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Approximately 2250 words

A NOTABLE RESTORATION

STOLL'S ALLEY, CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

One of the numerous engaging ways in which Charleston, capital of the Carolina Low Country, differs from other cities is that here an "alley" usually denotes a choice residential area rather than a no-man's-land of cats and garbage. Most of Charleston's alleys appear to have eventuated from the whims of property owners in developing private parcels of land, especially where such parcels lay contiguous to already well-defined thoroughfares. A man chose the most advantageous site for his dwelling, garden and dependencies and opened a path or a drive connecting him with the adjacent streets. Time and a matter of convenience gradually changed such lanes into public roadways.

Early property transfers recorded in Charleston show such a condition to have been the genesis of Stoll's Alley, dear to the hearts of tourists and running a block in length between lower Church Street and East Bay. Today the approach from Church Street is along a brick-paved lane only wide enough for the comfortable passage of an automobile and on which two old brick-and-frame houses abutt. Beyond these the space widens into a court, or mews, with a grass plot dappled by shadows of hackberry trees and with four additional houses grouped about the green. From the far side a narrow walk - a mere tunnel between high walls - leads to East Bay, beyond which flows the Cooper River as it enters Charleston harbor.

In 1759 Justinus Stoll bought a holding in this little close and by the time of his death in 1778 the passage connecting the two streets was freely open for public use and bore his name. Just which of the several old dwellings yet remaining he may have occupied is not known with certainty, as some of the original records have disappeared and all street numbers have been changed. He may even have lived in one of the two very ancient houses pulled down between his day and this. But members of his family continued to own other property in the alley and to live there for a long period of time.

Earlier dwellers in the little street were for the most part humble folk - Justinus was a blacksmith having his shop in East Bay, next Granville's Bastion, part of old Charles Town's fortifications. He advertised in the South Carolina Gazette that he had for sale, along with broadaxes, bells and nails, "new Iron-Plates to bake Johnny-Cake or Gridel-bread on". His grandson Justinus was a brickmason. Numerous harbor pilots lived in the alley and before it officially took the name of Stoll it was called Pilots' Alley. But if the occupations of the men who lived awhile there were not distinguished the lineage of one and another among them was excellent. In this category was Peter Trezevant, of Huguenot descent, who in the first years after his arrival in the city from Europe sold ship and pilot bread. Later he became a clerk for the State Bank, though seemingly at a small stipend, as is indicated by certain bits of family lore concerning him. One day a week it was his custom to repair to the market and invest all his funds of the moment in a choice sheepshead, or cavalli, along with a bottle of wine. Then

See Vol III S.C.H.G.M., p. 26 grandson of Justinus and great grandson of B.E. b. 1745 - died in Charleston (?) buried in Grotoes in 1786

in a spirit of true Gallic hospitality and lightheartedness he would invite a friend to dine and become, for that brief interval, a gentleman of substance. Was there, after all, a grain of truth in that passage from the old geographies which states: "The French are a gay people, fond of dancing and light wines"? By every timeworn adage such prodigality as Peter's should have brought him to dire straits in his latter days. But his story is a fine refutation of all such stuffy maxims. Thrpugh his wife, Elizabeth Farquhar, he fell heir to a goodly share of the estate of her English relative, Lord John Farquhar, who besides lands and houses died possessed of more than half a million pounds sterling. The Trezevants removed to England and divided their time between Fonthill Abbey and a town house in fashionable Chester Terrace. Peter never lost the memory of his lean years in Charleston and often compared them with his later affluence in the gay remark: "Not much like Stoll's Alley, eh?"

Not as residents of the alley, but as frequent visitors there, was a still different group of men whose names were to add lustre to the history of their State - Langdon Cheves, William Lowndes, John and Christopher Gadsden, patriots all; Charles Fraser the miniaturist, Doctor Gallagher the classicist, Doctor David Ramsey the medical pioneer and historian. They were members of the Philomathean Society, "cradle of oratory", which held its meetings in the Furman School, now #7 Stoll's Alley. At such gatherings questions of the hour were debated with fervor and a love of good talk for talk's sake, in a day when men formed their own opinions without

benefit of radio commentators.

About the year 1800 this same house, #7, owned then by another Justinus Stoll, sheltered the feeble flame of Methodism until increasing numbers and lessening dissention within the sect made possible the acquisition of a church building.

No satisfactory account of the long life of Stoll's Alley would be possible without passing mention of the War Between the States. Following this came change of property ownership, impoverishment and vacated premises. Gradually Negroes took over and the once quiet and charming old houses became noisome tenements, the roadway itself a quagmire. This unhappy state lasted until a day in 1927 when Mrs. George Dana Canfield, of Charleston and Peekskill, New York, was looking about for a building "south of Broad" - (Charlestonese for the best part of town) in which to locate an antique shop. It was a golden moment in the fortunes of the alley when she picked her way into its mouth and saw beneath the overlay of grime and decay the innate beauty of the first small house off Church Street, a house even then nearing the two-century mark. Its lower floor was of purplish brick, with flat-topped dormers set in a comfortable gambrel roof and clapboards on the gable ends. There had been a time when it was the delight of antiquarians because of the living green thatch of moss and ferm that covered its rotting shingles, but these had since been replaced with tin. Mrs. Canfield bought the house, #9, and restored it to the extent of replacing rotted timbers, crumbling plaster and leaking roof; she modernized it as to plumbing and wiring, and made it gleam again with fresh paint.

