

Renovations Mask Origin Of House

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Eighteenth in a series of articles on recent Ansonborough restorations. The nineteenth will appear next Monday.)

By W. H. J. THOMAS
Staff Reporter

The brick dwelling at 5 George St. is a study in overlapping periods and manners of ornamentation, with its real origin pretty thoroughly masked beneath features added during renovations in the late decades of the 19th century.

The two-and-a-half-story residence is actually an interesting example of the late Adam style, but anyone viewing it straight on from the George Street facade, without a glimpse of telltale fragments on the west, would

Do You Know Your Charleston?

judge the house to be a good 40 or 50 years younger than it apparently is.

The double lot the house now occupies was early held in the name of James W. Brandt, a merchant. In September of 1813, to satisfy a mortgage difficulty, Brandt sold the property as a vacant lot to Robert Roulain, a masonry contractor, for \$950. Roulain died three years later (in October of 1816), leaving the property, still as a vacant lot, to his two sons, Abraham Roulain and Robert S. Roulain.

It is apparent the two brothers constructed the present dwelling and probably did so not long after receiving the property from the senior Roulain. Although the actual house is not mentioned in a deed of transfer for another 18 years, many surviving features point to a construction date of before 1820.

On May 12, 1834, the Roulain brothers sold "all that piece parcel or Lot of Land together with the Brick Dwelling House thereon and all the other out houses and

buildings" to the Rev. Daniel S. Cobia for \$2,000. Cobia died within a few years and the house passed to his wife, Louisa Cobia.

Mrs. Cobia remarried, this time to John J. Roberts, and took up residency in North Carolina. Nine years after the dwelling was purchased by Cobia, Mr. and Mrs. Roberts conveyed it to William Laval, who already owned the nearby house at 79 Anson. The Roberts signed a lease for \$5 on the property to Laval on April 3, 1843 — and then a release for \$2,500 to him on April 4.

Laval was listed in the 1849 city directory as "U. S. Treasurer", with offices in the Fireproof Building. The same directory lists a William J. Laval as "Comptroller" — probably a son or nephew; by the 1858 directory, William Laval was apparently retired, but William J. Laval carries a listing as "State Treasurer". It does not appear that Laval ever lived at 5 George (the 1861 census lists the house as the residence of C. Richardson Miles, attorney).

On Jan. 21, 1864, Laval sold the house to Dennis O'Neill, a wholesale and retail boot and shoe merchant, for the surprising sum of \$20,000 — obviously in greatly inflated Confederate currency. The O'Neill family retained this property in its name for another 82 years.

The house and lot passed to Elizabeth F. O'Neill and then by will to A.M. O'Neill. He sold it to Andrew P. Leventis on July 15, 1946, for \$7,750. In 1965, Leventis conveyed it to the Dixie Beverage Co. and, within a few months, it was sold to Historic Charleston Foundation.

After holding the property for nearly four years, the Foundation sold the dwelling to R.E. Mevers on Feb. 28, 1969. Mr. Mevers is now completing renovation of the house as two apartment units. This property is joined to his contracting firm's property on Anson street,

To judge from the remaining early features of this residence, the Roulain brothers had built a small-scale but very well-finished residence with a substantial amount of Adam woodwork of a strongly individual design. It is possible, of course, that only one son followed his father as a mason, while the other may have been a carpenter and executed the detail carving to be found here.

The pre-1820 details may be found partially on the interior of the front rooms, first and

second story, and the exterior of the piazza side. The first story front sitting room retains portions of the dado railing and slight baseboard but little else, while the front room of the second floor retains an unusual late Adam mantle of a good height, with both circular and oval sunburst carvings supported by high-relief reeded, engaged columns.

Also unchanged are portions of the piazza where dentil trim and a number of quite slender columns attest to an early date, as does the tran-

som to the hall door and the nine-light double-hung window sashes with their thick muntins.

Probably the marble fireplace surround of the sitting room was put in during the 1840s, but the major change made in the house was of the post-Civil War period when the front facade on George Street was replaced.

Since this work was so extensive, it may date from the 1886 earthquake. Not only were the windows replaced by full Victorian glass panes, but window heads in tin were ad-

ded, as was a broken gable with its outline partially repeated in the window head of the attic opening. It is quite likely that 5 George was originally topped by a hip roof and the full line of the top story may have been changed at the time of this renovation.

The new apartment units (one to each floor) consist of a sitting room, dining room, kitchen, bath and two bedrooms. The period features which have survived previous remodelings have been kept and no structural changes made.



ROULAIN HOME BUILT AFTER 1816

5 George St. once possession of state treasurer. (Staff Photo by Murton)