

Drinkers, Artists Have Used 'Pink House'

By JACK LELAND
Post-Courier Reporter

In recent years the quaint little "Pink House" at 17 Chalmers St. has been a lawyer's office, an art gallery and a private residence — respectable usages that belie the character of the early neighborhood it was a part of.

For the Pink House — the name derives from the pinkish "Bermuda Stone" of which it was built in the late 17th or early 18th century — originally was a tavern in the middle of Charleston's first "tenderloin." The "red-light district" included Chalmers Street, State (then called Union) Street and parts of Queen and Cumberland streets.

Here, a scant two blocks from the "bridges" or "finger piers" that stretched out to the Cooper River channel, sailors from many nations found their recreation while in port. Here ruthless men indulged in "Shanghaiing," the drugging and kidnapping of men who then were impressed into service on ships bound for the Far East, ships aboard which the captain was lord and master.

Real estate records show that in 1752 the building was owned by a taverner named Thomas Coker. At that time, Chalmers, State and the eastern portions of Queen and Cumberland streets were lined with bordellos and taverns, a situation quite in keeping with the situations in most port cities of the day.

It took one of Charleston's most accomplished artisans to clean up the area. Thomas Elfe, the furniture maker whose pieces today are heirloom treasures, wrote a letter to the city fathers complaining that the ladies of the night, the taverners and the gamblers who frequented the streets near the beef market (now Wash-

Do You Know Your Charleston?

ton Square) were debauching the young apprentices working in the city.

Other citizens joined Elfe, and the government ordered all of the places closed. The taverns were allowed to continue operating but under stricter regulations. Where the gamblers went is not clear but the prostitutes moved a few blocks away, outside of the original walled city, to the area just north of St. John's Lutheran Church. That area, which had been settled mainly by German Lutherans, was then called "Dutch Town."

The core of Charleston's tenderloin survived there until just after World War II, when the U.S. Navy ordered the city to close the district or the Navy would place the town off limits to all military.

Just how long the Pink House continued as a tavern is unclear but that business was just about all the building could handle. The building consists of one room to a floor in the main portion and a garret. A small ell off the eastern end was added in the 1930s.

The main room on the ground floor has a huge fireplace. There is a small courtyard at the rear. The interior walls are of Lowcountry cypress.

The tiled roof, which is original, possibly was of the type of tile made by workers who shaped the wet clay on their thighs. There could have been an outbuilding but city maps show none.

The building had deteriorated greatly by the 1930s when it was bought and restored by Mr. and Mrs. Victor B. Morawetz, New Yorkers

who also restored Fenwick Hall on John's Island and the Kiawato Club House on Seabrook Island.

The house became a private residence and then was the studio of the late Alice R. Huger Smith, notable Charleston artist. It then was operated as the Pink House Galleries by Louis Lawson and was the scene of many exhibits by local, regional and national artists. While Miss Smith owned it, the building became the founding place of an unusual Charleston organization.

The artist agreed to let a group of young World War II veterans meet there for philosophical discussions. The group of 20 men had gathered to talk and do some judicious beer drinking once a month. One night, at the Pink House, it was decided to organize formally. The name selected was "The Piping and Marching Society of Lower Chalmers Street," a club that still marches during its formal

"Winter Games and Rout," the rout being led by bagpipers through the streets of the old city.

The property was purchased in 1956 by Mr. and Mrs. Frank H. Bailey. Bailey and Edward D. Buckley used the Pink House as law offices for many years. It is still used by Bailey, a senior member of the S.C. Bar.

