

# Home At South Battery Represents Two Periods

By W.H.J. THOMAS

A home that in part represents both the antebellum period and the time when Charleston was attempting to recover from the war is the impressively large dwelling at 20 South Battery which was greatly remodeled in the 1870s to serve hopefully as the meeting place for men of good will of both Confederate and Union sides.

The lot on which 20 South Battery now stands was purchased by Samuel N. Stevens for \$4,500 on June 7, 1843. Stevens was a factor in partnership with John and William Ravenel at the time he bought the property.

The house is shown on the bird's-eye view of the city published about 1850 by John William Hill. Several plats of the period also show the dwelling, its deep lot that reaches back more than 300 feet, a stable, a large kitchen building (still in existence), and two "necessary" buildings.

It appears that Stevens had died by 1849, as we find only his wife listed as a resident in the house. She would remain there for another ten years before selling it to John F. Blacklock, a factor, for \$20,000 in 1859. Blacklock had lived until that date in the well-known dwelling his family built around 1800 at 18 Bull St.

Blacklock sold the property at 20 South Battery to Col. Richard Lathers in 1870 and Lathers immediately set about transforming the large but simple residence into an architectural fashion plate of the period.

Col. Lathers, a millionaire, was a native of Georgetown who left South Carolina as a young man (in 1847) to open a commission business in New York City. He married a girl of prominent family, branched

out into insurance and banking, became an agent for cotton manufacturers throughout the South, took over as president of the Great Western Marine Insurance Co., and was named chairman for the finance committee of the directors of the Erie Railroad.

As the troubles became more serious just before the start of the Civil War, Lathers toured the South, addressing the Chambers of Commerce of the important cities and begging the businessmen to remain in the Union. During the war he served with the Union forces.

Lathers retired from his many offices in finance in 1869, with the intention of returning to South Carolina and assisting with the rebuilding of the state. He made numerous talks to both white and Negro groups, telling them of the evils of the "carpetbaggers" and apparently attempted true

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reform of the tax and land commission problems.

Perhaps the activities that he thought most helpful were the gatherings he held at 20 South Battery to bring leaders of the South together with those of the Union states.

In April of 1873 this report appeared in The News and Courier:

"One of the most notable social events of the Charleston season was the brilliant party given last evening at the mansion of Col. Richard Lathers, on the South Battery, in honor of the Hon. Horatio Seymour, ex-Governor of New York, and the Hon. William Cullen Bryant, the venerable editor of the New York Evening Post . . . The cards of invitation to this 'At Home' of Colonel and Mrs. Lathers

had been issued for some days, and the party assembled in response was a most select and fashionable assemblage, including the most prominent gentlemen of the city, with their ladies, as well as a number of military guests from the garrison at the Citadel . . .

Despite this report it appears that Lathers met with little real success in Charleston at a time when most of the substantial people he might have cared to attract were too concerned with survival to think highly of grand "blow-outs" on South Battery. By 1874 he had sold his house and returned to New York.

The dwelling that Lathers remade for himself was expanded by a two-story addition to the northeast corner of the earlier house, a ballroom area over a passageway to the west and a mansard roof to form a fourth story that Lathers used as a library. He also added a railing to the roof above.

Many of the features of Lathers' addition still remain at 20 South Battery. In many of the rooms today one will find pressed tin ceilings which must have been high fashion in the 1870s. In the ballroom one will find that the large panes of glass in the windows are actually beveled about two inches from where they reach the frame.

Andrew Simonds purchased the house from Lathers and lived there at the time he was president of First National Bank of Charleston and of the Imperial Fertilizer Co. It was sold by the Simonds family to William B. Chisolm for \$25,000 in 1910.

Ernest H. Pringle bought the house for \$34,000 in 1916 and it was his home for many years.

# Mansion's Past Traced

By ROBERT P. STOCKTON

Col. Richard Lathers did not build 20 South Battery, but he placed his mark, indelibly, upon the mansion.

The colonel gave the house its present appearance when he remodeled the antebellum structure in 1870, in the taste of that period.

Samuel N. Stevens, a factor, actually built the house after he bought the apparently vacant lot for \$4,500 on June 7, 1843.

