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Lower East Bay Neighborhood Was Once City's Heartbeat

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The neighborhood on the west side of lower East Bay Street, between Broad Street and the commencement of High Battery, is one of the oldest in the city, having been settled in the late 1670s.

More than any other part of Charleston, this portion of the peninsula was the first to exhibit the appearance of a true city to the immigrants of the early 18th century.

The area, which underwent almost complete renovation during the 1930s and '40s, has a colorful history. Once a booming trade center bounded on the east by the Cooper River, lower East Bay Street has survived fire, earthquake, wars and economic depression.

Contained in these three or four blocks is a collection of architectural details and influences that cover the history of Charleston for more than 300 years.

Pre-Revolutionary work, such as the tiny brick of early colonial days, is there, along with the characteristic crafts of the post-Revolutionary period. Barbadian influences, brought by early colonists, also are visible in many buildings.

Tile roofs of later colonial times, cast-iron roof ventilators and wrought-iron grills tell the story of the early use of iron and of its adaptation for the Greek Revival period.

The block between Tradd and Elliott streets, known as Rainbow Row, features many post-Revolutionary buildings in a plain, transitional style combining Georgian features and Federal influences. Most of these houses were built before the profuse decorations of the Adam style became popular in Charleston in the late 1790s.

As early as 1772, the map, "View of Charlestown," shows a line of substantial buildings along East Bay, many of which were destroyed in the great fire of 1778. Surviving the fire were numbers 95, 97 and 99-101, built in the 1740s.

The majority of the buildings were erected in the late 1700s during the city's golden commercial age, when wealthy merchants such as Nathaniel Russell, William Blacklock and William and Adam Tunno owned property along East Bay. However, at least one building was built as late as 1886.

In the decades before the Civil War, merchants along East Bay became the Southern anchor of the wholesale and retail grocery trade.

Built as merchants' houses, the buildings had stores on the ground floor and living quarters above. Entrance to the second floor of the residences was generally by exterior stairs in rear courtyards.

Part of lower East Bay, including Rainbow Row, was shelled during the Union bombardment of the city in 1864-65 and afterward the long period of depression and slow recovery left this section almost a slum.

The commercial aspect of this area persisted into the early part of the 20th century, with stores, saloons, cafes and tinsmith shops interspersed with tenements and ruins.

Do You Know Your Charleston?

Photographs taken by George W. Johnson in the 1920s show the rundown condition of the neighborhood, which is said to have partly inspired D. Rose Heyward's Catfish Row in "Porgy."

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

A gradual realization of the architectural tradition that exists there brought about a movement for restoration and renovation. The first renovation was accomplished in 1921 by Dorothy Porcher Legge at 99-101 East Bay. Others followed and by the late 1940s most of the neighborhood had been renovated.

