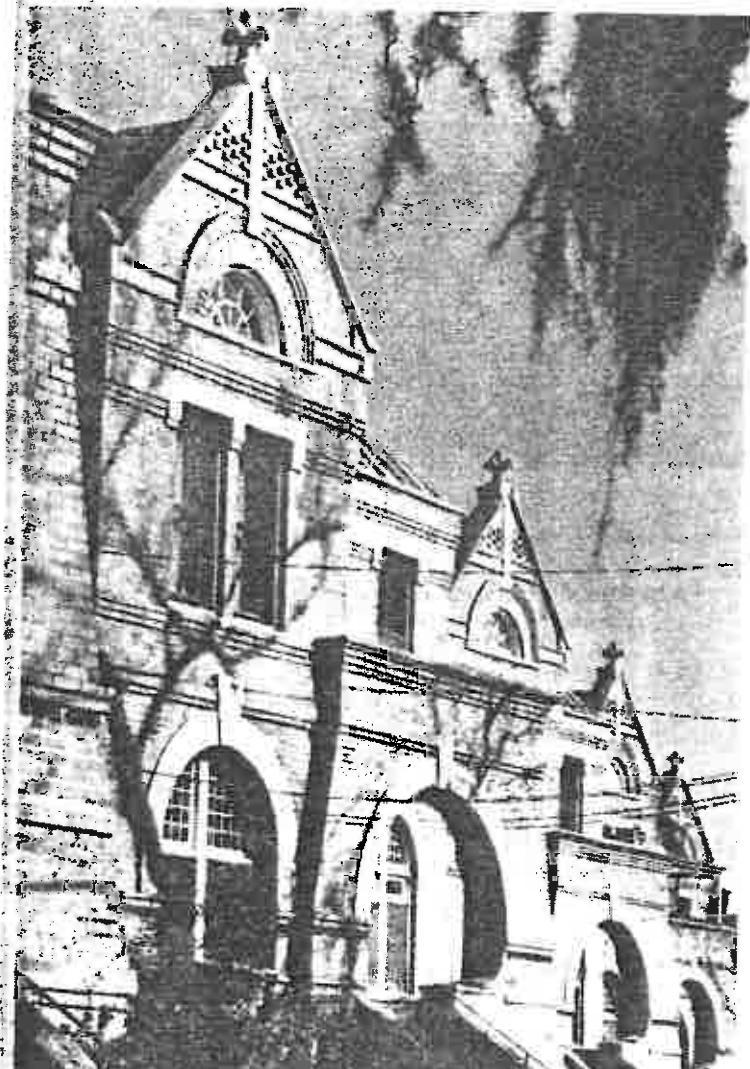


W.M. ENSTON HOMES
900 King Street

Street

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King St. Buildings A Little Bit Of 19th-Century England



Staff Photo by Wade Spees

Arched entryways lead to porches.

By JANE E. ALLEN
Post-Courier Reporter

A little bit of 19th-century England lies behind a granite gateway on upper King Street.

Charleston resident William Enston, a prosperous furniture maker, merchant and steamship magnate, left his fortune to the city so that a home for the elderly, like one in his native Canterbury, England, could be built "to make old age comfortable."

In 1887, 17 years after Enston's death, architect W.B.W. Howe Jr. designed the complex following Enston's specifications: that the cottages be "built of brick, in rows, neat and convenient, two stories high, each having two rooms and a kitchen. Each cottage must have a small garden to busy the occupant."

The residents, Enston said, were to be the old and sick, aged 45 to 75, and of "good honest character."

"None must be admitted under the age of forty-five years unless in case of some great infirmity, some lameness, some physical infirmity" and none could suffer from "lunacy," he said. No more than 20 residents were to be of any one religious denomination.

Enston's vision was realized on a tract of land between King Street and Interstate Highway 26, north of Huger Street. The brick and stone houses occupy St. Martin's Court, named for the first Christian church in England; Queen Bertha's Court, for the first Christian queen in England; St. Augustine's Court, for the first Christian missionary in England; Canterbury Avenue for the founder's birthplace; and Colsterworth Avenue, for the birthplace of the founder's wife.

