

**13 Pitt Street
Charleston, SC**

An Architectural Description

**NOTICE: These materials
are for your research use only.
They are not to be further
reproduced, transferred to
another individual, or placed
in another repository.**

**Carl Lounsbury
May 27, 2005**

Introduction

Built in 1859-60 by wholesale grocer and merchant Henry Gerdts, 13 Pitt Street is a two-story brick dwelling that stands on the northwest corner of Wentworth and Pitt Streets in the Harleston suburb. The property remained in the possession of Gerdts' descendants for nearly a century until it was sold in the mid 1950s to the Lemack family who owned it until recently. The house is richly trimmed on the exterior with brownstone dressings including cambered lintels, tooled sills, a decorative frontispiece, front staircase, and a low, wrought-iron railing that projects forward a few feet from the Pitt Street façade at the front entrance and terminates at the north end of a balustraded brick perimeter wall that encloses the southern half of the property. A two-story piazza wraps around the south side of the house and overlooks a formal garden. On the south side of the house at the back of the main block, an exterior staircase composed of sandstone steps and iron handrail provides access to the service stair and was conveniently situated next to the attached, two-story, brick kitchen-washhouse wing at the back of the lot.

The house built by Henry Gerdts has a number of features typical of elite building in Charleston in the late antebellum period. The decorative treatment is indicative of the movement away from Greek Revival detailing in favor of Italianate finishes in the 1850s. The filigree plaster cornice and medallion in the ground floor entertaining rooms, the marble coal-burning mantelpieces with their compass-headed openings and cast-iron inserts on the two main floors, and the door and window architraves with their large quirked cymas and beveled astragals are indicative of the type of fashionable details favored by Charlestonians in this last decade of peace.

Novel too is the plan of the dwelling with three public rooms on the ground floor linked by a longitudinal stair passage. Common to most cities, the side passage plan had only appeared in Charleston in the late antebellum period. The old single house plan has been jettisoned in favor of one that made it possible to have three ground-floor public rooms—two parlors and a dining room, segregated entrance into the house by way of a stair passage that extends two-thirds the depth of the house, terminating at the end in a rear dining room.

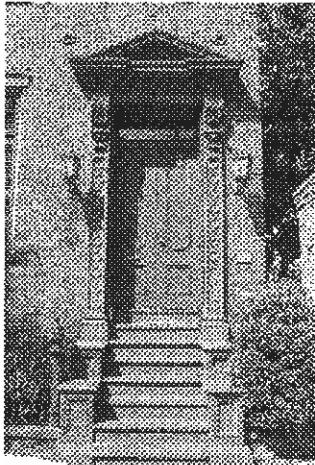
This arrangement allowed for a more private piazza, one that was accessed through the entertaining rooms and was not part of the principal circulation pattern as in the single-house plan. It also provided space at the back of the main block for a service

stair, one that was difficult to fit into the single house form. This plan with two parlors (13 Pitt does not have symmetrical double parlors divided by large folding or pocket doors) and a dining room on the main floor became de rigueur among wealthy Charleston households by the 1830s and 1840s appear in various arrangements at the remodeled Aiken-Rhett House (mid 1830s), the Joseph Aiken House at 20 Charlotte Street (1848), and the William Pinckney Shingler House at 9 Limehouse Street (1857-59) for example. This last house has a plan that is almost identical to 13 Pitt Street. Both have three entertaining rooms linked by a side stair passage that terminates at the entrance to the narrower space at the rear of the house that forms the dining room with access to the piazza on the other side of the building through each of these three rooms.

Although the conversion of part of the cellar space and the rear service wing into apartments in the twentieth century altered or obliterated original fabric, the main house remains substantially in tact in both plan and finishes. The principal changes are relatively minor. The dining room lost its original mantel and a service space off the dining room next to the back staircase was converted into a modern kitchen in the knotty pine era in the mid-twentieth century. On the second floor, the dressing rooms between the front and middle bedrooms have been rearranged, though the plaster cornice and much of the original base remain in place. The attic space has been subdivided into small apartments, altering and masking the original division of this unheated space. Despite this, the original decorative scheme and plan survive or can be traced on the two principal floors.

