

Statesman, Diplomat, Horticulturist**Joel Poinsett Built Double Tenement**

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Special Writer

The double tenement at 22-24 State St. was built around 1841 by Joel Roberts Poinsett, Charleston-born statesman, diplomat, horticulturalist and patron of the arts.

The double building, with an arched passageway leading to a rear courtyard, had been presumed to be older, as its style was conservative for 1841.

It could not have been built earlier, however, because the three small lots that form the site for the large building were not combined until 1841.

Poinsett had the structure built as a double tenement. The term "tenement" at the time simply designated a rental property and did not acquire its negative connotations until later.

There seem to have been two shops on the ground floor and two residences above. A block plat of 1882 shows a pair of two-story brick outbuildings in the rear.

Joel Roberts Poinsett was born March 2, 1779, a son of Dr. Elisha Poinsett and Ann Roberts Poinsett. The family, of Huguenot origin, died out with Joel Roberts.

He attended schools in

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Charleston, Connecticut and London as a youth, studied medicine at Edinburgh and read law in the office of Chancellor H.W. DeSaussure of Charleston.

He traveled extensively in the United States, South America, Europe and the Middle East, and had a command of several languages.

Poinsett's career included diplomatic service in Argentina, Chile and Mexico, election to the S.C. General Assembly and the U.S. Congress, leadership in the Unionist or anti-Nullification party, and appointment as U.S. secretary of war.

He also had diverse cultural and scientific interests. He was a founder of the Charleston Academy of Fine Arts and of the Smithsonian Institution. He encouraged artists, including Thomas Sully and John Blake White, and the architect Robert Mills.

He was interested in scientific agriculture and devoted to horticulture. He brought back from Mexico a plant that was named for him, the poinsettia. He sup-

ported the western explorations of Fremont and Nicollet and organized an expedition to the South Seas.

His Charleston residence, known as Poinsett's Grove, stood on the site of B'rith Sholom Beth Israel Synagogue, 182 Rutledge Ave. He and his wife, Mary Pringle Poinsett, had a plantation, White House (Casa Blanca), on the Pee Dee, and a farm, The Homestead, near Greenville.

Poinsett inherited from his father a lot on Union or State Street, which Elisha Poinsett had bought in 1794 from Thomas Doughty.

The lot measured 15 feet in front and 65 feet in depth, and was situated 31 feet north of Unity Alley on the east side of State.

In May 1841, Poinsett purchased from Dr. Joseph Johnson two small lots to the north, one measuring 13 feet 3 inches in front and 82 feet 6 inches in depth, the other measuring 13 feet in front and 82 feet 6 inches in depth. The purchase price was \$4,700, indicating there were buildings on the lots at the time.

Poinsett combined the lot inherited from his father with the two lots purchased from Johnson

to provide the site for the present building.

The building is 3½ stories of brick, stuccoed on the facade. The high-pitched roof, with gables on the sides of the building, has gabled dormers and high chimneys of exposed brick.

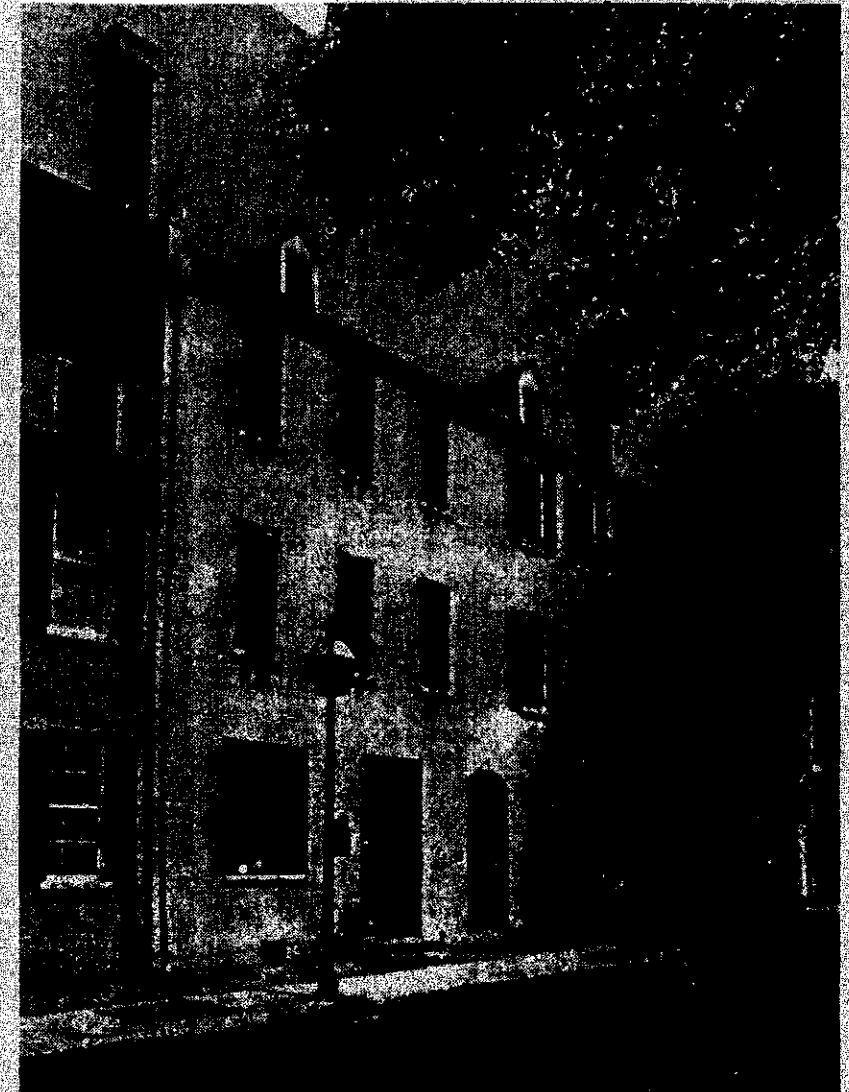
Each tenement is three bays wide, with a shop entrance and oversized window on the first level.

The arched passageway centered on the first level gave access to the residential entrances, with stairways leading to the upper floors.

The interiors of both units have been considerably altered, with old pine floors the only discernible original features.

The street facade contains, above the arched opening, a shallow recess which rises to a pointed arch below the cornice line. According to local tradition, the elongated pointed arch is a phallic symbol and indicates that the building housed a brothel at one time.

Whether that is true, or whether the elongated blind arch was the builder's decorative solution for the blank space above the passageway opening, is still undeciphered.



Staff Photo by Brad Nettles

22-24 State St., Built Around 1841