

An Architectural and Historical Analysis
of the
Nathaniel Russell House
Charleston, South Carolina

Volume IV
Room by Room Catalog of Architectural Features
Nathaniel Russell House

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for
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Although there is patching on the jamb, the present (large) five-knuckle, cast-iron butt hinges on the exterior door under the stair appear original. The iron rimlock dates to the middle of the nineteenth century. The wrought-iron sliding bolts are early.

The trap door in the floor retains original wrought-iron ring pulls and rimlock. The rimlock and framing for the opening suggests the trap door is an original feature.

Walls:

Original plaster does survive in the passage, applied to riven lath secured with cut nails with machine heads.

Cornice:

The stair passage was originally decorated with a painted trompe l'oeil cornice, believed to be the work of Samuel O'Hara. Traces of this important early decorative work have been located in the southwest corner of the ceiling, partially concealed by the later applied cornice.¹⁴

As part of the Mullally renovation of 1909, an ornamental cornice was installed. This cornice is cast in sections using gypsum as the principal molding material with a fabric backing. While the precise source for this cornice is not known, it was almost certainly purchased through a catalog from a manufacturer of architectural components. The pattern of this cornice and a contemporary cornice in the back parlor (Room 104) closely match products offered in the early twentieth century by the Architectural Decorating Company in Chicago.¹⁵

The cast cornice in the passage is less elaborate than the contemporary cornice in the back parlor. Dentil blocks and a band of egg-and-dart molding provide the principal decoration for this Corinthian cornice; bead-and-reel and water-leaf foliage add further embellishment.

Ceiling:

Although patched, the ceiling is largely original until it abuts the soffit of the stair. Part of the original trompe l'oeil painting by Samuel O'Hara is still visible and may indicate that the passage had a trompe l'oeil ceiling as well as the cornice. It appears that little, if any of the ceiling has received a later skim coat.

Stair:

The stair is elliptical and free standing except where it attaches to each landing and where steel supports were added in 1955-56. The structure of the stair consists of a frame

of four members that make a trapezoid--the front and rear pieces extending beyond the two side members; the side members are tenoned to the longer pieces. The front piece is used to catch the top of a tread and the rear member is intended to carry small angled "stringers" that bird mouth to the top of it and under the front member on the next frame up (these pieces are screwed into place). The trapezoidal frame then becomes a platform on which to nail the treads. Small posts are tenoned to the underside of the front long member and extend down to the next tread, to be tenoned into the top of the rear long member at that level.

A second framing system is set below that used to carry treads and risers and is used to carry the plaster soffit and exterior trim. At each tread level, it is through-bolted to the frame above. All stair framing is made of hand planed, southern yellow pine.

The soffit of the stair was stripped of plaster during the 1955-56 restoration to permit raising and reinforcing the stair, which had dropped several inches over time. When the soffit was replastered, a window was installed to provide a view of the complex joinery of the stair frame; photographs taken in 1955 provide further documentation of the complex construction of the stair.

Square wood balusters tenon to the treads and handrail. The handrail is made of several pieces, the cap being one piece, the body another (which is veneered with mahogany to match the rest of the finish surfaces). Small ovolos are attached under the cap, and bead and fillets are placed under the body. The fillets drop below the body to create a channel in which to set the balusters, and blocking is installed between each baluster to form the mortise for the balusters. The cap to the handrail is made of a number of small pieces, mitered and joined together in an attempt to form a proper, three-dimensional curve. This detail is quite unusual, and its only corollary known to these authors is a stair in the Robert Stewart House, 415 High Street, Petersburg, Virginia dating from 1798. The use of segmented pieces here is even more puzzling, since it consists of long, straight runs, with curved sections limited to ramps and easements. Reinforcement of the balustrade is given by an occasional iron baluster; these form an ell at their base and are let into the tops of treads.

The handrail profile is a popular neoclassical motif for Charleston and can be seen in slightly varied forms at Vanderhorst Row (1799-1800), the early nineteenth-century rebuilt stair at 90 Church Street, and the 1806-09 stair at 54 Montagu Street. Circular stair cases and this handrail profile were popularized by William Pain, as can be seen in *The Practical House Carpenter, or Youth's Instructor* (plate 66 for the handrail, plate 70 for the staircase). The handrail follows the curl of the curtail step and terminates with an ivory plug.¹⁶

Stair bracket ends are scrolled and pierced to create a floral design. These are curved to the profile of the stair. The only carving on the stair--in fact, little is used anywhere in

the house--is a patera medallion on each bracket. Nearly identical brackets are found at the William Blacklock House (1800) on Bull Street.

Closets:

There is no evidence for shelving in the east closet. A wire-nailed, Victorian style picture rail is installed within this space, presumably added by the Mullallys. A double-beaded rail found within the closets may be original. The base is made of a beaded board.