Stevens died in 1845 but city directories show his widow, Mary Smith Stevens, continued to live in the house on South Bay (now South Battery).

Mrs. Stevens and her son, Samuel N. Stevens the Younger, sold the property on Dec. 18, 1859, to John Freer Blacklock, a factor, for \$20,000.

A plat accompanying this sale shows the house with a characteristic "T" shape, and piazzas wrapped around three sides of its central portion.

The plat also shows a kitchen building which remains on the property, a stable which has disappeared and two privies which yielded a large number of champagne bottles when excavated recently.

The "Bird's Eye View Map" published by John William Hill about 1850 shows the house with a broad gable roof with a wide fanlight in the front pediment.

The house retains its basic floor plan, as built for Stevens. The plan is unusual in that the entrance door is in the northwest wing of the "T" and the front of the central portion is taken up by double drawing rooms on the main floor.

The drawing rooms retain plaster cornices and Greek Revival pilasters decorated with anthemia, in the style of the 1840s.

The entrance hall, in the northwest wing of the "T," opens into the stairhall, in back of the drawing rooms.

There is retained the staircase, with its Empire style newel post and mahogany rail, typical of the 1840s, which sweeps to the upper floors in beautiful semi-oval curves. All but the top flight dates from Stevens' time.

Col. Lathers, who retained these features when he remodeled, was a native of Georgetown who moved to New York in 1837 and became a millionaire as a cotton broker, banker and insurance executive and railroad director.

In the trying period just before the Confederate War, Lathers toured the South, in a vain speechmaking attempt to hold the Union together. During the war, he served with the Union forces.

After the war, Col. Lathers retired from business and returned to Charleston to help rebuild the state.

On Feb. 21, 1870, he bought the South Battery house and began embellishing it.

He added a large ballroom above a porte cochere on the northwest corner of the house, expanded the northeast wing to the rear and added a mansard roof to provide space for a large library.

The mansard appears on the house in the "Bird's Eye View of Charleston" of 1872, proving he had completed it by then.

Col. Lathers' additions permitted him to hold large and elegant receptions, to which he invited political and military leaders of the North and South, in an attempt to heal the wounds of the recent conflict.

Alfred L. Dennis, a visitor from New York, describes his visit, on March 5, 1874, to "the beautiful house of Colonel Lathers on the Battery."

There, he said, "we were welcomed with great cordiality and introduced to a large company of gentlemen and ladies who had been invited to meet us.

"A fine picture gallery occupied a large space on the first floor, and in the top of

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the house is a large library well stocked with books and engravings, and commanding from two sides noble views of the city and harbor.

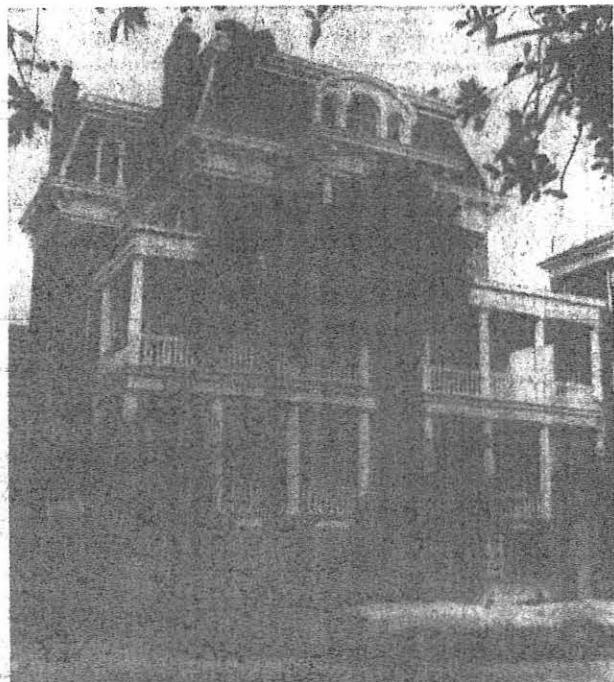
"From the balcony we could see Fort Sumter, and with a glass could trace the points made memorable during the long seige..."