Exterior Description

The main house and service wing at 13 Pitt Street is situated against the northern edge of a rectangular lot whose narrow east frontage borders Pitt Street. Windows along the north back wall are few—two lighting the stair passage and a set on either side of the fireplace in the third room in the rear of the main block. The principal entrance is on the shorter, Pitt Street side of the lot and sits back a few feet from the street. The cellar is raised slightly above ground with two windows lighting the east side of the cellar. A brownstone staircase ascends seven steps from the Pitt Street sidewalk to a pedimented modillion frontispiece and double front doors accentuated by bolection moldings with a rectangular transom overhead. The frontispiece pilasters are decorated with a modified guilloche pattern and crowned by richly carved consoles shaped in the form of acanthus leaves.



South of the frontispiece are two, eight-light, double hung windows with tooled brownstone sills and cambered brownstone lintels. Relatively modern exterior louvered shutters hang from these openings as well as others throughout the house. The second floor repeats the pattern of the ground floor on the east façade except that there is an additional window above the front door. A four-course corbelled brick

cornice forms the pediment of the attic story. In the center of the gable is a three part window with two smaller side lights flanking a central four-light sash.



On the garden or southern façade, the house is dominated by a two-story, six-bay piazza that extends nearly the full length of the main house, returning in the last bay against the narrower section of the main block where the dining room and service stair are located. The piazza stands on piers and provides light for the semi subterranean service spaces of the cellar. The piazza is approximately 10 feet in width with Ionic capitals with fluted columns on the main story and Corinthian ones on the story above. The piazzas are enclosed by a balustrade with molded handrail and bulbous-shaped balusters. Access to the piazza from the house is through a French door in each of three principal rooms on each floor. From the garden, a set of stairs lead up to the west end of the piazza at the back. The south façade consists of five bays across the front section of the house (which encompasses the front two parlors on the main floor and two bedchambers and dressing rooms

on the second story. The façade of the narrower back section of the main block has a French door leading from the dining room on the ground floor to the piazza, a window, and at the west end a doorway that opens into the rear service stair and is accessed by brownstone stairs. The second floor has three windows placed directly above the openings below. The attic is lit by three gabled dormer windows in the front section of the house and two 4-light sash in the narrower back section.

The brickwork of 13 Pitt Street is typical of the workmanship and finishes of the period. The bricks are predominantly brownish red of a fairly uniform color and marked with numerous blackish inclusions. The bricks measure between 8 ½ and 9 inches in length, 4 to 4 ½ inches in width, and between 2 ½ and 2 ¾ inches in height. They are set in a ½-inch tucked “beak” joint of white mortar. Four courses measure 11 ½ inches in height, which easily fits the standard for Charleston brickwork. The building has no water table or string course but does have a corbelled four course cornice. At the top of the wall, the cornice steps out a course, followed by an inverted beveled course, then two further stepped courses at the top. At the cellar level, the wall bonding consists of one course of headers for every five rows of stretchers. This 1:5 bonding continues unbroken to eaves on the rear, north wall as well as on the west wall of the main block and on all the exterior walls of the service building. In contrast, the bonding changes from 1:5 at the cellar level to Flemish bond on the east façade and the south, piazza side of the house, the two public fronts of the building. There are few closers at the apertures, which, as mentioned earlier, are trimmed with brownstone sills and lintels.

Interior Description

Cellar

The cellar beneath the main house was probably used as service rooms worked by slaves and then later domestic servants. Unfortunately, most of the space was renovated in the twentieth century to accommodate an apartment. Because of this, it is difficult to assess the earliest features in this area. However, it is clear that at least part of the cellar, if not the entire area beneath the front section of the house was not ceiled with plaster. The exposed, mill sawn floor joists of the main floor are whitewash, which attest to the original simple finishes in the cellar. A series of sash windows on the west wall beneath the piazza provided light into these cellar rooms.

An original staircase descends beneath the main staircase to a small partitioned area that corresponds to the width and depth of the passageway on the main floor. Whether this northern part of the cellar provided access to other rooms below stairs is not certain since partition walls have been inserted at some later date to segregate this space.