Enston's village was actually a memorial to his national and familial ties. He was born May 5, 1808, one of seven children in an Episcopal family. In 1825, his father moved the family to Philadelphia, where he opened a cabinet shop near Independence Hall, making his son an apprentice in gilding and woodworking. At the age of 21, the young Enston completed his apprenticeship.

In 1832, he moved to Charleston, where he worked for "a French lady who had a furniture store in Meeting Street." He then opened his own small business. During a brief return to Philadelphia in 1834 he

Do You Know Your Charleston?

married Hannah Shuttlewood of Colsterworth, England. The newlyweds moved to Charleston, where Enston had a furniture shop at King and Clifford streets.

Enston made his fortune through other business projects, including a half-interest in the Charleston Hotel and some real estate holdings in Chicago and Cincinnati. He built two side-wheel steamships that ran passengers from New York to Charleston. They were "The Southerner," which, at 1,000 tons, could carry 200 passengers between the cities in 55 hours, and "The Northerner," which, at 1,350 tons, carried 250 passengers. A third ship, "The Baltimore" ran between Charleston and Havana.

Enston died March 23, 1860, of heart disease, leaving \$1 million in real estate, personal property, stocks, securities and other investments to provide for his wife and designated friends and relatives during their lifetimes. After they were cared for, the rest was to go to the City of Charleston for construction of the homes. The Civil War reduced his estate to about \$500,000.

Hannah Enston settled her husband's estate in 1882, and the city received \$136,950 for the construction and maintenance of the homes. The city-appointed trustees eventually agreed to build 40 cottages, although only 24 were constructed.

Under her husband's will, Mrs. Enston was to approve a site for the home. The city purchased the eight-acre M. Stoen farm and later added three acres of the Blake Lands, part of the Rutledge estate, to the tract. Later additions included the land all the way to Huger Street.

Mrs. Enston died Oct. 26, 1886, in Spartanburg, having moved there after the 1886 earthquake in Charleston. She was buried with her husband in Laurel Hill Cemetery near Philadelphia.

Construction began the year after her death.

Ground was broken March 9, 1887, for the foundation of one of the first five cottages on the northwest lot on King Street. On Sept. 1, 1887, the city contracted for the erection of 14 more cottages. A central avenue from west to east divided the property, with another running north to south. Each quadrant was divided into courts.

Enston's endowment financed the construction of the 24 red brick cottages, a water tower, and an artesian well that was to have had the capacity for 20,000 gallons of water a day.

The city erected a memorial chapel with a high campanile-style tower, which now houses a recreation room downstairs and woodworking shop on the upper story. Mounted within the recessed entrance is a bronze bust of Enston, executed by Edward V. Valentine of Richmond, Va. Downstairs are three paintings, one of a very stern-faced Hannah Enston, one of William Enston and one of Mayor William A. Courtenay, who served as first president of the board of trustees from 1882 to 1894. In the upstairs room, which is decorated with stained-glass panels, lie watermarked prints of Canterbury Cathedral and several framed memorials to the Enstons that probably hung inside each of the apartments.

In 1931, the infirmary was built from the bequest of Harriett E. Dawson, in memory of her brother Dr. John L. Dawson.

Today, 76 residents occupy the homes, which are managed by a 12-man board of trustees. Charleston Mayor Joseph P. Riley Jr. is an ex officio board member. According to secretary and treasurer John Thomas, "only money from the original bequest" and interest, managed by the South Carolina Bank Trust Department, is used for upkeep. Occasional small donations supplement those funds.

The more antiquated rules, like a prohibition against radios in the cottages, have been lifted, Thomas said. Residents must be able to provide their own furniture, food and clothing, but living space and utilities are given to them.

The chapel built by the city in 1888 is used for board meetings, and the infirmary has been converted into the superintendent's home.