

by homeowner
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HOUSE TOURS
OWNER'S HISTORY
20 SOUTH BATTERY

I find most house histories quite boring, so I have taken the description of the Preservation Society and included a few comments on family and Charleston. But first, here are some of the mundane "facts".

The property was purchased on June 7, 1843, by Samuel N. Stevens, a wealthy factor, for \$4,500. A factor acted as the commercial agent for plantation owners, lending funds required to plant crops and aiding in the sale of the crops. Planters of rice as well as cotton used these financial agents regularly while they focused on crop production. South Carolina was prosperous then, and these East Bay and Battery houses reflected this prosperity.

The original 1843 house was different from the one you see. It was a typical neo-classical structure, and a picture of it is shown in early prints of the Battery houses. You can see such a print downstairs in the Inn, next to the front desk.

Essentially, it was a large Charleston "single" house, one room deep with a hall behind the rooms on each floor, but with the length of the house facing the sea, instead of being put vertically to the street as is the custom. This obviously allowed more light and air. The "ballroom" did not exist. The back of the library where it sinks down did not exist. The room there was a small office with a fire place. Also, there was no fourth floor and no mansard roof.

Remnants of the neoclassical interior can be seen around the hall mirror. There was no heavy wainscoting, and the stairwell was a free standing one, a smaller version of the one in the Russell house.

Turning the house to the street in this way created an issue as to where to put the front door. The French windows of the living room open directly to the porch and can serve as entrances, but more normal doors were put at either end of the porches. The door to the "office" on the east side no longer exists as the porch was converted to a small kitchen in the 50's, when the kitchens below were abandoned. The normal place to put a formal entrance would be the center but this would have divided the large single room into two rooms. Thus it is on the side.

The lot was deep to allow for kitchen, stable and outbuildings and the lot extended to Lamboll Street.

Stevens remained at 20 South Battery until 1859 when he sold it to John F. Blacklock, another factor, who moved from his well-known house at 18 Bull Street to the Battery, but as luck would have it, the War soon began and he abandoned the house and declined to move back after the war, selling it instead in 1870 to Col. Lathers, an interesting fellow, and another "money-man".

You should note that this house never belonged to a planter, and contrary to what is often thought, a high number of the large houses in Charleston belonged to merchants and financial services men, not planters--such as the Roper House at 9 East Battery and the Nathaniel Russell house.

The house was beat up during the Seige of Charleston, at that time the longest bombardment of a civilian population in the history of warfare, since the Northern cannon could reach up to Calhoun Street, and the Battery was a Southern artillery emplacement.

After the War wealth had obviously disappeared from Charleston. Blacklock and other Southern merchants and factors were broke, and it is amazing that there was anyone at all to buy the property. The purchaser was indeed a Southerner, born in Georgetown, SC, but alas, a Yankee Colonel.

Col. Lathers also had been a factor and represented numerous Northern cotton mills. He married into a wealthy New York banking family, opposed the War, and served in the Union Army. After the War, he wanted to help out his home state, and he tried to provide capital and other assistance to revive the economy.

His first step was to buy 20 South Battery and hire John Henry Devereaux, a well known Charleston architect, to renovate the house in the then current New York fashion known generally as Second Empire. Thus, the mansard roof, which housed a library. The so-called "ballroom" was not designed for dancing. It was a conference room, and Lathers had US senators, the Gov. of New York, and NYC financial people come down to look over the situation and meet with local people. As Charleston did not consider itself reconciled to the Union until after 1900, it was a bit too early for local Southerners to do business with the North. This attitude is one of the main reasons that Charleston, despite its harbor and many geographic advantages, languished while a little railroad crossroads like Atlanta grew prosperous. They simply told Lathers to go to hell and take his Yankee blood money with him. He left. [See New Men, New Cities, New South by Don H. Doyle for a good description of the Reconstruction mentality--which is still prevalent among all the "good families".]

So after spending a couple of years renovating and trying to help, Lathers found a buyer in 1874, another "money-man", Andrew Simonds who was my great-great grandfather. Andrew Simonds' mother was a member of the Calhoun clan and his wife Sarah was a Calhoun too, his first cousin.[Well, we're pleased she wasn't his sister.] John C. Calhoun was their Uncle. The Calhoun clan had settled in the South Carolina "up-country" and as they had many commercial interests, they did not hesitate to try to prosper after the War. My unfortunate and formerly very wealthy great grandfather of the same generation, John Grimke Drayton, just languished after losing all of his properties due to the War and spent the rest of his life on his few remaining acres digging in the soil and creating Magnolia Gardens. Commercial ventures were foreign to him.

On the other hand, Andrew Simonds promptly founded the First National Bank of South Carolina and even engaged in the hated but essential post-war fertilizer business by founding the Imperial Fertilizer Company. The impoverished plantation owners could raise tax money by digging phosphate which was turned into fertilizer. This unfortunately was accomplished by strip mining Lowcountry plantations, such as Magnolia Gardens. If you visit Magnolia, you can still see the devastation caused by strip mining. With the Imperial Fertilizer Company and the Bank, Simonds added a fleet of ships to trade from the wharfs of Charleston.

