

Vernacular Architecture of Charleston

Upton D.

THE WILLIAM ENSTON HOME

Built nineteen residential cottages, Memorial Hall, water tower, engine house, and internal road network, 1884-1888. Additions: entrance gate, 1893; five new cottages, 1927; infirmary, 1933.

Architects and builders: W.B.W. Howe Jr., with Rudolph Hering, sanitary engineer, and W.F. Bowe, Patrick Culleton, and Colin McKenzie Grant, contractors (1884-1888); Robert McCarrel (1893); unknown (1927, 1933).

900 King Street

Between 1850 and 1880 the number of Americans living past age fifty tripled. At the same time, the social and economic status of this group grew increasingly perilous. For one thing, though forced retirements were now common, pensions remained rare. This was an era when poverty was still widely regarded as a form of social deviancy, whatever its causes, and for those Americans who could not maintain their own homes or depend on friends or family, there were few options; private benevolent homes (usually religious, ethnic, or professional in affiliation); subsidized tenements (most often located near large industrial centers and geared toward working families); or, for the poorest of the poor, that most pervasive and dreaded "corrective"--the city or county-run almshouse. Inmates of the almshouse, young and old alike, were typically put into uniforms and locked up with criminals and the insane, subjected to hard work, strict discipline, over-crowding, squalor, and disease. Yet despite its widely recognized inadequacies, the almshouse remained the nation's most common mode of public relief into the first decade of the twentieth century.

Charleston's Enston Home offered a rare, benevolent, non-sectarian alternative. In his 1859 will, British-born businessman William Enston directed that the bulk of his half-million dollar estate be used to build a home for the elderly poor of his adoptive city of Charleston. The home was intended, in is words, "to make old age comfortable" (a motto later cast in bronze and placed ont eh home's entrance gate). Residents would come from the ranks of the "worthy" poor, people of "good, honest character," at least forty-five years of age and not insane. No restrictions were placed on race or creed. The will directed that residents be provided with "neat and convenient" two-story brick cottages, set in rows on at least eight acres of ground, with individual kitchens and garden plots.

Owing to the Civil War and its aftermath, no action was taken on Enston's bequest until 1881. In that year Charleston mayor William Ashmead Courtenay contacted Enston's widow, Hannah, to arrange a settlement. This was reached a year later and a twelve-member board of trustees (independent, though reporting annually to the mayor and the city council) was established to oversee the home's construction and operation. An eight acre site on King Street, two miles north of Charleston's center, was purchased by the city in 1882. Additional acreage was acquired two years later and construction began under architect W.B.W. Howe, Jr.

Today the Enston Home consists of twenty-nine structures on 12.1 landscaped acres. The site is entered from King Street, though a massive, octagonal-towered stone gate that frames the view of Memorial Hall and provides a monumental border between the home and the newer working-class neighborhood outside. Inside, a network of stone-paved streets and curbed sidewalks links the twenty-four residential cottages, Memorial Hall, infirmary, water tower, entrance

gate, and engine house. With the exception of the granite rubble Richardsonian Romanesque entrance gate, all buildings are constructed of red brick in a style that combines Romanesque and Queen Anne elements. (Note: the 1933 infirmary employs a rather more eclectic mix, combining features borrowed from the cottages with Palladian windows and such bungalow-style elements as a sun porch and jerkin-head gables.) Romanesque Revival architecture is rare in Charleston, a cityscape dominated by the image of its ante-bellum past, and the Enston Home provides one of the preeminent local examples.

Viewed as a whole, the site possesses a rather institutional character via the stylistic uniformity of its buildings, their arrangement in rows, and their orientation (all facing front to back toward the southwest, rather than face to face across the streets). Considered separately, however, the cottages do read as residential--this on account of their massing and scale, and such features as shingled hip roofs with cross gables, corbeled chimneys, covered porches, small doors, and double-hung sash windows. At the center of the community is the "village chapel," or Memorial Hall, with its peaked-roof bell tower, round-arched stained-glass windows, and bronze bust of Enston by Richmond sculptor Edward Valentine. The hall was intended to provide a space for community functions, non-denominational worship, board meetings, a library, and a superintendent's office.

