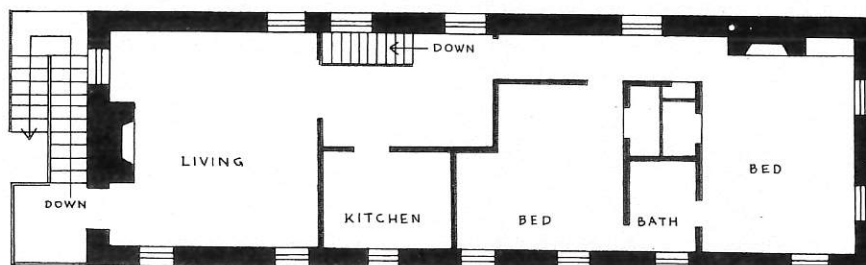


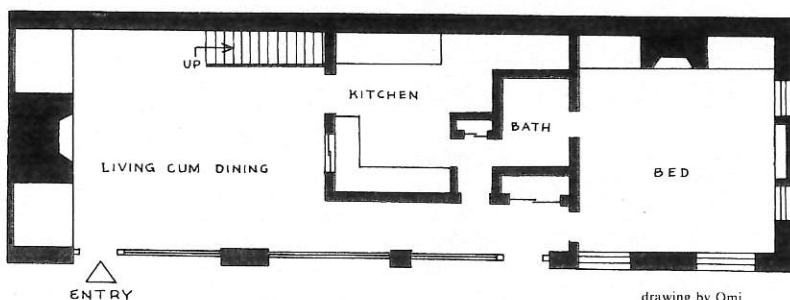


This Old House

story by Marjorie Buckholtz photography by Neil Buckholtz



SECOND FLOOR PLAN



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

drawing by Omi

A shell is all that remains of the Old Bennett Rice Mill. It stands alone, half-forgotten, blending into the waterfront vista, on the Cooper River at the foot of Wentworth. Its front wall enshrouds the memory of a bustling, antebellum business, like a movie set — a far cry from its stature during the rice boom, when it was considered an outstanding example of industrial architecture.

To Paul and Barbara Belknap, the ancient structure will always be special. Their home, a triple carriage house at 13 Meeting St., was literally fashioned from its ruins.

Mrs. Belknap explained that when the previous owners of 13 Meeting St., the Donald Hobarts of Philadelphia discovered the house in 1957, the top floor had been renovated into a two bedroom apartment with spacious rooms and outside stairway, "but the first story looked like ancient steeds had just pulled their last carriages onto the Meeting Street of the eighteenth Century."

She spoke while leafing through a before and after scrapbook documenting the restoration. The pictures show that the carriage part of the dwelling was exactly as it was shortly after completion in 1753.

Three arched carriage doors opened into three large rooms designed to hold carriage, horses and tack room. Upstairs had probably been servants' quarters. Mrs. Belknap said that triple carriage houses are a bit unusual for Charleston. "Most have one or two openings, so we consider ourselves most fortunate to have found this one."

A dirt floor ran the length of the building, and each horse stall remained intact. The tack room contained a well-worn fireplace, loaded with a large and varied assortment of bricks, which were also scattered throughout the structure. Many of these, now artifacts in themselves, were used in the metamorphosis of the house.

Behind the filth and mess, Mrs. Hobart must have seen great potential,

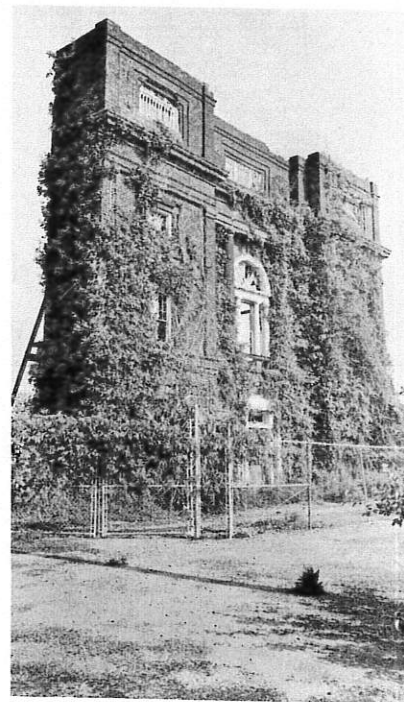
the present owner continued. "Although not nearly as grand as the main house, or the elegant mansions that surround it, I imagine she saw what we did — an ideal retirement home which is small enough for two people, filled with charm and history, yet roomy enough for guests and visiting grandchildren."

The plot on which the house stands is shaped in an upside-down-L, which affords total privacy from the main house and street traffic, with lush grounds for gardening and birdwatching. The Belknaps have added a separate garage with an upstairs studio.