Gen. James Conner described a reception for Gov. Horatio Seymour of New York, and William Cullen Bryant, on April 4, 1873:

"They received in the Music Room — really a handsome room...the furniture quite handsome. Coffee, wine, and punch in a little room off the Music Room, Supper, in one of the front drawing rooms thrown open and the table set in one..."

Lathers, however, finally gave up trying to get the estranged North and South reunited, sold the South Battery house on Aug. 11, 1874 and returned north.

His house is now owned by Mr. and Mrs. Frank Gay Jr.



Inset Photo by Bill Martin Jr.

20 South Battery, C. 1843 and 1870

In 1870

# Well-Known Architect Remodeled Mansion

By ROBERT P. STOCKTON  
Special Writer

New research on the Stevens-Lathers Mansion, 20 South Battery, indicates its remodeling in 1870 was designed by John Henry Devereux, one of Charleston's best known postbellum architects.

The house, built about 1843 by Samuel N. Stevens, a prosperous moneylender, was purchased Feb. 21, 1870, by Col. Richard Lathers.

On March 31, 1870, the Charleston Daily Courier reported that Col. Lathers' residence on South Battery was "in the hands of the mechanics" and "in charge of Mr. J.H. Devereux," architect and builder.

The Courier reported on Aug. 5, 1870, on improvements to "the residence of Richard Lathers, Esq., a gentleman who is quite an acquisition to our social and commercial circles, situated on South Battery, with a fine view of the harbor entrance, neighboring islands and rivers that sweep by them.

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"There is a dining room 25 by 40 feet, which approximates more to a banquet hall, which rises 17½ feet in height, richly paneled and wainscoted.

"When the improvements are completed the residence will be one of the finest in this city. Mr. Lathers' spirit is being carried out by John H. Devereux, who is too perfect in his profession to need any comment."

For Devereux, 1870 was a busy year. He was remodeling John S. Riggs' range of buildings at the northwest corner of Broad and East Bay streets (now demolished), completing his St. Matthew's Lutheran Church on King Street and his Masonic Temple at King and Wentworth streets, remodeling photographer George S. Cook's house on South Battery, remodeling William M. Bird's building at East Bay and Cumberland streets and building a new structure for a merchant tailor on King Street.

Lathers, for whom he remodeled 20 South Battery, was a native of Georgetown who went to New York in 1847 and became a millionaire as a cotton broker, banker, insurance executive and railroad director.

Just before the Civil War, Lathers toured his native South, making speeches in a vain attempt to hold the Union together. During the war he served in the Union forces.

After the war, Col. Lathers retired from business and returned to Charleston to help rebuild South Carolina.

His enlargement of the South Battery house permitted him to hold large and elegant receptions to which he invited political and military leaders of the North and South, hoping to heal the wounds of war through social intercourse.

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Staff Photo by Tom Spain

## 20 South Battery

welcomed with great cordiality and introduced to a large company of gentlemen and ladies who had been invited to meet us.

"A fine picture gallery occupied a large space on the first floor, and in the top of the house is a large library well stocked with books and engravings, and commanding from two sides noble views of the city and harbor."

Gen. James Conner, a Confederate veteran, described a reception for Gov. Horatio Seymour of New York and William Cullen Bryant, the New York journalist, poet and civic leader, on April 4, 1873:

"They received in the Music Room — Really a handsome room ... the furniture quite handsome. Coffee, wine, and punch in a little room off the Music Room. Supper, in one of the front drawing rooms thrown open and the table set in one."

Lathers, according to tradition, gave up trying to bring the North and South together, and returned to New York. He sold the South Battery mansion on Aug. 11, 1874 to Andrew Simonds, a prominent local banker, for \$20,000.

The property now is owned by Mr. and Mrs. Frank Gay Jr., who operate the Battery Carriage House, a small hotel, in an outbuilding.

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# South Battery mansion sold to local real estate firm

By JIM PARKER  
Of the Post-Courier staff

Twenty South Battery, a 19th-century mansion that's now both a residence and the Battery Carriage House inn, was sold Thursday at a foreclosure sale to a local real estate firm.