But she very wisely made no attempt to overdress the plain original fabric with false ornamentation.

Long before this restoration was complete Mrs. Canfield had succumbed to the charm of the alley, a locale known to her during all her early years spent in Charleston and yet not actually familiar because of the low estate to which it had fallen. She appreciated its seeming remoteness, its potential quiet and its fortunate location, only four blocks or so above the Battery, or bay. She determined on salvaging the entire area, but not merely to provide more housing for in that almost forgotten day there was no shortage of living quarters in the city. She saw the project from an esthetic viewpoint - these old "shacks" were eseentially too good for final decay - and as a financial venture she felt it would pull its own weight.

As rapidly as was possible she acquired all the property and went on with the work of salvage. The undertaking was large; to a person of less astute business sense and to one lacking an appreciation for good architecture it would have been certain of failure. The mere squalor and dilapidation were hard to face. Number Three, for example, an all-frame structure, was so nearly tumbledown as made little difference. The double piazzas across the face were almost literally hanging by a nail; the flooring had rotted out; the chimney stacks were tottering. But the generous fireplaces remained, most of the fabric was sound if coming apart at the seams and the interior trim was pleasing. It was a prideful thing to see this house finally emerge in its original form, staunch, whole and immaculate in white paint and a brave red roof.

Each unit presented its own problem of repair and alteration. The most difficult was met in #5, now occupied by Mrs. Canfield as a winter home. And, by the way, once long ago the home of Peter Trezevant. As purchased the house consisted of two sections, connected by a short central hall and entrance. The left part was a story-and-a-half stucco on brick built as a dwelling about the Mid-Eighteenth Century but with all its lower floor then converted into a commercial laundry. Nothing remained here of the original interior. The right half was a two-story frame wing, at a slightly higher floor level, added some later fifty years/and still used as living quarters, and it was substantially in good condition. The delicate Adam mantel, cornice and chair rail of the drawing room, the two windows each in the north, east and west walls, and the bedrooms above needed little more than vigorous cleaning and fresh paint.

Where the laundry had operated was laid out a very large dining and family sitting room combined; back of this a serving pantry and kitchen were incorporated. The half-story above was finished off into more bedrooms and baths and servants' quarters were added by extending a wing at the back of the housd, running at right angles and above the drive. The old fireplace was reopened in the dining room, mantel and trim in harmony with the old work were installed, and a wide board floor replaced the concrete of the laundry. With the entire exterior painted white, and dark-green shutters - so necessary a part of the Charleston scene - hung at all windows, the house became a harmonious entity, distilling an air of urbane living.

Beside #7, which is another composite of brick and clapboard sitting flush with the brick pavement, and has been mentioned earlier as once being Stoll property, a delicate wroughtiron gate opens on a narrow walk. This leads to #7-1/2 Stoll's Alley, a simple frame house built about fifty years ago as servants' quarters but remodeled into a perfect small home for Mrs. Canfield's daughter, Mrs. Joseph S. Hanahan. It has its own bit of garden and a flagstone terrace at the back, where golden cocker spaniels dream in the breezes which somehow find their way up from the Battery past the intervening medley of rooftops.

Facing #7 is an old two-story frame house, once the quarters for a large residence standing on Church Street. Its rooms are on different floor levels and each has a fireplace. The premises now house a smart dress shop owned by Mrs. Canfield's daughters, Mrs. Hanahan and Mrs. Huger Sinkler junior. It is attractive at any season but on a chilly spring day, with early flowers blooming in the scrap of dooryard and open fires making a welcome within, it is enchanting. There are always fresh magnolia branches on the old mantels, and mellow antique furniture - not for sale - adds its own atmosphere. Speaking of antiques, the shop which gave the impetus for acquiring the alley has been closed, #9 being once again a home. But most of the refurbished houses are furnished in excellent old pieces, the fruits of Mrs. Canfield's collecting years - slant-top desks, Sheraton chairs, dim Chippendale mirrors, a rare oval-topped pedestal dining table. She retains title to all the property and rents it to a well-satisfied clientele.

Rounding out the number which comprises the alley proper

are two rather modern white clapboard dwellings enclosed by a picket fence and facing the green. These have no particular architectural merit but their spotless white paint makes pictorial contrast with the heavy green foliage of the trees which shelter them. The brick paving replacing the old quagmire has a deceptive look of antiquity due to its uneven surface, being laid in places over the bed of a meandering creek running up from Water Street. Which in turn covers the former course of Vanderhorst Creek. Down this Lord William Campbell, last royal governor of the Province, was rowed to the safety of a British warship lying in the harbor just off East Bay, not long before the first shots of the Revolution were heard in the city.

Enough time has passed since the restoration was finished to have mellowed all of the new work. A stranger seeing the place would feel that here was a group of singularly fortunate houses which had reached honorable age without suffering the misfortunes of neglect and decay. Many strangers do see them thus for during the spring season in Charleston visitors wander in and out of the alley from dawn to dusk, voicing their appreciation. It is not uncommon for one of the residents to open his door in the morning and step almost literally into the arms of a tourist getting a snapshot of his house, but far from objecting he is pleased to know that others share his opinion of the picturesque charm of the alley.