

2-B—The News & Courier, Charleston, S.C., Monday, July 22, 1985

File Photo

The houses at 37, 39 and 41 Calhoun St.

Demolition Of Three Sisters, Picturesque Houses, Recalled

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In 1962-64, three picturesque brick residences at 37-39-41 Calhoun St. were demolished despite protests of Charleston preservationists who felt that the Three Sisters were valuable to the city.

They were at the southeast corner of the intersection of East Bay and Calhoun streets and regarded as a sort of gateway to the old and historic city, making a charming, typically Charleston scene for motorists driving into town. In exterior detail, they were much like the three French Houses on lower King Street.

The site was never used and today the lot is grown up in weeds, another example of the destruction of Charleston's antique, architectural symbols of the past.

Nos. 37 and 39 were condemned by the city's fire inspectors in 1962 after they had been allowed to fall into disrepair, victims of vandals, weather and neglect. This sort of demolition by neglect no longer is possible in the Old and Historic City, an ordinance having been passed preventing owners from deliberately allowing buildings to decay.

When announcement of the pending demolition was made, the late Capt. W.T. Hart, president of the Preservation Society of Charleston, said:

"During some 200 years, the Three Sisters at Calhoun and East Bay have withstood the ravages of time, fire and earthquake — they cannot withstand the shameful attacks of man. The Three Sisters could be restored into attractive row houses without any zoning change. Within a block are the Gadsden and Primerose Houses. Both of these 'fire traps' have been modernized into excellent apartments within the year."

As spokesman for the Preservation Society, Hart castigated the city government for condemning the buildings. He suggested having the doors and windows boarded up with the city holding the houses without taxes until a restoration-minded developer could be found.

The three two-story and garret single houses were built of Carolina gray brick, the oversized brick made at brickyards mainly on the Cooper and Wando rivers.

They were nearly identical, each with two rooms to the floor in the main house and a smaller kitchen annex at the rear. Each stood on fairly deep lots that extended south from Calhoun Street.

Each had a central stairhall and each of the four main rooms had fireplaces with chimneys projecting above the east side of the gable roofs.

The trio of dwellings was just south of the city's northern border when Calhoun Street was called Line Street. At one time, the area north of the city was a garden district, where many fine town houses were built by wealthy planters. These included such well-known families as Vanderhorst, Fraser, Aiken, Tennent, Toomer, Simons and Heyward.

The Three Sisters were owned as rental properties by the Aiken family before the Civil War. Just to the east,

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at the southwest corner of Washington and Calhoun streets, stood Po-Jo's Tavern, an establishment that had a notorious reputation as a haunt for sailors during the days when cotton warehouses and piers lined the Cooper River waterfront.

Po-Jo's, the colloquial name of the great blue heron, also was razed to provide part of the site for a steel company.

When the Three Sisters were torn down the property was owned by Washington Realty Co. At that time a company spokesman, Robert L. Kaiser, said plans were to develop the site as commercial property. That never materialized.

In 1962, Francis Edmunds, executive director of the Historic Charleston Foundation, said: "The houses are like a gateway in the historic part of East Bay Street. They represent the northern boundary of Ansonborough, in one of the showiest places in Charleston. I had hoped that some suitable use could be found for them."

Recently Mrs. Edmunds recalled that she met a number of times with the owners in an effort to save the houses. They are listed in the survey of old buildings as "worthy of mention." As a grouping of row houses, historic preservationists regarded them as extremely important to the city.

Calhoun Street, east of Meeting Street, was one of the first of the city's thoroughfares to deteriorate into a slum area. Following World War I, the street began to become racially mixed and, after World War II it was practically 100 percent occupied by blacks.

Much of the property was rental and further deterioration took place. Lack of job opportunities along the waterfront apparently was a major factor.

When the Historic Charleston Foundation began its restoration program in Ansonborough during the 1950s, there appeared some hope that worthwhile old houses on Calhoun Street could be saved and restored. However, most of the houses west of East Bay on the street's south side were demolished to provide part of the site of Gaillard Municipal Auditorium.

Only the Arch House at 85 Calhoun remains. It was a former tavern and wagon yard that stood at the city's northern boundary. It was restored by the Historic Charleston Foundation and is occupied as a visitor's center by the Chamber of Commerce.

The preservation program has moved north of Calhoun Street and continues to save and restore old houses in that area and in the city's East Side section.