The west closet was similarly treated, except evidence survives for two levels of early shelving. Beaded ledgers remain; these are secured with double-struck cut wrought nails. The lower shelf in this closet dates to the twentieth century.

HVAC Systems:

Radiator pipes in the northeast corner of the room were removed during the 1955-56 restoration.

Gas and Electrical Systems:

The stair passage was once lit by a gas chandelier, presumably installed in the late 1850s by the Allstons, but possibly installed by Mrs. Dehon as much as a decade earlier. Photographs taken during the 1910s and 1920s provide views of two different periods of light fixture suspended from the ceiling. In 1917, for example, Alice Huger Ravenel Smith published a view of the room from the entry doorway. At that point, a heavy, three-light fixture is in place. This fixture is consistent in style with the third quarter of the nineteenth century, and incorporates a gas pipe as the central stem. In the background, a portrait of Francis Pelzer hangs on the west wall of the passage, indicating the gas fixture remained in place until after the Pelzers acquired the house. By 1926, this fixture had been replaced with a more traditional colonial revival chandelier suspended on a chain, with the electrical connection woven into the chain.¹⁷

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**Historic Images Relating
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1680-1939**

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Architectural Photographer To Portray Historic Home Interiors

Mrs. S. Henry Edmunds of Historic Charleston Foundation yesterday visited the circular staircase of the Pelzer House on Meeting Street with Samuel Chamberlain, Marblehead, Mass.,

photographer. Mr. Chamberlain, well known architectural photographer and writer, will be in Charleston for some seven weeks photographing interiors of famous old homes here. He said he hopes to do a book about the interiors of old Charleston houses. "There

have been many books about Charleston, mostly exterior studies, and I hope to put together agreeable pictures and interesting text to make these beautiful homes known from the inside as well." (News and Courier Staff Photo.)

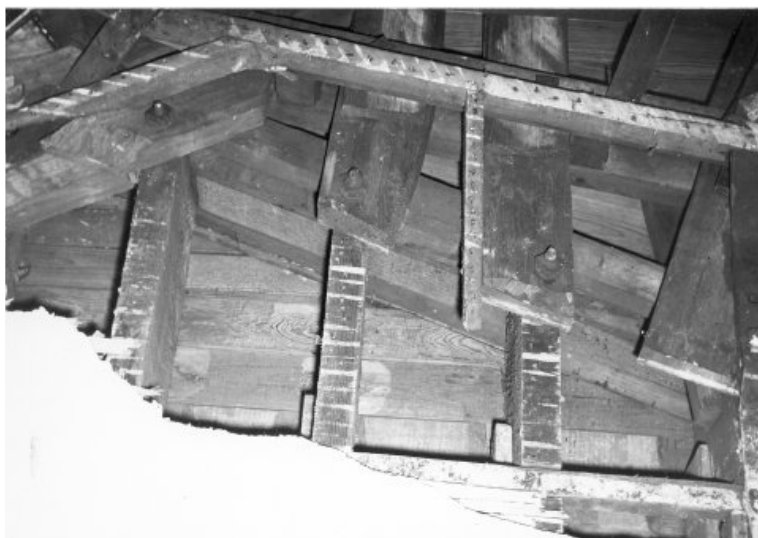
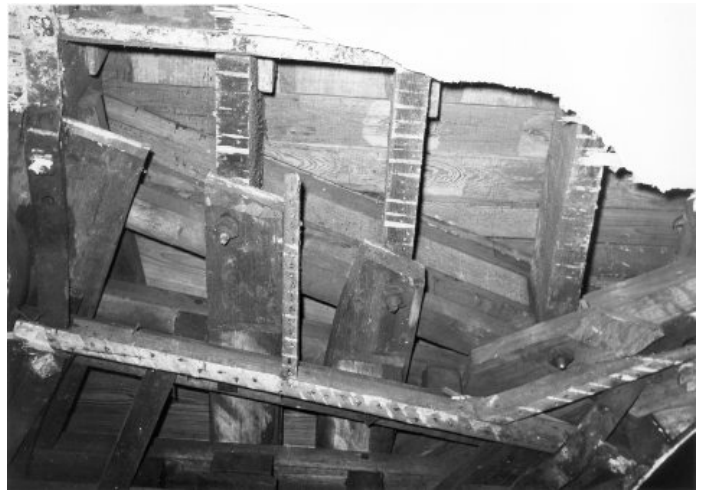


STAIRCASE IN RUSSELL HOUSE



Photographs of the Nathaniel Russell House Staircase

Historic Charleston Foundation, 1955 Restoration





George W. Johnson, ca. 1920



Rick McKee, 2008