

Pink House Once Served As A Tavern

On cobbled Chalmers Street's south side stands the Pink House, a pre-Revolutionary War tavern where blue-water sailors drank grog in what was then Charleston's red light district.

Today its quaint facade hides the decorum of law offices, a half-block away from the city's legal and banking center on Broad Street. The ladies of the night long since have moved and changing transportation systems have taken the old port's piers up-harbor.

The Pink House, 17 Chalmers St., was built in the Colonial era. Recent research and discovery of an old plat indicate it could have been built in the 1694-1712 period. It was owned in 1752 by Thomas Coker, a "taverner." Its walls are of West Indian coral stone, and its tile roof is of ancient vintage.

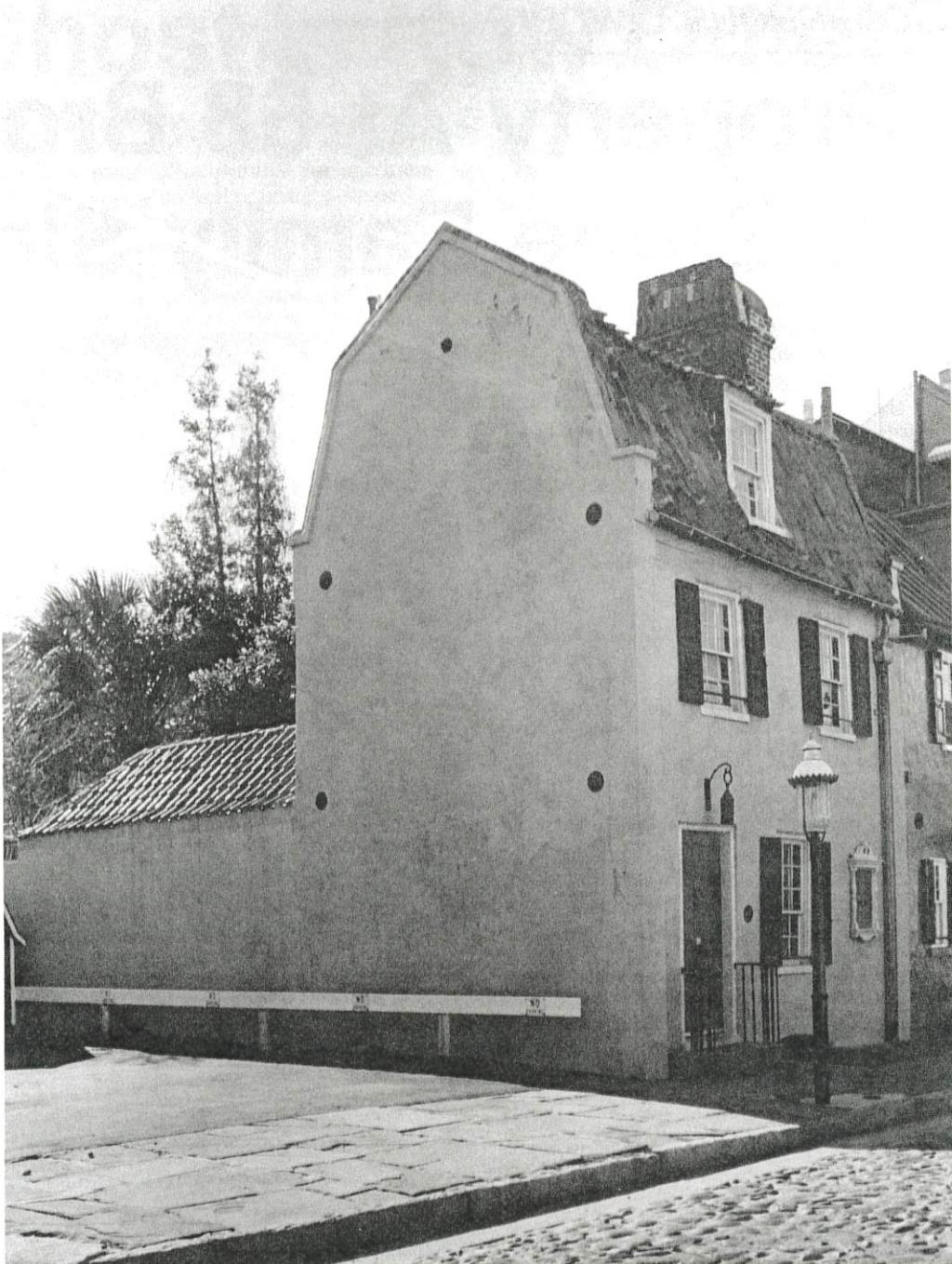
When built, the oversized fireplace on the main floor was designed to provide heat and some means of cookery. However, the tavern probably had an outbuilding that also served as a kitchen.

In the 1930s the building had fallen into disrepair. It was rescued and restored by Mr. and Mrs. Victor B. Morawetz who added a single-story wing at the left rear so that a bathroom and kitchen might be provided without changes to the main rooms. It was bought in 1956 by Mr. and Mrs. Frank H. Bailey who added a right-rear wing flanker of one-story height, keeping the high-walled flagstoned patio with its fountain and flower beds at the rear. The two main floors were utilized as law offices and the attic as a library.

When built, the tavern was inside the locale of the original walled city of Charles Towne but outside the pale, for its street was then called Mulatto Alley and was lined with small houses, most of them bordellos. State Street (then called Union) offered similar entertainment at Chalmers east end and just across East Bay, two blocks away, the long "bridges" (finger piers) of Charleston's merchant princes jutted harborward.

Tall spars of bigantine, barkentine, schooner, sloop and man-of-war often showed against the eastern sky above the warehouses lining the "Bay," and their crews found their three "Ws" (wenches, whisky and wittles) conveniently near. From its size, the Pink House very probably was not a fashionable bistro and one finds no mention of it as a meeting place for Charleston's gentry.

Except for the durability of its construction material, the tavern probably long since would have tumbled down. Today, with its cypress paneling, narrow stairs and small-paned windows, it is much as it was more than two centuries ago.



17 Chalmers — Walls are made of West Indian coral stone.

No one knows exactly when it ceased to be a tavern and was used as a residence but this change must have occurred following the departure of the ladies of the night. This "removal" came about after 1800 when Charleston's City Council was petitioned by downtown residents to "clean up" Beresford Street, or Mulatto Alley, as the street was variously called. The bordellos found haven not too far away, in "Dutch Town," the area north of Clifford and west of King Street. They remained there until after World War II when the Navy persuaded the city to close them permanently.

In the interim, Broad Street became the legal and banking center, East Bay and Meeting the wholesale and warehouse districts. Downtown Charleston spread itself northward, gradually embracing Chalmers Street. As the area prospered, the street changed into a quiet residential area between Meeting and Church Streets,

although warehouses and other commercial buildings remained between Church and State. Its inhabitants, however, were not as affluent or politically powerful as other downtown residents, a factor that probably explains why the street never was paved. Today it remains one of the few cobbled streets in the city.

Looking at the huge fireplace in the main room of the Pink House today, one easily can imagine a bright fire casting rosy light onto the sun-darkened faces of sailors as they pounded the table tops with their mugs, pinched the waitresses and recounted tales of derringdo in the earth's far corners.

And the same cobbles that today play havoc with the 20th century woman's high heels, must certainly have caused many a bruise to ale-addled seamen as they staggered out of the door of 17 Chalmers, onto mist-dampened stones and the rocky road back to the wharves.