

Mills House To Be Finished In About 12 Months

(EDITOR'S NOTE: First in a series of three articles on the exterior and interior plans for Charleston's new Mills House, a hotel now being constructed at the intersection of Queen and Meeting streets.)

By W. H. J. THOMAS

The large site at the southwest corner of Meeting and Queen — formerly the location of the old St. John Hotel and now a place of much construction activity — will be occupied 12 months from today by what should be America's finest small hotel.

This has been the site of hotel buildings of varying size and distinction for nearly 175 years, with the exception of periods when these same buildings were leased briefly for other purposes, as in the 1830s and 1840s when the quarters of the Planter's Hotel served as a courthouse.

The new Mills House, named for the fashionable hostelry that opened on this spot in 1853, will be a special sort of venture for Charleston. The new hotel that is scheduled to be completed in April of 1970 will be virtually a restoration, in both exterior and interior aspects, of the ante bellum Mills House, known during the 19th century as "a commodious and beautiful hotel" and as "The Leading Hotel of the South", according to contemporary publications.

The old Mills House or St. John Hotel was a five-story building of 125 rooms, with a facade designed after the high-colored taste of the Victorian period of the 1850s when features of classical architecture had not fully been abandoned. Its bearing - wall con-

struction was of brick covered in mastic cement.

A contemporary description of the hotel at its opening, appearing in "Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion", gave the color of the exterior as "finely imitating brown stone" and further stated that "the monotony that would otherwise be produced by such an extent of wall is relieved by the number and size of the windows, and the projecting brackets above them. These are of terra cotta, and in the richest style of ornament allowed by good taste."

The new Mills House is being constructed at a cost of several millions of dollars by the development firm of Charleston Associates. It will be a seven-story building, though only some 12 feet taller than the former hotel, with 237 rooms and greatly expanded restaurant and public room facilities.

It will be of concrete skeleton frame construction, with walls in concrete block, faced in brick and then stuccoed. This plan will allow for a structurally sound building that closely matches the use of materials in the old St. John. When the hotel was being razed it was found to be structurally unsound and much of it simply collapsed.

Those ornate features of the exterior, so characteristic of building during the last long period of prosperity before the Civil War, will be mostly retained, following the facade designs of the local architectural firm of Simons, Lapham, Mitchell and Small. On Meeting Street, all ground level, one will find identical win-

dow spacing and the same richly ornamented tripartite doorway leading into the public vestibule, with gas lights along the first floor level.

The window hoods and pediments on first and second floor will follow exactly those of the first and second story

of the former hotel, but the pediments on the next five levels will be flat terra cotta pieces supported by brackets that are similar to the fifth floor window ornaments of the old St. John. The old hotel had a different window treatment for each story.

These window pieces will be

made from molds of the original hoods that are now stored in the basement of Hibernian Hall along with the hotel's iron balcony and parts of the interior of the demolished building. A number of different materials were considered in reproducing these ornaments, but it was decided

to once again use terra cotta. The builders will also place the hoods back into the walls in a method similar to that used on the hotel more than 160 years ago.

In removing the sample hoods from the hotel during demolition activities, it was found that several were simp-

ly built into the brick while others were more properly anchored. The latter method will be used to hang the hoods for the new hotel, with nine and one half inch metal anchors strapped back into the walls holding the weight. A similar method will be used to hang the large brackets in from the cornice at the roof level.

The color of the exterior walls will be a shade to closely match that original Mills House color "finely imitating brown stone." Such a shade will not be out of place along Meeting Street where a number of public building will contrast pleasingly. Basic earth colors are also to be used for the hotel's interior.

The 79-foot cast iron balcony that was placed at the second story level along Meeting Street will be replaced and a new 75-foot balcony of identical design will occupy the second story level along Queen Street. With the new plan for the hotel, the balcony on Queen will help to break up the rather massive appearance.

A color for the iron work on the balconies has not been selected. Richard H. Jenrette, representing Charleston Associates, has said that a number of colors are being considered. It has been suggested that painting iron work black is a development of a later period and the original Mills House iron work was something close to a lime green. Mr. Jenrette recently said a light color might be

chosen and pointed to the iron on the front of the Dock Street Theatre — a pale gray-blue — as an example of the success of using such a shade.

To the south of the main building will be two extensions of one story each. On Meeting Street, set recessed somewhat from the front of the hotel to permit automobiles to pull into a semi-circular drive for unloading of baggage, will be an arcaded entrance loggia. This loggia will serve as main entrance and will shield a garden court from the street.

A restaurant extension will be to the west of the garden. Above the restaurant will be a terrace with swimming pool, shielded to the south by an arcaded Charleston wall. A bridge will lead from the terrace to the proposed high rise parking garage to permit easy movement. Rooms facing immediately out onto the terrace will each have small individual balconies in iron.

Representatives of the Charleston architects responsible for the facade and the lobby areas and representatives of the New York architectural firm of Curtis and Davis, designers of much of the interior, have stressed the unusual nature of designing for this project. From the beginning, the architects of both firms and the interior decorators for the Mills House have worked to merge all physical details. A more common practice is to design the building and then let the decorators fit their efforts in later.



CHARLESTON'S MILLS HOUSE OPENED IN 1853
 Hotel called most "luxurious establishment South of New York."