A separate door on the west side of the cellar provides access beneath the narrower rear section of the main house. Part of this space beneath the dining room had a large cistern in it, now mostly demolished. This cistern was divided into two tanks and had lead feeder pipes entering into them a few feet above the floor. A fragment of one of the lead pipes still survives in the brickwork of the west end wall of one of the tanks. At the east end, a brick wall defines the extent of the cistern and separates this part of the cellar from the working service spaces in the front.

The First Story

Plan

The main floor of 13 Pitt Street contains the principal entertaining rooms. The front entrance on Pitt Street leads into a small 7-foot square vestibule. A pair of double glazed doors leads from this foyer into the stair passage where an open string stair rises along the north wall on the right and two doors open on the left into two unequal-sized parlors. A French door on the south wall in each of the parlors opens onto the piazza. At the back of the stair passage, a door leads into the dining room. The dining room also has a door leading out to the piazza. Originally there was a small service pantry or storage room opening off the back wall of the dining room and another door to the south which provides access to the rear service stair. A door on the south side of the service stair lobby leads to an exterior staircase that lands next to the east end of the attached two-story service wing.

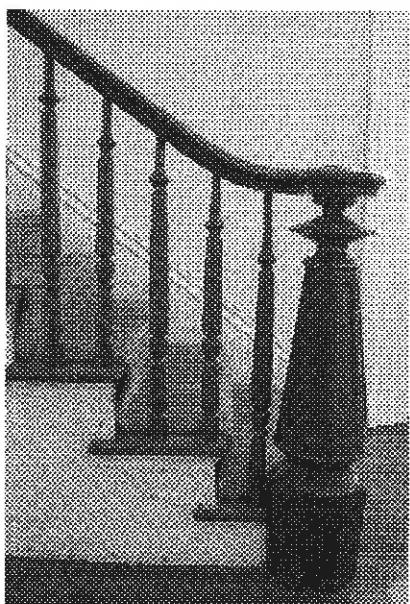
Entrance Vestibule

The double front doors of the Pitt Street entrance open into a seven-by-seven-foot vestibule. This space provides a buffer between the street and the heart of the dwelling. It is lit by a horizontally elongated oval transom over the entrance doors, which have four panels enframed by large bolection moldings. Like all the primary doors in the house, these front ones are hung with a pair of double-knuckle butt hinges secured into the jamb with five screws in each plate. The original front door lock has been replaced by a modern one. The double architrave is Italianate with a complex molding consisting quirked ovolo followed by a pointed astragal followed by a smaller quirked ovolo in the back band, a long fillet, and terminated at the jamb with a full half-inch bead. This architrave molding is used throughout the house in the major rooms for doors and windows.

Above a tall base, the walls of the vestibule are plastered and where modern paint is peeling, there is evidence that this space may have had an early if not original faux-ashlar paint scheme. Another pair of double doors at the back of the vestibule opens into the stair passage. The vertically elongated upper panels of these doors are glazed, providing additional light for the vestibule and visual connection with the passage. Below the panels are set off with the same Italianate bolection moldings. The door has a mortise lock and white porcelain knobs (the one on the passage side is different from the one on the vestibule side), features that are repeated on the other principal doors in the house. As with the other principal doorways, a saddle or threshold separates the two spaces at floor level.

Stair passage

The stair passage is seven feet in width and extends 35 feet from the front vestibule to the entrance to the dining room. It is dominated by two doorways into the parlors on the south side and an open-string staircase on the north wall. The passage is lit by two, 8-light sash on the north wall, one of which is at the foot of the stair and the other at the back of the staircase. There is a metal grill for a heat register in the floor in front of the staircase.

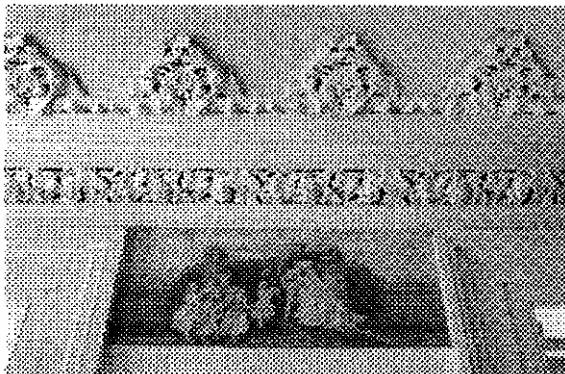


The staircase, which runs up a straight flight to the second floor is 3 feet 6 inches in width. At the base is a large, tapered, octagonal newel post with small decorative beading along the edges of the recessed panel in each of the facets. The newel post is mahogany as are the "breadloaf" shaped handrail and the tapered turned balusters. The stair brackets consisted of applied scrolled and pierced pieces. The area below the stair carriage is framed in and plastered and masks a utilitarian service stair to the cellar that descends below the main staircase. Entrance into the cellar stair is through a paneled door at the back of the staircase.

