

Street

Wm. Enston Homes  
900 King Street

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



Staff Photo by Wade Speed

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. Storen 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.

900 King Street  
Wm. Enston Home

Arched entryways lead to porches.



Staff Photo by Bill Jordan

These Victorian-style houses are typical of Enston Homes on King Street.

## Enston Homes to become agency's newest project

By KERRI MORGAN  
Enston Post-Courier staff

Enston Homes, a pastoral 19th century village of Victorian brick cottages at 900 King St., is under contract to be sold to the Charleston Housing Authority.

The authority's board of directors allocated \$625,000 for the purchase, but has until late November to close the sale.

If purchased, the 12-acre site would be used for low- to moderate-income housing. The authority plans to buy 9.4 acres containing the cottages, and the city of Charleston is considering buying 2.6 vacant acres and building new housing.

The 24 cottages were built in 1887-88 at the direction of William Enston, a British-born Charlestonian who died in 1860 and left most of his fortune to build and maintain housing for the elderly and disabled.

His will — which stated that his goal was "to make old age comfortable" — specified the design for the

village and established the 12-member Enston Foundation to oversee the trust and operation of the homes.

Foundation Chairman Park Smith said the city approached the foundation about buying the property, "but selling has been in our minds."

Smith told the Post-Courier in 1987 that the interest from the trust, then estimated at more than \$1 million, no longer met expenses for the aging complex. The foundation also had to postpone repairs to the buildings for nearly a year after Hurricane Hugo.

If the housing authority buys Enston Homes, the foundation intends to build new housing for the current residents, Smith said.

Before deciding whether to buy the property, the housing authority will determine how much it would cost to repair the buildings and conduct soil tests, Executive Director Donald J. Cameron said.

The authority's board allocated \$12,500 to Lucilio and Associates of Charleston to determine repair

costs. Cameron said he hopes the studies will be completed in time for the board to make a final decision at its October meeting.

He said the city has hired a planner to study the overall site and plans to do a historical survey. But Mayor Joseph P. Riley Jr. said the city's involvement is only conceptual at this stage.

"We are working with the housing authority and Charleston Interfaith Crisis Ministry," he said. "We're looking at it in conjunction with our overall affordable housing plan. We're not that specific yet, but we do see it as an important housing opportunity."

All three entities teamed up to create the award-winning Charleston Cottages, which provide affordable transitional housing for homeless and mentally impaired people. The cottages are located on Huger Street about a block from Enston Homes, which is at the corner of King and Huger.

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# City authority to purchase 6/24/92 Enston Homes

By ERIC FRAZIER  
Of The Post and Courier staff

After nearly a year of negotiations, the Charleston Housing Authority signed a contract Thursday to buy the Enston Homes housing complex on upper King Street.

The two groups had been negotiating a sale since last July. A tentative agreement fell through in December when the authority decided the \$625,000 price tag was too high considering that the 12-acre complex needed about \$1.7 million in restoration work.

The agreement allows the authority to buy the 24 brick Victorian cottages for \$400,000. Don Cameron, executive director of the authority, said the lower sale price and the offer of 12 acres instead of the nine acres in the earlier plan makes the renovation more affordable.

Under the new agreement, the authority has 90 days to study the repair costs to make sure the project is feasible, he said. If that proves acceptable, the authority hopes to close on the property by October, he added.

William Enston, a wealthy merchant, left a trust fund in the late 19th century to build the homes specifically "to make old age comfortable" for elderly and disabled citizens.

Both the authority and the Enston Homes Foundation took pains to assure the 39 elderly residents of the 105-year-old village that the transition will be orderly and that their interests will be protected.

Park B. Smith, chairman of the Enston Foundation board of directors, stressed that the residents will be protected during the transition. The foundation also will follow through on its plans to build a new facility for them, he added.

"All their rights will be protected," Cameron said.

Authority officials said the pur-

chase enhances the city's stock of low- and moderate-income housing. They plan to spend \$3.3 million to complete William Enston's vision of a pastoral village similar to his boyhood home in Canterbury, England. The existing cottages will be restored, and 13 new buildings will be constructed to fill out the original plan devised in the 1880s.

Some cottages will be sold to first-time homebuyers, while others will be used as rental units, transitional housing and permanent housing for residents with special needs.

Foundation officials have said damages from Hurricane Hugo and termites have taxed the Enston trust's ability to restore the complex.

In other matters, Cameron said state health officials have asked the federal Environmental Protection Agency for an expanded investigation into soil contamination near the Ansonborough Homes. 4/24/92