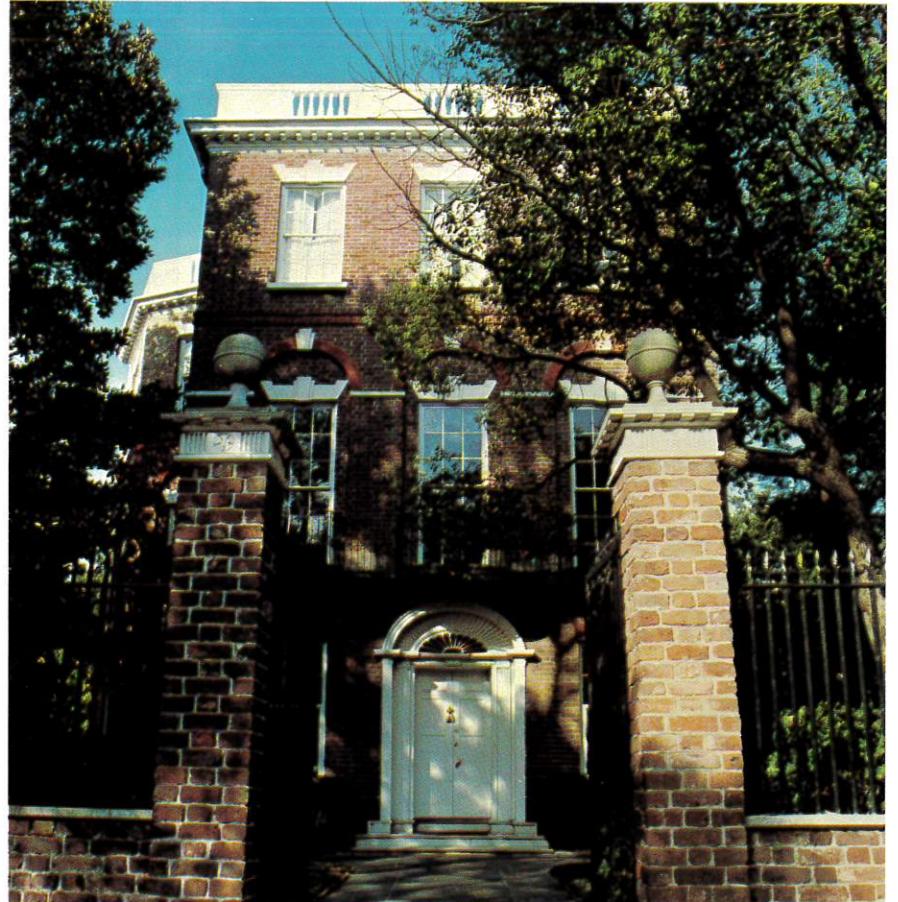


Historic Houses: An Old Southern Mansion

The Nathaniel Russell House in Charleston

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES S. WHITE



ABOVE: In 1809 Nathaniel Russell, a prominent merchant, built his residence on Charleston's Meeting Street, and it is still one of the city's great houses. Twin gateposts topped with finials frame the Adam-inspired façade with its delicate fanlight above the door. The Carolina gray brick structure is enhanced by trim of marble and polished red brick. RIGHT: A free-flying elliptical staircase spirals the three-story height of the house, giving the interiors an exhilarating lightness.

CHARLESTON, the most aristocratic and refined of southern cities, has always been a great port, a fact that has consistently added to its character. Compact houses with large wooden shutters, on streets lined with palm trees, give more than a hint of exotic places, and white-columned verandas, called *piazzas*—first popularized by planters arriving from Barbados—

exert a relaxing influence on even the most imposing mansions. The city is built on a small peninsula, at the spot where the Ashley and Cooper rivers converge in a harbor dominated by Fort Sumter. The Battery, at the water's edge, has long been a favorite spot for the wealthy to live; Meeting Street, following the inevitable path of expansion from the water up the





OPPOSITE: Like the formal parlors of many Charleston houses, the Green Drawing Room occupies the entire second floor front of the building. In the foreground, a Charleston-made tea table is laid with French china and a brass kettle. Windows ornamented with enclosed double-engaged columns flank an Italian console and a portrait attributed to Sir Peter Lely. ABOVE: In the oval Library, a book of drawings and a *médailleur*, circa 1800, rest on an English Sheraton-style drum table.

peninsula, is one of its broadest, proudest thoroughfares.

The prominent shipping merchant Nathaniel Russell decided to build his great mansion at No. 51 Meeting Street, just one block from Saint Michael's Church, whose spire still defines the skyline and whose bells have chimed the hours since 1765. The house was completed in 1809,