Front Parlor (Front Room)

The most elaborately decorated room in the house is the front parlor. Entrance into this largest room in the house is through a recessed six-panel door from the stair passage on the north wall. The room measures nearly 17 feet in width and is 25 feet in length stretching from the two front windows on the Pitt Street façade to the doorway into the back parlor.

The floors consist of 4 1/2 to 6-inch blind nailed pine floor, most of which are edge grained running in an east to west direction. The floorboards in this room as well as those in the other two entertaining rooms on this floor and the three bedchambers of the second floor show evidence of having once been carpeted. Tack holes of three-foot centers run in an east to west direction from base to base. The molded base stands 8 1/2 inches high. Near the top of the plastered walls is a small picture rail with a decorative wall papered frieze above consisting of eighteenth-century costumed ladies and gentlemen cavorting in a variety of Arcadian settings with fountains, temples, and gates. This wallpaper frieze extends around the entire room.



The eye catching decoration in this room, however, is the filigree plaster cornice. It is molded with high relief floral motifs of grapes, fig leaves, and other elements rapped around roll moldings that spill out onto the ceiling. Was this filigree work once polychromy? If other Charleston decorative plasterwork of the era such as that found at the Aiken-Rhett House is any indication, then there is a strong likelihood that this cornice was richly

colored. In the center of the ceiling is similar plasterwork. An oval filigree medallion features birds, fruits, figs leaves, and other motifs. A metal gasolier of several tiers and six branches hangs from the center of the medallion. Originally lit by gas, it was later electrified.

A pair of double-hung, 8-light windows are on the east, Pitt Street, wall. On the east wall are another pair of windows and a third opening, which is a 6-light French door with a double transom above that opens onto the piazza. Below the window are recessed panels with quirked ovoli and beveled astragal moldings. The window and door architraves are of the type described earlier.

Just east of the doorway from the stair passage is the projecting mass of the chimney, which sticks out 1 foot 9 inches into the room and extends 6 feet 6 inches across the face. Lining the opening above the stone hearth is an Italianate chimneypiece of gray marble with a compass-headed opening and a curved mantel shelf. The top of the arch of the mantel is decorated with a volute or bracket with a scallop shell. The fireplace opening itself is enclosed by a decorative cast iron coal grate and screen. On

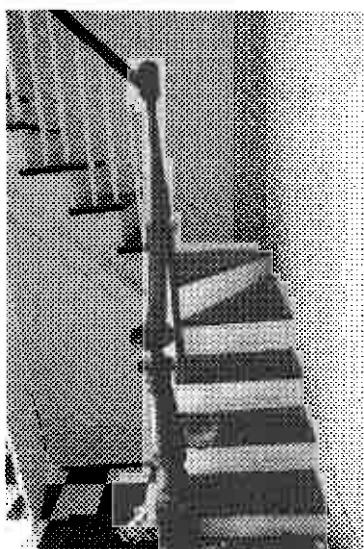
the east cheek of the chimney is the remnants of a service bell. A heat register is on the floor on the west side of the chimney jamb.

Second Parlor (Middle Room)

The smaller second parlor has three doorways—one from the passage on the north wall, one from the front room on the east wall, and a French door that opens onto the piazza on the south wall. The room is roughly 17 feet square in plan and is not as elaborately decorated as the larger front parlor. Flooring, base, windows, and doors are similarly treated, but the Italianate mantel is simpler in design and the cornice and ceiling medallion are less florid. The mantel lacks the scalloped shell in the keystone console. The cornice lacks the filigree floral motifs. Moldings start about 10 inches from the ceiling and extend out about 12 inches on the ceiling from the edge of the wall. The ceiling medallion is circular rather than oval and consists of filigree patterns of sinuous leaves and pods along with clusters of flowers such as roses. An early twentieth-century, electrical brass-and-crystal fixture of five lights hangs from the center of the medallion. The service bell crank is on the west side of the fireplace jamb. A heat register is on the east side on the floor.