Local hotelier Frank G. Gay Jr. and wife Rebecca B. Gay owned the antebellum four-story home and two-story addition in the rear, where the inn is located.

Also sold at the Charleston County master-in-equity sale was a parcel on Seabrook Island. The Gays had lived at 20 South Battery and also had a home at Seabrook. The total debt on the properties was \$2.77 million, the master-in-equity office says.

The bidder was Ravenel Eiserhardt & Co., which held a fourth mortgage on the foreclosed property. Ravenel Eiserhardt put in a

\$100,000 bid. However, the amount is actually just to record that a sale took place, and the firm in effect is out the amount of the loan.

First Federal Savings and Loan Association of Charleston and The First S&L Association of Greenville held the other three mortgages, according to the master-in-equity's office.

Twenty South Battery, also known as the Stevens-Lathers Mansion, was built in 1843 by Samuel M. Stevens, a commission merchant, after buying the lot for \$4,500.

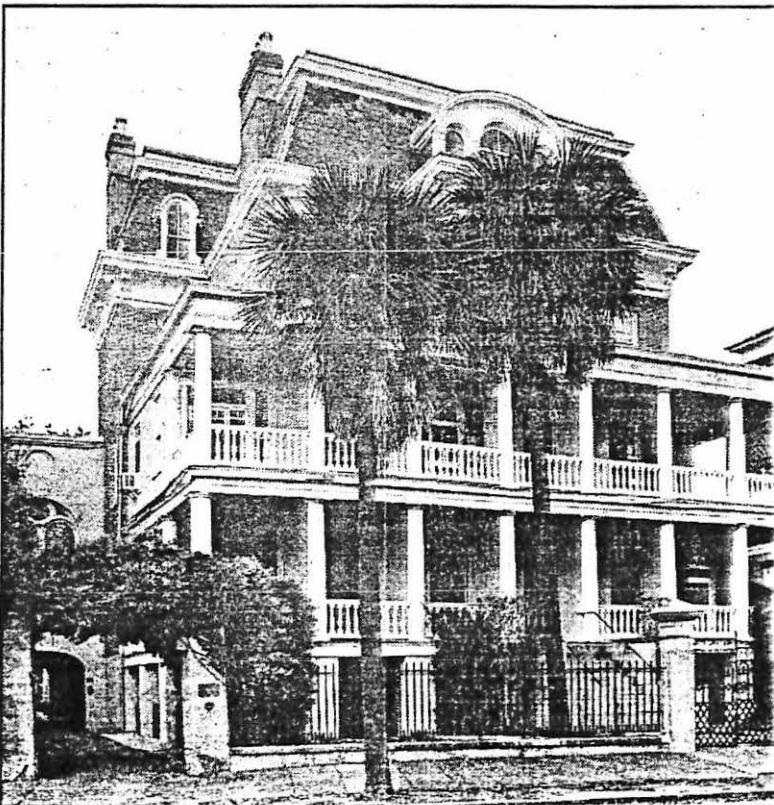
A plat accompanying a sale in 1859 shows the house with its characteristic "T" shape, and piazzas wrapped around the three sides of its central portion. The house had a broad gable roof with a wide fanlight in the front pediment, according to a guide published in 1850.

The home's staircase, with its Empire style newel post and mahog-

any rail sweeps to the upper floors in semi-oval curves.

In 1870, Col. Richard Lathers bought the mansion and remodeled it, adding a large ballroom, expanded the northeast wing and installed a mansard roof. Lathers, a Georgetown native, made a fortune in New York as a cotton broker, banker, insurance executive and railroad director. He returned to South Carolina to help the state rebuild after the War Between the States.

Gay, 46, a Mississippi native, bought 20 South Battery in 1971 for \$93,000 and spent \$200,000 on renovations, according to an article eight years ago in the Post-Courier. Soon afterward, he opened the Battery Carriage House, with 10 luxury rooms. Gay in 1981 opened the Elliott House on Queen Street and a year later opened the Meeting Street Inn, investing \$2.8 million.



20 South Battery was built in 1843.

Staff Photo by Tom S.