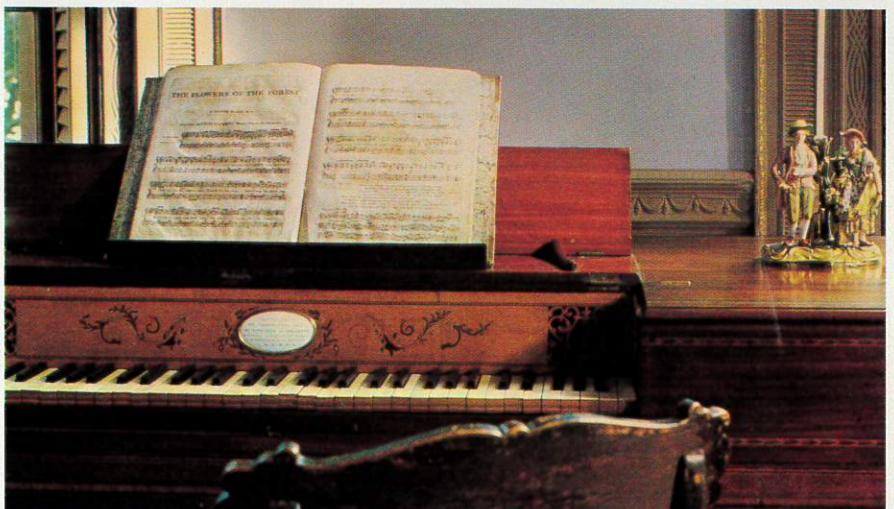
when Mr. Russell was seventy-one years old, and it has been a landmark since the day it was built.

As happens in many port cities, some of Charleston's most successful citizens have come from other places. Nathaniel Russell was from Rhode Island, where his father had been chief justice. He arrived in Charleston in 1765, as an agent for a Prov-

dence firm, and by the end of his life his vast fortune had earned him the sobriquet King of the Yankees. Like many merchants, he spent most of his life on East Bay, where he lived and worked within sight of his ships. He waited until later life to build his house, at the cost of \$80,000, an enormous sum for those times.

Seen today, Nathaniel Russell's





Generous floor-to-ceiling windows emphasize the spacious proportions of the oval Music Room. PRECEDING PAGES: An Erard harp, made in Paris around 1803, and a small piano, are attended by lyre-backed Baltimore chairs, circa 1810. The lyre, on the American Empire *lit de repos*, was formerly at Hampton Plantation. top: Sparing use of gilt, and a Chippendale fret, enliven the rich decoration of the window. ABOVE: The 5 1/2-octave piano, made by Longman & Broderip of London around 1790, is an early example of hammer-to-string action. RIGHT: The Dining Room was enlarged to its present size in the early years of this century. Antique Sheraton chairs surround a Charleston banquet table, while a 17th-century Dutch painting graces the wall above a large Charleston mahogany sideboard.

house does not look like a typical Charleston house at all. It shows, instead, the mark of a man at the height of his power determined to follow his own tastes. Very much a big-city house, the restrained three-story structure was inspired by Robert Adam, whose style was seen in Charleston chiefly in the prosperous years between the Revolution

and the War of 1812. The façade of Carolina gray brick is varied with highly buffed red brick window trim, as a cornice on the first floor and as an arch to modify the scale of the taller second floor. A delicate wrought-iron balcony, ornamented with the flowing initials *N.R.*, encircles the building on the second level, and the local preoccupation with





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catching precious sea breezes finds expression in floor-to-ceiling windows that open from the bottom, a departure from the customary piazza. The structure itself is set back from the street in a garden. This, too, is unusual for a city in which houses are built quite close together.

A free-flying elliptical stairway, a gracefully effective element of the Adam style, gives the total design a feeling of tremendous drama and buoyancy. The unbroken swirl of steps rises the entire three-story height without visible support anywhere, as if springing upwards out of some inner excitement and energy.

Finely proportioned oval rooms on each floor comprise the house's most imposing interiors. The first-floor oval room has been restored as a library, while the one on the second floor is a music room of grander scale, boasting a pair of large mirrored doors. Ornamental plaster-work is exquisite throughout.

Nathaniel Russell died in 1819, at the age of eighty-one. His youngest daughter continued to live in the house until her death, in the 1850s. In 1857 it became the home of Robert F. W. Alston, governor of South Carolina and one of its leading planters. General Robert E. Lee was entertained there during the Civil War. When the war ended, leaving many ruined fortunes in Charleston as

A New York Sheraton bed is draped for summer in muslin with knotted fringe; the design of the matching curtains was inspired by a sketch by Thomas Jefferson. Beside the bed are two aquatints from a set of six depicting the story of *Paul et Virginie*. An English cradle rests nearby on a Chinese rug. A pair of porcelain urns, a Meissen figurine and Chelsea figures of a lady and a warrior adorn the Hepplewhite English chest of drawers. An églomisé panel enriches an architectural looking glass, circa 1800.

elsewhere throughout the South, the women of the family earned their living running a school for girls in these same proud rooms.

In the years since the Alstons last lived there, the house has been at various times a convent school and a private residence. Today it is the home of the Historic Charleston Foundation, an organization that has done much to preserve and enhance the city's beauty. The lower two floors are maintained in the style of Nathaniel Russell and his contemporaries.

Planters, merchants and even pirates, making great fortunes, helped Charleston become one of America's most vigorous and refined cities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—vigorous while prosperity lasted, and eminently refined to this day. It is, in one way, fortunate that Charleston was too poor after the Civil War to engage in the costly alterations and rebuilding that have blotted out venerable architecture of so many cities—in the Victorian age as well as in our own. Novelist DuBose Heyward, whose *Porgy* takes place on "Catfish Row" (actually Cabbage Row), just one block from Meeting Street, called Charleston "an ancient beautiful city that time had forgotten before it could destroy." Hard times may have brought a temporary shabbiness in the past, but the essential character of its streets has never been violated. Nathaniel Russell's house has been fortunate in always having been respected and well maintained. Like most of the city, it is an example of Charleston's unique sense of continuity, graceful way of life and an appreciation for quality nowhere better expressed than in her houses. □

—Christopher Phillips