376 Race St.

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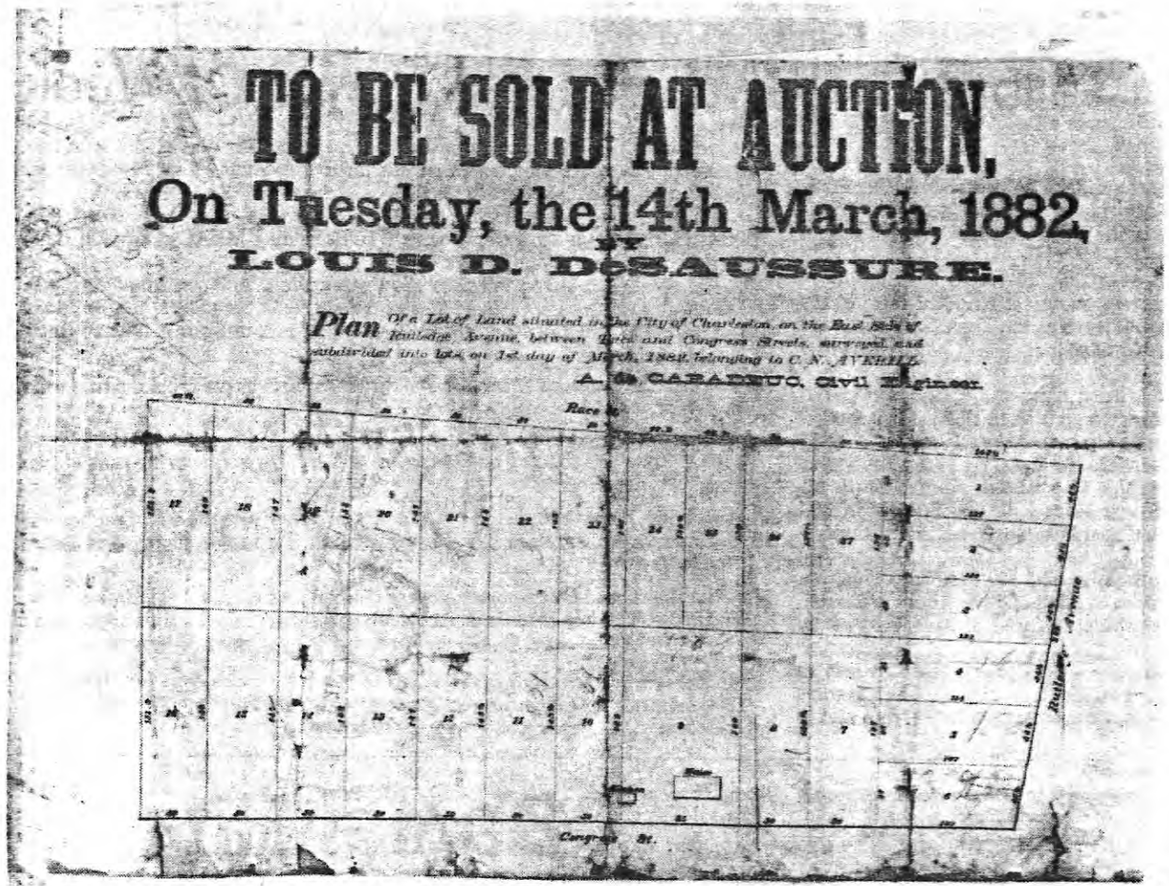

Plan of lots auctioned in 1882.

Resident Recalls Race St.'s Rural Roots In Last Century

By JANE A. ALLEN
Post-Courier Reporter

Camille G. Hogan can recall when Race Street was just grass, water, and mud and she could listen to the sound of frogs crying all night long.

Locked away in a safe at her home at 376 Race St. is the plan for a group of lots whose sale impelled the transition of the area from farmland to a residential neighborhood.

Race Street, located in the area known as Charleston Neck, probably got its name from the nearby New Market Race Course, which dates to 1760. The racecourse was on the Blake Lands, an area between King and Meeting streets, north of Line Street and south of what is now Huger Street. A race post may have been located where Race Street lies. Property records indicate that Race Street had been called Gadsden Street and had been a part of the old Washington Village, an area laid out west from King Street. Washington Village included the Washington Race Course, the present site of Hampton Park.

