

Do You Know Your Charleston?

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America Street Houses Face Demolition

By ROBERT P. STOCKTON

The two frame houses at 52 and 54 America St. face demolition unless alternatives can be found.

Three weeks ago, The Charleston Board of Architectural Review placed a 180-day delay on demolition to allow the owner to seek renovation alternatives.

Board member James H. Small suggested the owner look into city-operated programs that give financial assistance to East Side property owners for renovation projects.

Mrs. Christabelle Mitchell of 312 President St., owner of the buildings, said they have been offered for sale to anyone interested in restoring them.

Neither of the buildings is listed in the Historic Architecture Inventory of Charleston, although both are more than 100 years old and retain many of their original architectural features.

The construction date of 54 America St. has not been established, but 52 America appears to have been built about 1855 by John S. Bee.

The construction date of 54 America remains a mystery because, although it was not on its present site before 1844 and is not documented there until 1853, the house nevertheless has architectural features of a much earlier period.

Either the builder of 54 America was extremely conservative in his architectural taste or the dwelling

was moved from a previous location.

The two houses stand on lots that originally were part of a larger tract designated as Lot No. 53 in the "Plan of the Village of Hampstead," drawn by Barnard Beckman in 1789.

The village, one of Charleston's early suburbs, was laid out on a plantation belonging to Henry Laurens, a president of the Continental Congress and a prosperous Charleston merchant and planter.

Lot No. 53, bounded on the west by America Street, on the north by Amherst Street, on the south by Reid Street and on the east by Lot No. 54, was largely a "low water lot" deeply penetrated by a marshy creek.

The marsh remained unfilled until after 1844, when a plat of Lot No. 53 was made for Robert W. Disher, who would purchase the tract in 1845 from the master in equity.

The 1844 plat indicates that the entire America and Reid street frontage of the tract was still "low water" and that a tongue of high ground extended along the eastern portion of the tract, south from Amherst Street. The deeds of the period, consequently, refer to the tract as fronting on Amherst.

The plat also depicts three small buildings on the high ground, but none was a two story single house, indicating that present-day 54 America St. could not have been moved from there.

Disher paid \$500 for the sizable tract, indicating its relative worth in 1844-45.

By 1848, the property had been improved sufficiently for Disher to receive \$2,500 for it in a sale to Robert Martin. The deed mentions no buildings.

Martin, a prosperous factor who built his mansion at the corner of Charlotte and East Bay streets, divided the large tract into several lots fronting on America Street.

The first documentation found of present-day 54 America St. is in 1853 when, in the division of Martin's estate, it was conveyed to his widow, Mrs. Milberry Serena Martin.

The notice of the auction of Martin's real estate in the Charleston Daily Courier of March 29, 1853, describes the lot as having "buildings thereon, consisting of a two-story wooden Dwelling house, new kitchen and out-buildings all new."

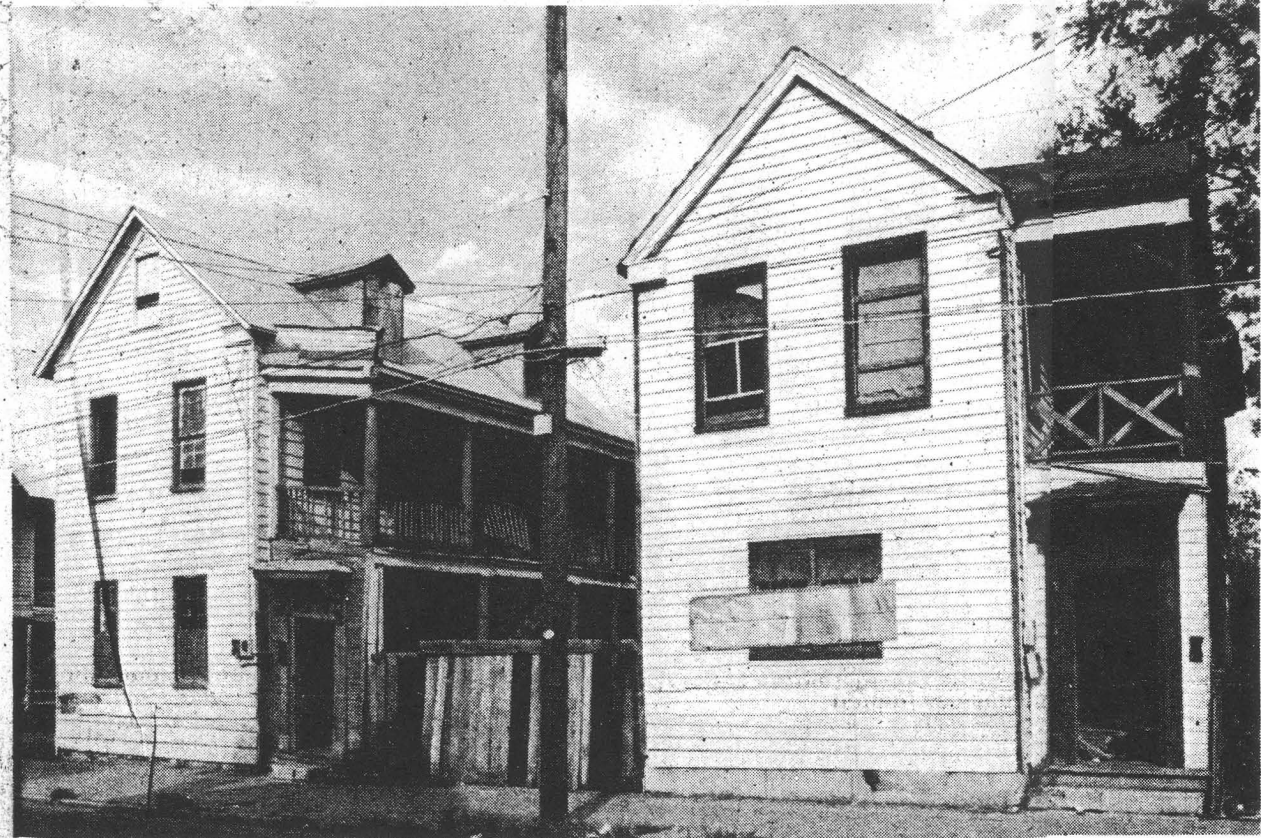
In the same sale, the lot adjacent to the south, identified as Lot "E" in the plan of Martin's lands, was sold to John S. Bee for \$500.

The Courier notice described the lot as one of several vacant lots between Lot "D" and Reid Street.

Bee, a teller of the Bank of the State of South Carolina, is listed in the 1855 city directory as residing on America Street.

Bee mortgaged the property to the S.C. Building and Loan Association in 1853 for \$2,120, promising to insure "the House and Buildings" on the lot.

Bee sold the property in 1857 to W.J. Jacobi for \$1,800.



(Staff Photo by Tom Spain)

52 And 54 America St. More Than 100 Years Old