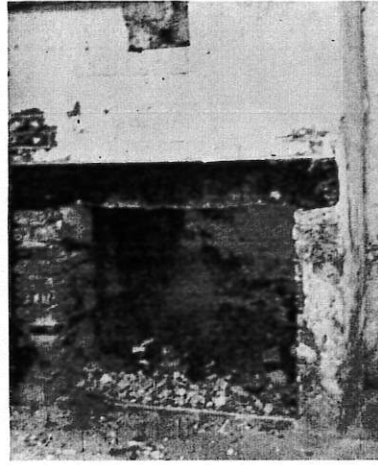
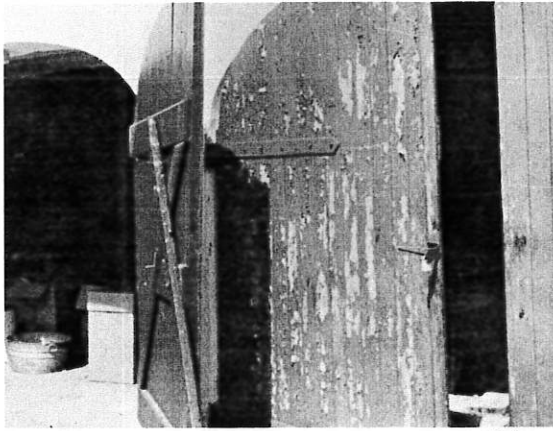
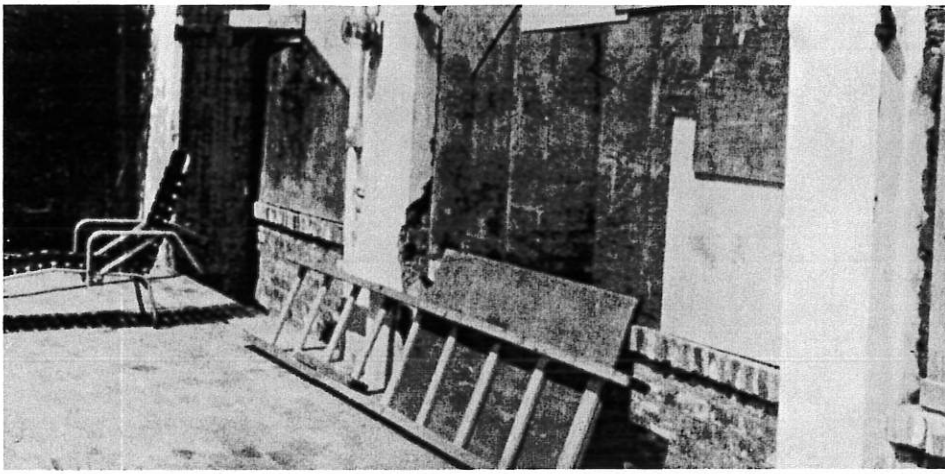
With the aid of contracting and landscape experts, renovation began shortly after purchase. The scrapbook points out that first of all, the carriage and tack room doors were bricked up to make way for new doors and windows.

The outside walls were patched, broad fan windows were built into the three carriage doors, and smaller, narrow front entry doors were created, also with large archlike windows for a light, airy look. Decorative iron grillwork was added for security. Two of the carriage door windows are now in the library and the third is in the downstairs bedroom.

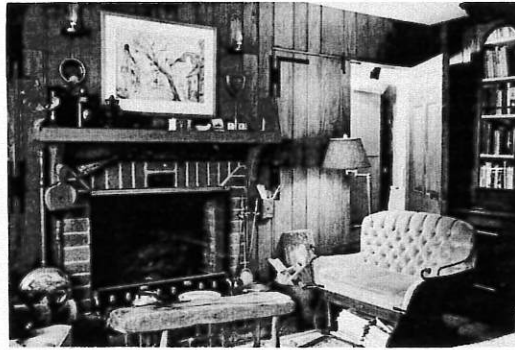
Imagine for a moment the incredible number of disasters that have befallen this portion of town — from wars and fires to hurricanes and earthquakes — it is a wonder that this house still stands. Yet, with the addition of new second floor steps and railings, restoration of tool and toilet rooms outside, only external touches such as painting and patio work were then needed to complete the exterior.



The Bennett Rice Mill today



Before.



Presto chango. The bricks in the fireplace are the smaller, Dutch variety. The pleated seat is a carriage seat.



The formal parlour. The draperies and cornices were designed and made by Barbara Belknap.



The floor is made of English bricks probably about 250 years old.

At this point, pictures show a lovely, finished looking triple carriage house from the outside, but the inside of 13 Meeting Street was still a gutted shell. "It is here that the old rice mill comes into play," Mrs. Belknap reminds.

"Most of the woodwork comes from there," she said, pointing to the solid, long leaf pine panelling in the kitchen, which had been used in the mill. The large beam in the living room was also salvaged from the Bennett structure. This piece is solid, 8 inches thick by 14 inches deep.

Other fine samples of wood obtained from the mill are in the rich, dark-hued downstairs library wall. Two-inch, unpainted cypress lends itself perfectly to the mid-eighteenth century decor.

With the walls renewed, the Hobarts turned to the floors. In fact, the brick work of 13 Meeting Street is a story in itself.

In a lengthy sheet prepared for tour guides, Mrs. Hobart described the various bricks which were used on the floors and the east dining room wall. They had foreign sounding names which might indicate that they were brought to America by ship, but she thought not. Her exhaustive research showed that the names "English" and "Dutch" represented a size and variety of brick, not their country of origin. She said:

The large brown brick (seen in the family room) are known as English brick. Made here in Charleston, but English as to size.

She explained that bricks of this size were made from the first settling of Charleston, and date back to the early 1700s. "Think of the hundreds of plantations flourishing by 1750. Later each made their own bricks with slave labor."

Small red or "Dutch" bricks were also used, along with leftovers from wrecked buildings on King and Chalmers Streets, and a few samples from the Bennett Rice Mill. These are found around the fireplace. The walls and floor were the major changes, apart from electricity and plumbing, that completed the restoration.

The Belknaps moved to Charleston from Ohio in 1948 and purchased 13 Meeting Street in 1969. While Mrs. Belknap gives all the restoration credit to the previous owners, it is her own touch that makes it the charming, comfortable place it is today. □

The wall is Dutch brick.

