

The Wagener House Incident



Today's Charleston owes much to several pioneers in historic preservation who fought tirelessly to ensure that the city's unique setting would not be altered by changing architectural trends and development. The battleground, then as is now, was all of the peninsula, and our campus played a key role in one of these skirmishes.

by Robert Stockton

It has become legendary. They were two well-dressed and well-groomed Charleston ladies, hardly the stereotypical “little old ladies in tennis shoes.” In February 1971, they performed the perhaps unlikely stunt of physically preventing a bulldozer from wrecking a historic house on the College’s campus.

I can claim partial credit for the legendary event. At the time, I was a reporter for *The News and Courier*, as *The Post and Courier* was then known (and dubbed by Charleston wags as “The Newsless Courier”). It actually was a respected newspaper with perhaps more influence than it has today, or maybe that was just our hubris. I was assigned to cover education, historic preservation and culture. The College fit all those categories, and I frequently was on the campus.

The College, since 1968, had been led by President Ted Stern. His appointment had been very political, as several of the College’s presidential choices have been. He also was one of the College’s most dynamic and effective presidents. His administrative ability, ebullient personality and deft diplomacy made him one of our most well-regarded presidents.

Stern’s many challenges included the transformation of a small, insular private college into a major state institution, with a mandate to keep the College in its historic downtown location. For a rapidly growing student body, the College needed to expand its physical presence. Especially, a bigger and better library building was needed. A site at the northwest corner of College and Calhoun streets, facing the College Mall, was chosen, but the site was occupied by four historic buildings. They included a brick house at 14 College Street, built circa 1845, and the brick

kitchen and carriage house of the Gov. William Aiken Tenement at 10 Green Street, built circa 1839. The small two-story masonry house known as 6 Green Street was of particular concern.

The little house was listed as “notable” in the architectural survey *This Is Charleston*, published in 1944. The house also had a romantic mystique about it. Despite its appeal, no one had bothered to document its history. It was called West Indian style, although there was nothing peculiarly Caribbean about its architecture. It was known as the Wagener House because that family had lived there for many years, although they had arrived from Hanover decades after the house was built. The house had Adamesque interior woodwork and was presumed to have been built circa 1817, the year in which the College divided most of its lands into building lots and sold them to pay off a burdensome debt. Alpha Tau Omega fraternity had occupied the house for a while, and for some 25 years it had been used for faculty offices.

The Wagener House already had a checkered past. In 1966, its original site on Green Street had been in the way of the new College Mall (now called Cougar Mall). Alumna Frances Ravenel Smythe Edmonds '39, the formidable director of Historic Charleston Foundation, informed the College that the foundation opposed its demolition and persuaded the College to move it to the west side of the mall. The house lost its original foundations and historical context.

In 1971, the College intended to move the Wagener House again, to a lot on Coming Street. A house mover gave an estimate of \$30,000 and could not guarantee the survival of the house through a second move. Stern decided it was more practical to demolish it. He consulted Edmonds, who agreed reluctantly, reasoning that “the healthy existence of the College is most important to the community.”

No information about the proposed demolition of the Wagener House was released to the media. I discovered by chance – passing through the campus on my way to work the afternoon of Thursday, February 11 – that preparations were being made and demolition would begin the next day. I raced to the newspaper, where I began trying to reach Stern, who was at a meeting out of town. When he returned my call later that evening, he explained how the decision to demolish had been made.

In the meantime, I consulted the list of Stern’s appointees to his President’s Advisory Committee on Historic Preservation. I telephoned two committee members, Jane Lucas Thornhill '46, president of the Preservation Society of Charleston, and Elizabeth Jenkins Young '39, a trustee of Historic Charleston Foundation. I called them for their comments. Neither had been informed of the demolition, and both were upset. After talking with me, Thornhill called Young, and they decided to confront the issue on the following morning.

Early Friday morning, they rushed to the College. Thornhill went to Randolph Hall, hoping to talk with Stern, not realizing he was out of town. Young went to the Wagener House, where she put her foot in front of the bulldozer and threatened to lie down in front of it. She was soon joined at the site by Thornhill. Ernest B. Sweatman of National Wrecking Company, a Charleston man, knew exactly who he was dealing with. After talking with them, he agreed to hold off until noon on the following Monday. Thornhill and Young also talked with J. Floyd Tyler, the College’s vice president for business affairs, who relayed their concern to Stern.

Part of the legend insists that I was there and witnessed the foot in front of the bulldozer. Untrue. The ladies had not informed me of their plan (which certainly would have drawn me to the site), and I did not hear about it until later.

Stern, after returning to town, decided it would be unwise to battle the determined and socially prominent ladies, which might result in negative public relations. He knew “when to fold ’em,” as the Kenny Rogers song goes. Stern agreed to move the Wagener House to the site of 8 Green Street, the Aiken Tenement’s twin, which was demolished. Unfortunately, his order came after Sweatman’s noon deadline, and parts of the interior had been removed and sold. But the house was otherwise intact, and it survived the move.

The Wagener House incident was one of several instances in which I, as an assertive young reporter, was at cross purposes with Stern. A former Navy captain, he was unused to having decisions questioned. One evening he called me at the newspaper and said, “Bob, you are no longer welcome on the College campus.” Astounded and alarmed, I said, “Could you hold on for a moment?” I gently put the phone on my desk, went over to City Editor Evan Bussey and said, “Buzz, Ted Stern is on the phone and says I am no longer welcome on the College campus.” Buzz picked up my phone and said, “Robert Stockton is the reporter assigned to cover the College of Charleston and he will continue to do so.” That was that. Again, Stern knew “when to fold ’em.” But I resolved to be more diplomatic.

Ted Stern and I developed a friendly relationship that lasted until he died in 2013, mourned by many, including me. Liz Young also has passed away. Jane Thornhill is as intrepid as ever.

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— *Illustration by Tim Banks*