The nineteen cottages at the north end of the property date from 1887, the five to the south are from 1927. While exteriors of the earlier and later cottages are nearly identical, differences do appear inside. In both cases, the buildings are divided into four apartments, two per floor, consisting of private bedroom (each with his own fireplace) and kitchen, with a shared bath and toilet on each floor. Basements contain cisterns for drinking water and space for coal and wood storage. Walls are lathed and plastered, and kitchens feature built-in storage cabinets with screen doors. One key difference in the plans is the locations of stairwells; in the earlier cottages these are found on the north sides, perpendicular to the west-side front porches; in the later buildings they are located at the south end, directly across from the front doors, thus turning the wide hallways into pleasantly breezy sitting areas. Other differences include the woodwork on the stair balustrades and fireplace surrounds (turned and carved in the 1887 buildings, more simple and blocky in those of 1927), and the curved corner walls in the 1927 hallways.

In 1880s Charleston it was widely known that one of Enston's ancestors had founded the late sixteenth century Jesus Hospital for "honest persons of good behavior," aged fifty-five or older, in Canterbury, England. Whatever the truth of the matter, mayor Courtenay believed that Enston had been inspired by this example, or by one of the other medieval cloistered almshouses in his native town. Courtenay wrote to Canterbury's mayor G.R. Frend for information on the architectural and administrative form of that city's almshouses. His annotated copy of the 1882 book Rambles Around Old Canterbury, along with his many letters to Howe and the builders discussing construction details, indicate his significant involvement in the planning of the home.

While the home's medieval village character was thought to be in keeping with Enston's intentions, it was also very much in line with contemporary developments in British and American architecture. A.W.N. Pugin's influential book Contrasts (whose 1841 edition featured a comparison between a modern panopticon-plan prison workhouse and a stately gothic quadrangular-form "ancient

Poor Hoyse"). Olmstead and Vaux's 1868 plan for suburban Riverside, Illinois, and H.H. Richardson's great New England churches and municipal buildings provide related images.

With Enston's abundant bequest at its disposal, the progressive, business-oriented Courtenay administration intended from the outset to make a showpiece of the home. In 1882 the Charleston News and Courier reported that "the object will be to make the William Enston Home an ornament to the City and an attraction for visitors, while fulfilling every practical use of the trust." "When fully developed," the 1883 Charleston Yearbook went on, the home "promises to be the most attractive charitable foundation in the Union." Already in 1882, the mayor was considering electric lighting, with an on-site power plant if necessary, and centralized steam heating for the cottages--then new and fairly exotic technologies for Charleston. A state of the art sewage system was designed for the home by well-known Philadelphia sanitary engineer Rudolph Hering, and its roads were paved with granite Belgian blocks; these accommodations came at a time when Charleston itself had neither a municipal sewage system nor more than a few paved streets. While the home was explicitly described as an impetus to Charleston's northward expansion, it also offered an implicit suggestion of the war-torn city's economic recovery; prominently situated between King Street--Charleston's main inbound artery--and the South Carolina Railway line, the home would be seen by almost everyone entering or exiting the town by land; only a place well on its way to recovery could afford to house its indigents in such style. Moreover, in a city where whole blocks leveled by Civil War bombardments were rebuilt to replicate their ante-bailey forms, the home's Romanesque Revival design suggested a deliberate turn away from past architecture and ideology.

More than the sum of its parts, it is the overall scheme of the Enston Home that is of interest and value. A late nineteenth century interpretation of a medieval English village, combined with then-current notions of healthful suburban living, the home is an early and unusual example of privately-funded, non-denominational, American philanthropic housing. In contrast to the almshouse, the spacious, picturesque grounds and cottages of Enston's village offered its indigent population a dignified, comfortable, and well-maintained modern home.

The home continues to function as originally established. According to a recent arrangement between the board of trustees and the Charleston Housing Authority, the property will be rehabilitated and expanded into mixed-use facilities for low-income residents.

Keith L. Eggener

Sources:

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