Dining Room (Rear Room)

The dining room is entered from the back of the passage. A secondary entrance is from a service stair on the west side of the room. A French door opens onto the back side of the piazza on the west wall. This third entertaining room on the main floor was decorated in a similar manner as the front two parlors. The ceiling medallion is identical to the one in the second parlor or middle room. As in that room, the cornice in the dining room has no decorative motifs but consists of a series of moldings that roll up from the wall to the ceiling. The room originally measured approximately 16 ½ feet square, but has been altered by the removal of a wall on the west side to create a modern kitchen where a service room, perhaps a pantry, was once located. The room has also suffered the loss of its original Italianate chimneypiece, replaced in modern times by a brick veneer. The two windows flanking the chimney mass on the north wall have also been enclosed to created book cases.



Service Stair and Lobby

The plan of late antebellum houses such as 13 Pitt allowed for a service stair that was conveniently situated at the back of the main block with access to the back service building nearby. Opening off the west wall of the dining room, the service stair is enclosed in a room that is 8 feet 4 inches deep from east to west, and 7 feet 7 inches from north to south. The open string stair rises along the north wall of this space and then turns along the back west wall and turns yet again along the south wall above the exterior doorway. The staircase runs the full height of the house to the third floor attic, making it possible for slaves and servants to move through the house without resorting to the

main staircase. The interior trim in this space is simpler than the main rooms. A single architrave decorates the door and windows openings and consists of a quirked ovolo with a beveled astragal and a full half inch bead at the jamb.

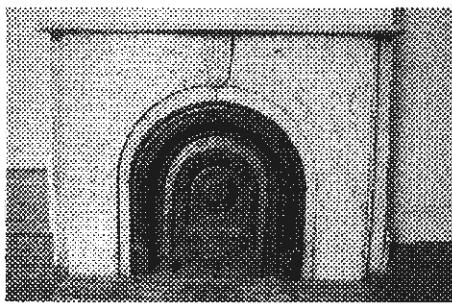
The Second Story

Plan

The plan of the second floor replicates the division of rooms on the ground floor and consists of three bedchambers and closets. There is also a small, 10-by-7-foot room at the front of the passage above the ground-floor vestibule, which is now used as a modern bathroom. The division between the front bedchamber and middle one has been altered to accommodate closets. The plaster cornice on reworked east wall of the second chamber has been rebuilt crudely to match the original elsewhere. At the back of the house, the service stair lands at the second story. A doorway from there opens into the west wall of the rear bedchamber. The space next to it has been reworked to accommodate a small bathroom and may have been used for storage or service in the nineteenth century.

The Bedchambers

Since all three bedchambers are finished in a very similar manner they will treated here collectively and only small details that differ from one to another noted. The chambers have 4 to 6-inch pine floorboards, which are blind nailed. Evidence of carpet tack holes every three feet in the floorboards indicates that all the bedchambers once had wall to wall carpeting. Above a molded base, the walls are plastered and capped at the apex by plaster cornice with roll and cove moldings that extend out onto the ceiling. The double-hung, 8-light windows repeat the same details as found on the main floor including the double architraves and panels beneath the sills. The principal doors on this floor are recessed, 4-panel doors with the same hardware found below. French doors placed directly above those on the ground floor provide access from all three rooms to the second-story piazza.



The front two bedchambers have gray Italianate chimneypieces similar to those on the ground floor but with little decorative molding and carving other than a keystone console. The rear bedchamber features a variegated green and tan veined Italianate mantel with a stylized central scalloped console just beneath the shelf. All fireplaces have the cast iron grates and pierced covers as on the ground floor. The one in the back room, however, has been removed. All three bedchambers have service bell cranks located on one of the cheeks of their chimneys. The one in the second, or middle, bedchamber retains its white porcelain knob.