As Mrs. Hogan tells the story, her father, James W. Gordon, was riding down Race Street in a horse and buggy on March 14, 1882, when he noticed a crowd of people. To satisfy his curiosity, he stopped at what turned out to be a land auction run by Louis D. DeSaussure. When Amos McNeill dropped out of the bidding on lot 20, Gordon "stepped up and bought the lot."

The 27 lots put on the auction block that day by Caleb N. Averill ran between Race and Congress streets, on the east side of Rutledge Avenue. Buyers paid $160 for each lot whose dimensions were roughly 50 feet by 150 feet.

The earliest available records for the property show that before the 1850s, Henry C. Gefkin owned 28 lots of farmland there. The 1872 map, "Bird's Eye View of Charleston," drawn and published by C. Drie, shows one house on the northwest corner of King and Race streets, another on the north side of Race Street further from King Street and a third house on the south side of Congress Street. When Averill sold his lots in 1882, the land plan for his property showed a single house and a kitchen on lot 9, which was on the south side of Congress Street.

James W. Gordon was a black boss carpenter, today termed a carpenter's contractor. One of his favorite jobs, his daughter said, was the fish-scale woodwork surrounding a bay window for a house on the northeast corner of Rutledge Avenue and Beaufain Street. Gordon built himself a wood house on Race Street, and later deeded the property (which had changed numbers, from 20 to 24 to 376), to his daughter Camille, the eighth of his nine children. "I don't know any other home," Mrs. Hogan said.

He married a seamstress, Anna Maria Seel, when he was living on Hanover Street, and built his first house on Race Street sometime between 1884 and 1887, according to city directories of the time. This house burnt sometime between 1894 and 1898, according to tax records, leaving a smaller two-room structure intact. Mrs. Hogan was not

See Race St., Page 10-B

Do You Know Your Charleston?

Race Street

...Race St.

Continued From Page 1-B

born on Race Street, but her family returned there when she was very young, after her father built another house on the lot, which she thinks was sometime after 1896.

Another early purchaser at the 1882 auction was a German farmer, Christopher H. Suhrstedt, who bought six lots for $1,080. Suhrstedt, Mrs. Hogan said, built two barns, one near King Street and the other near Rutledge Avenue, and was quite popular in the neighborhood. Before Suhrstedt would turn over his crops for the next season, he would open up his fields and let people take what they wanted. "People came from far and near," Mrs. Hogan recalled, for such crops as strawberries.

Since the early residents moved in, Race Street has changed dramatically. It was extended in 1903 by city ordinance to include the former Hope Place. A ballpark was put in and in 1940 a Hellenic Center was built.

In 1915, on stationery with an elaborate letterhead from Harken's Grocery, "Charleston's Largest Retail Grocery," H.D. Harken and L.Y. Melfi, a pharmacist, asked Charleston Mayor John P. Grace to pave Race Street between King Street and Rutledge Avenue: "in its unpaved condition, after a rain it is very boggy, and consequently hard on our teams and wagons, and almost impossible for one to cross from one sidewalk to the other for sometimes two days after a rain."

Mrs. Hogan recalled the inconvenience of the mud: "For my school prom it was so muddy that my Daddy had to carry chairs. We walked from chair to chair on Race Street."

In 1921, Hogan petitioned for sewers with two of his neighbors, John Thee and Walter Hightower. "My father wired the house himself. There was no electricity for my wedding. The gas and electric company asked him and other residents to put up $200 and in 10 years they'd give them all their money back plus interest. The first electric pole on Race Street is still in front of our house today," Mrs. Hogan said. She also said her father and the neighbors never recovered their money.

Until 1921, Mrs. Hogan said, her family used kerosene oil lamps for light and fueled the house with wood or coal. She studied by oil lamp.

Mrs. Hogan attended the Avery Normal Institute, where she was a classmate of civil rights activist Septima Clark, and taught school in Cainhoy, because "there were no colored teachers (in Charleston) until 1924-25." She traveled there by boat from the foot of Cumberland Street, at Adger's Wharf.

After her marriage to Lawrence A. Hogan, she went on to a series of careers, she said, from working for Donnelly's Publishing Co. in New York, then training as a licensed practical nurse at Bellevue Hospital in New York, to running the Charleston branch of a Columbia-based casket showroom, and driving for funerals. She was the first black licensed woman driver, she said, having received her license in 1921 for $1. She worked at the Charleston Naval Shipyard as a supply clerk during World War II and has spent the last 20 years as custodian of Memorial Baptist church cemetery on West Mechanic Street.

She is repairing her house at 376 Race St., which was built in 1912, the third house on the property.