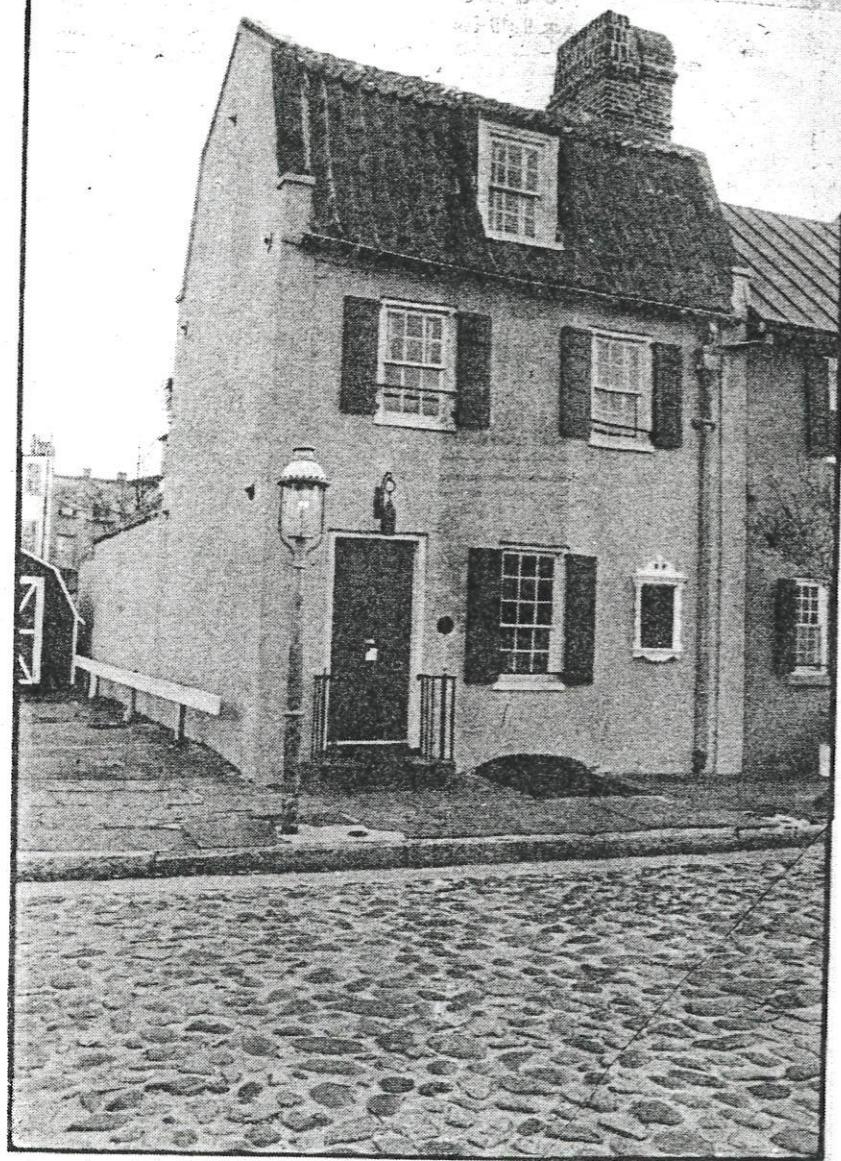
While the Pink House was an art gallery, one of the painters to show there was the late Edward Von Siebold Dingle of Middleburg Plantation, a painter of birds. Some of his nephews in Charleston agreed to act as "exhibit sitters" for the show.

When the telephone rang one evening, one of the nephews, using what — until then — was a family expression, answered "Hello, Dinglebirds." Today, Dingle's paintings are still known as "Dinglebirds."

Quite probably, only the durability of the Bermuda stone kept the building from falling down. This coral rock, which is carved from quarries in Bermuda and some West Indian islands, is still a popular construction material in Bermuda and the Caribbean area.

The building is one of only a few other Bermuda stone buildings in the city. It is believed to be the oldest tavern building in the South and it fronts on Chalmers Street, once called "Mulatto Alley" and one of the few remaining cobblestone streets.

Gone are the days when blue-water tars came ashore to obtain the necessary three "Ws" (wenches, whiskey and "wittles"). However, as some older members of the Piping and Marching Society will attest, late at night there is the definite feeling a sea chantey is being sung in the street, somewhere between the old tavern and the Cooper River waterfront.



House at 17 Chalmers St. was first a tavern.

Staff Photo by Wade Spees



Victor B.
Morawetz



Alice R.
Huger Smith

Jan. 9, 1984