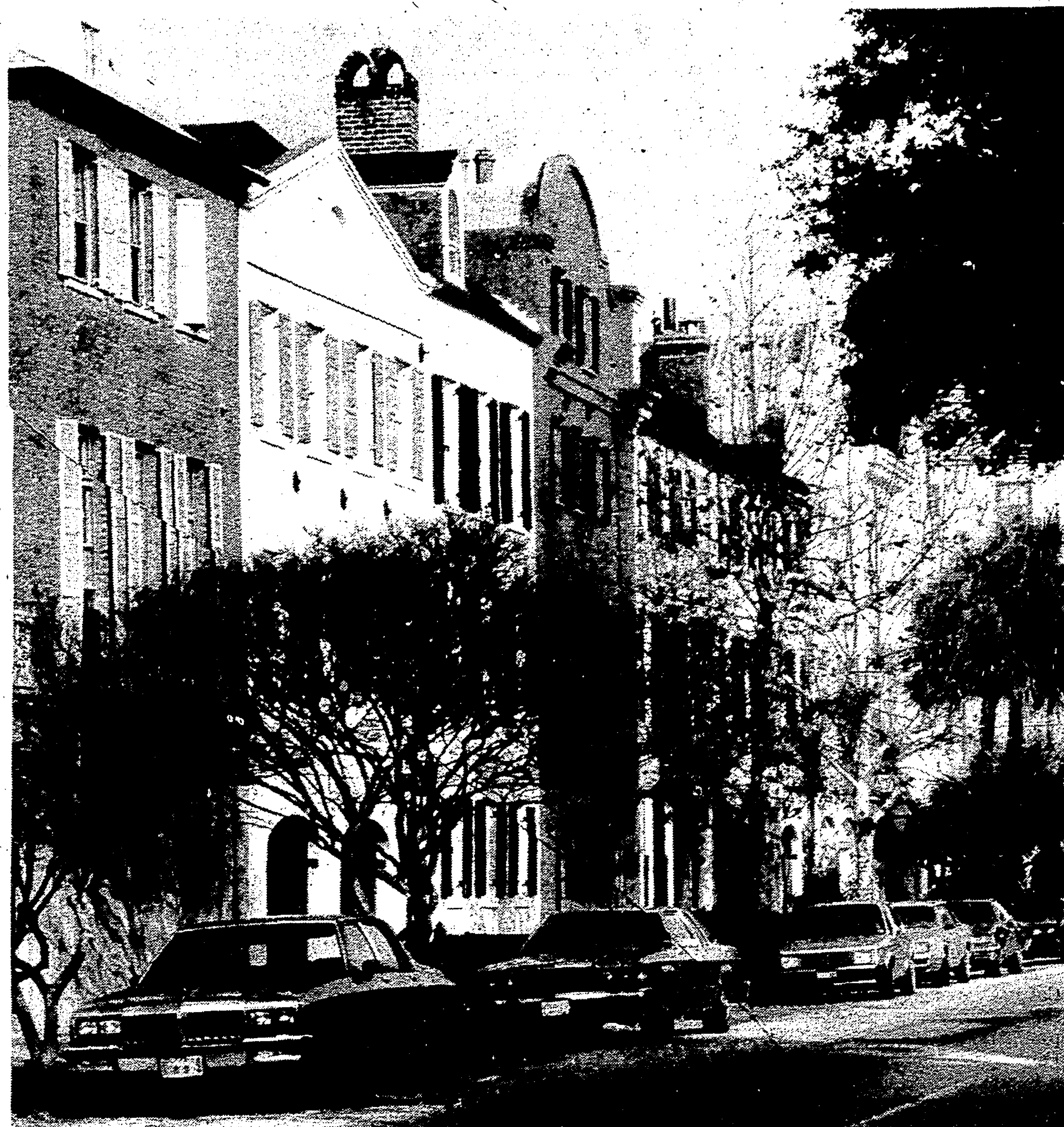
The row of historic buildings shows no evidence of the decay that almost cost the neighborhood its existence. Houses that could be bought in the 1920s and '30s for a few thousand dollars have a market value exceeding several hundred thousand dollars. Here are a few historical notes on some of the buildings:

- The double building numbered 99-101, along with the three-story brick house at No. 97, is part of a group of buildings constructed by Othniel Beale, engineer of the city's colonial fortifications, after the great fire of 1740, which destroyed much of the Charleston waterfront. No. 99-101 was the first building in Rainbow Row to be restored from near slum condition. No. 97 went through many owners becoming at times a boarding house, a dairy, a grocery, a place of refreshments and a carpentry shop.

- The common facade of 97 and 99-101 East Bay is also related to the facade of 95 East Bay by the same giant-order pilasters. It is possible that Beale had a hand in building that structure as well, although there is no evidence supporting that claim.

In 1779 the property was owned by Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, the patriot, officer and statesman who was a delegate to the U.S. Constitutional Convention in 1790, minister to France in 1796 and Federalist candidate for president in 1800, 1804 and 1808.

- Vanderhorst Row, on the west side of East Bay is said to be America's oldest apartment house. Built as a residence for three families by Gen. Arnoldus Vanderhorst, owner of a large amount of waterfront property and one-time governor of South Carolina, the building survived earthquakes, a dozen major West Indian hurricanes, total abandonment and numerous occupants. By 1936 Vanderhorst Row was restored by Dr. Josiah E. Smith. The exterior remains the same as it was in the early 1800s.



Staff Photo by Brad Nettles

Buildings reflect wide range of architectural influences.