

Do You Know Your Charleston?

Rainbow Row Saw Hard Times

By ROBERT P. STOCKTON

Rainbow Row shows no evidence today of the decay which almost cost the neighborhood its existence 50 years ago.

The block of buildings on the west side of East Bay, between Tradd and Elliott streets, popularly known as Rainbow Row, did not have its present "coat of many colors" in the 1920s.

The row of historic buildings had become so dilapidated that a member of City Council proposed that it be demolished and the area redeveloped with new commercial buildings.

Photographs taken by George W. Johnson in the 1920s reveal the rundown condition of the neighborhood, which is said to have partly inspired DuBose Heyward's classic, "Porgy and Bess."

But the 1920s were actually pivotal years for Rainbow Row, which since then has returned to a level of economic and social prominence that it had not experienced since the late 18th century.

Built as merchants' houses, some as early as the 1740s and one as late as 1886, the buildings originally had stores on the ground floors and living quarters above.

Entrance to the second floor of the residences was generally by exterior stairs in the rear courtyards, as most houses in the row had no inter-

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(Staff Photo by Bill Jordan)

Former Merchants' Houses On Rainbow Row

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or stairs between the ground floor and the upper stories.

The neighborhood is actually one of Charleston's oldest, having been settled in the late 1670s. The original lots were described as bounding eastward on "Cooper River." It was literally true, as until the early 19th century, there was nothing on the east side of East Bay except marsh, water and the wharves and "bridges" of the East Bay merchants.

The importance of the waterfront lots to the commerce of the town was recognized early, as an Act of Assembly in 1700 permitted the piercing of the city's fortification walls for access to the "bridges."

The "View of Charles-town" of 1772 shows a line of substantial buildings along East Bay, most of which were destroyed in the great fire of 1778.

Buildings which are shown on the 1772 "View" and survived the fire are those presently numbered 95, 97 and 99-101 East Bay, all of which were built in the 1740s.

The facades of these buildings are related by means of identical giant order pilasters and belt courses, making them an architectural ensemble which is unique in the city.

It was apparently always a lopsided ensemble, as the 1772 "View" shows no twin of 95 East Bay's Flemish gable to the north of 99-101 East Bay. There were, however, three other Flemish gables to the south of 95 East Bay.

Most of the remainder of Rainbow Row's buildings date from the 1780s and early 1790s, and are in the transitional style which characterized Charleston buildings constructed just after the American Revolution.

The transitional style incorporated features of the Georgian style, such as the typical "eared" moldings and Chippendale style fretwork, but also leaned toward the more attenuated

proportions and delicate decorative motifs of the Federal period.

The Federal influences are rather plain, as the Rainbow Row houses were built before the profuse decorations of the Adam style became popular in Charleston in the late 1790s and early 1800s.

Most of the buildings were erected during the city's golden commercial age, when wealthy merchants such as Nathaniel Russell, William Blacklock, and William and Adam Tunno all owned property in the row.

In the early 1800s, the golden age ended and in the decades before the Civil War the row became the southern anchor of the wholesale and retail grocery trade which became centered on East Bay.

Part of the row was shelled during the Union bombardment of the city in 1864-65. After the war, the neighborhood declined further and the 1888 Sanborn insurance map shows several buildings in use as saloons and tenements, while others were in ruins.

The gradual decline continued into the 1920s. Susan Pringle Frost, one of the founders of the Preservation Society, bought six decayed buildings in the row in 1920, but lacked funds to restore them immediately.

The first actual restoration was accomplished in 1931 by Dorothy Porcher Legge at 99-101 East Bay. Shortly afterward, 103 East Bay was restored for Anna Wells Rutledge. Others followed and by 1945 most of the row had been renovated.

Rainbow Row was transformed from a run-down commercial-residential neighborhood into a prestigious residential neighborhood, with accompanying economic and sociological changes.

Houses which could be bought in the 1920s and 1930s for a few thousand dollars now have a market value of more than \$100,000.