The Attic or Third Story

The third floor of 13 Pitt Street was originally unheated and provided storage space, additional bedchambers, and rooms for servants. However, the division of the top floor of the house in modern times into individual apartments has masked the original arrangement of partitions and circulation patterns in the attic story. The principal staircase rises along the north wall to the third floor and lands under the slope of the gable roof, providing tight headroom. Besides the main staircase, the service stair lands on the third floor against the west gable end where a three-part window provides light. A rob light window in a partition next to the stair provides light from the gable-end window into the room just beyond the stair. This back part of the second floor must have been used by servants either as living space or for storage. Where the floor is not covered in modern carpeting in the front part of the attic, there are the ghost marks of an earlier closet partition just in front of the stair well. How the rest of the front part of the attic was subdivided is unclear. A three-part window similar to the one in the rear gable lights the front, Pitt Street, gable room. Three dormer windows punctuate the south slope of the roof to bring light into the central section of the attic.

The Kitchen/Wash House/Quarter

A two-story brick service building survives attached to the rear or west end of the main house. The building is laid in 1:5 bonding with sash windows and doors crowned by flat jack arches on the south side and no apertures on the north side. Unfortunately, the south façade has been altered several times in the twentieth century to accommodate two separate apartments. Doorways and windows have been reworked as well as the interior. Two chimney stacks are situated in the center of the original two rooms on the north wall. The west stack has been removed above the roofline though the one in the east room survives.

Presumably, the building was originally used as the kitchen and perhaps a laundry room or wash house on the ground floor as was typical of such spaces in Charleston in the antebellum period. Ladders or simple staircases provided access to the bedchambers on the second floor. These have been replaced by modern staircases.

Technology and Service Systems at 13 Pitt Street

The technology of 13 Pitt Street fits with the type of materials and systems found in other late antebellum houses in Charleston. All the framing timbers are mill sawn, fabricated by a reciprocating, sash saw. Mortise and tenon joints are used to secure the principal framing members and mature cut nails are employed for secondary members and plaster lath. The laths are circular sawn. The floorboards appear to have been run through a planer and are not gauged nor undercut. The decorative woodwork consists of Italianate moldings typical of third quarter of the nineteenth century. The tapered,

polygonal, mahogany newel post, tapered balusters, and "breadloaf" shaped handrail match in spirit if not exact form the shape of other late antebellum staircases in the city.

The late antebellum period is also noted for its imported materials and the molded plaster cornices and ceiling ornaments could well have been imported from a northern city to decorate Henry Gerdts' new town house. Imported too are the marble Italianate mantels that appear in all the principal rooms on the main and second floors. The brownstone used for window and door lintels and sills, the staircase at the Pitt Street entrance and the rear service stair, and the frontispiece were probably imported into Charleston from a northern port. The origin of the decorative ironwork that skirts the front façade is not known. It may have been the product of northern manufacture, but given the substantial use of the material in Charleston in the late antebellum period, it may well have been the handiwork of a native smith.



The late 1840s and 1850s marked the introduction and spread of several new mechanical and plumbing systems in the best houses of Charleston. 13 Pitt Street was wired with service bells in each of the three public rooms on the ground floor and in the bedchambers above on the second floor. The bell cranks with white porcelain knobs were located on one side of chimney breast in these rooms and must have connected to one or more bells near service spaces in the cellar and rear kitchen-washhouse wing. At one time, perhaps initially, the house also had gas lighting. The principal remnant of this technology appears in the front parlor on the main floor where the gas jets of the six-branch brass gasolier was later wired for electricity. Finally, there are the remnants of a double tank cistern in the cellar beneath the dining room. Although a short section of a lead pipe that once fed one of the tanks is still in place, the working of this water system has not been traced.

Recommendations

From a cursory survey of 13 Pitt Street, it is evident that the house needs to have a set of measured drawings done to record an important plan of a late antebellum dwelling. Some of the details noted in this report could be clearly delineated on these drawings and serve as a guide to future owners who wish to restore and renovate the house.

Paint analysis would be helpful to determine the original finishes of several key features in the house. Investigations should be done to determine if the there was a faux ashlar of the entrance vestibule, whether the doors were grained, and to see if there was a rich polychrome scheme in the plaster cornice and ceiling medallions on the principal floor.

Finally, immediate maintenance is necessary in some areas. Perhaps most urgent are the piazza and balustrade of the perimeter wall. They need immediate attention to arrest the rot that has damaged them.