of the hall continued by a walkway ending at a circular garden house. He made a concession to the climate in the use of piazzas, but kept them subordinate, and integrated one of them with the plan by curving it to balance the curving dining room on the opposite side of the building.

While the staunchness of the masonry, local gray brick laid in Flemish bond, and the wooden-pegged slate roof, are excellent, they

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Miss Ravenel, by inheritance, interest, and experience, is one of Charleston's most active and enthusiastic preservationists. JOURNAL readers are particularly fortunate in having from her such a succinct and understanding report of the restoration of one of Charleston's finest architectural monuments.

are not unusual and are probably due to the builder, who remains anonymous. But several exceptional details show Manigault's attention to practical matters. Piazza columns deteriorate first in their plinths; he made these of stone. A layer of lime (potent against insects and decay) was placed between floor and subfloor. On every story inside the outer wall, just back of the baseboard, a row of bricks bars the way to rats and the truly magnificent Charleston cockroaches. A system of concealed and counterbalancing weights was used to raise the heavy sash of the large half-moon window on the third story so that when lifted this sash would disappear into a pocket above.

Unlike some buildings which have been restored almost with ferocity, the house was accorded painstaking research before a paintbrush was applied. A half dozen coats of paint, more or less, were removed to determine the original colors. Even when results were surprisingg (as in the case of the baseboards of a utilitarian gray, matching the marble facings of the fireplaces), they were followed. The austere coloring was most marked in the dining room which combined doors grained to simulate satinwood, cafe au lait trim with a pinkish cast, and rich green walls under an ivory cornice and ceiling. The library, also on the first floor, was a fresh green with gray trim, while the small music room adjoining was found to have been purplish gray with dark blue-gray trim and doors grained like mahogany. To quote Mr. Simons, "One reason that this light architecture doesn't look weak and finicky is the strong coloring that went with it."

In every room a small piece of wall and woodwork has been left unrestored to show the original paint, constituting both a valuable record and an answer to doubting Thomases. A door has likewise been kept with the original graining uncovered. Some of the doors had been grained, others painted, and in every case have been returned to their first state. No trace of stain having been discovered on the floors, they have merely been waxed to preserve them.

As for structural matters, the house was examined exhaustively for signs both of decay and of alteration. It proved to have suffered few changes, being happily without additions, although one piazza had been tampered with, and the other had been wrecked by the last hurricane. An unsuspected fireplace in the first story hall was found to have been bricked up so early in its history that it has been left that way, the only evidence of its former existence being the framing of the timbers around the hearth, visible from the basement. The dramatic, curving staircase was largely unhurt, even the most casual of slum dwellers having respected it, so that only a few balusters were missing. These were supplied by some taken from the back stairs, the latter being replaced by substitutes. The elaborate plaster ceiling above the staircase was largely intact, as were, in general, the minute applied decorations on mantelpieces, doorways, chair rails, and cornices. Shelves were supplied for the brackets found in the dressing room off the master's bedroom. Most of the box locks with brass knobs on the top story were gone, and had to be replaced in kind, but the mortised locks with china knobs of the lower stories remained. Unchanged was that tourists' delight, the "secret passage" from the third to the second story, now believed to have been a clothes chute.

When it was impossible to secure an exact copy of the original, a temporary substitute has been employed. Owing to the war, small china knobs of French manufacture to replace those missing from the

solid inside shutters of the third story could not be obtained. Instead wooden knobs finished with white enamel paint have been used and can be removed without a trace whenever china ones become available. In a larger matter, the expense involved prevented duplication of the original. The halls, upper and lower, were found, unexpectedly, to have been marbleized. To have repeated this decoration would have exceeded all estimates. The problem has been met for the present by painting the halls the color of the priming which fortunately was of an acceptable, bean-soup shade not far removed from the general tone of the marbleizing. If, in the future, additional funds are forthcoming, the halls can be marbleized without further preparation.

Two striking painted designs have been reproduced with care. The smaller and more restrained is a frieze around the master's bedroom, consisting of a Greek rinceau pattern in ocher on a light ground. The other is the amazing ceiling of the drawing room which, as often happens in Charleston, is on the second story. On a light ivory ground, pearl gray cartouches containing anthemei, the whole emphasized by gray shadows and white highlights to simulate relief, converge as it were toward a central medallion. These radiating cartouches are irregular, those extending from the four corners being the longest and proportionately the narrowest, while the location of the highlight and shade lines varies in different parts of the ceiling, making them appear as if they were the result of the natural light of the windows below. It is all very spirited and free and, probably because of the clear, flat tones, not at all oppressive, although the most uncritical eye sees that the large bold elements of its design are out of scale with the delicate architectural detail of the room.

This ceiling decoration had been so long painted over that it had been forgotten. Its restoration entailed the most careful work to discover, record, and repeat the exact variations of the design which was in poor condition. In fact, the center may have possessed greater elaboration than now appears, but possible under-, rather than over-decoration was thought preferable.

The plaster walls above the wainscot of this room revealed traces of the former presence of wallpaper, in sheets measuring 22 3/4 by 17 inches. The paper was entirely gone, but fortunately had been slightly embossed on the reverse side and had left faint impressions of much of its pattern in the paperhanger's paste which was the bottom stratum on the wall. Diminutive lines indicated the borders, and othermarks showed the general proportions of designs which had covered the greater part of the wall; but of the designs themselves and much of the minute decorations in the borders, there was no trace. To replace the missing designs, the architects prepared stencils, using wreath, lyre, and other late eighteenth century motives which were painted in ivory on a mellow field just off mulberry, this shade being derived from the marble facing of the fireplace.

The house has acquired more character since it has regained its forceful coloring and has lost the pallid aspect which suits the imposing temple forms of the Greek Revival, but is too often given to any old structure regardless of its style. The building is now in constant use so that the expense entailed in its restoration has been justified even from a purely financial viewpoint, and hence it is to be hoped that its example may encourage the preservation of other notable old buildings.