But all the new wealth of Andrew Simonds did not make him happy or save him from the normal miseries of life. Infected by the Charleston water as we say, the stern ways of Scots faded into the past, and tragically, Andrew Simonds Jr., the oldest son, was a dilettante and a drunk. Money was as corruptive then as now. It is acceptable for a Scotsman to love his drink, but not to be a dilettante. He only hunted, fished, partied, and he died in a Sanatorium in Baltimore. The famous and lovely Daisy Breaux was his wife. [See her view of things, The Autobiography Of A Chameleon, 1930]. As their wedding present, grandfather Simonds allowed them to build the Villa Margarita, just down the street, where she created an indoor "Roman courtyard", with pool, which witnessed many a festive "toga party".

I am quick to point out that I am not descended from dilettante Jr. but from his lovely sister, Sarah Simonds m. Simons, who also tragically died young [30] leaving two small children. She passed away on a clipper to take the waters at Baden Baden and was buried at sea. One of her young children was my grandmother [Sarah Calhoun Simons] who then was raised at 20 South Battery by her grandparents. She always said that her father "sold" her to her grandparents, but as he was a bon vivant and somewhat of a dilettante himself, he had no intention of trying to raise two young children. A photograph of my grandmother is on the hall table.

When she married the heir to Magnolia Gardens [Carlyle Norwood Hastie], her father refused to speak to her the rest of his life [no kidding], since Hastie was not only 20 years older but a drinking and carousing friend of his. [He probably missed his friend?---remember the joke: Man is sad. What's wrong Joe? ---Well, my wife ran off with my best friend. ---Oh No! How awful.---Yeah, I really miss him.]

As a child, my grandmother climbed on the roof of the ballroom [which was used as an art gallery by grandfather Andrew Simonds who collected mostly dark European reproductions] at about the age of the photo and fell through the glass skylight, and to her death --had she not fallen into one of the large chandeliers which luckily held her weight and she was thus rescued by a very nervous Nanny and house staff. So here I am, the scion of hanging crystal. The family lived here until 1912.

Andrew Simonds' interest in art was not entirely gloomy. If you visit the family's church, St. Michael's at the corner of Broad and Meeting, you can see the Tiffany window, called "Easter Morning", commissioned by Andrew Simonds in Memory of his beloved daughter, Sarah, [my great grandmother], the daughter who died at Sea at the age of 30. It

is a copy of the painting called "Holy Women at the Tomb" by the Norwegian painter, Axel Ender. Andrew Simonds saw it on a European trip and purchased a reproduction which he sent to Tiffany's for the purpose of the Memorial.

Later in 1908, a second Tiffany window was contributed in Memory of his Wife, my great, great grandmother Sarah Calhoun. It is the "Annunciation" based on a painting by Petrus van Schendel. You will also see a memorial to my other great-great grandfather the Rev. John Grimke Drayton. You won't see me.

St. Michaels miraculously has received a call from God to move to African Episcopalian theology--in the interest of holiness, of course. This righteous fervor has apparently swept through the Diocese of South Carolina. For somewhere in America there is a gay Bishop, and this naturally requires the destruction of the Traditional Episcopal Church which frankly didn't concern itself about its members' sexual habits. How enlightened the Church has become! African practices of genital mutilation of women, slavery, tribal warfare, rape of virgins to cure men with AIDS, slaughter of the animals for aphrodisiacs and total governmental corruption will be a wonderful place for these concerned Christians to sink their teeth into a few moral issues. And no, the windows will not go. I'm not truly worried because these things are cyclical and the good, well tried and true Episcopal Church of liberal intelligence will return. See, The South Carolina Historical Magazine, October 2005, for an interesting article by Jacob M. Blosser, concerning the difficulties of Bishop Alexander Garden who in the 1740's faced the same sort of fundamentalist problems with George Whitefield's "revivalism". He followed the wisdom of the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Tillotson, who promoted Reason as the foundation of Faith. But back to the house.

There has been a succession of owners of 20 South Battery during the 20th century. Notably the Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings, now the Preservation Society of Charleston, was formed in the Ballroom in 1920, as the then current owner, Mrs. Ernest Pringle, spearheaded the effort to preserve the Joseph Manigault House. This marked the beginning of the preservation effort not only in Charleston but in America as the Society is the oldest Preservation Society in America.

The Pringles converted the rear out building into a "motorcourt" during the 20's, and set up Burma Shave type signs on the major roads coming into Charleston. What is now the "Battery Carriage House Inn" was then "Pringle Court."

In the 40's it was discovered that rental by the hour was more profitable than by the night. Charleston has always been an open port, and it was then a Navy town. Hard drinking, gambling and whoring has thrived here, and always made Charleston suspect by its "Bible-Belt" fellow Carolinians. The Market area you know is now a clutter of tourist shops, but in the 40's it was solid nightclubs- with strippers galore. I personally saw my first almost naked woman there at about age 13. It was terrifying. She was large and fat and carried around a snake. I still don't understand women. Yes, 13. If you had the money and could reach the bar, you could buy a beer and sit down. We got drivers' licenses at 14. It seemed in those days that many cars drove themselves around town.

You couldn't see the head of anyone our age over the steering wheel because we had to slide way down in the seat to reach the pedals. This was good since we were a bunch of pimply faced youth at that time. I was tall and could look through the crescent hole between the top of the wheel and the dash. I couldn't see the street very well but we learned to navigate by the buildings overhead. At any rate, in the 40's things were much wilder in Charleston. While the young Jack Kennedy cavorted with his women friends [including a German spy] across the park at the luxurious Fort Sumter Hotel, less illustrious citizens were brought by the lovely Market Street women to the rooms at 20 South Battery for a quick toss in the hay.

By the 60's respectability returned as the hard core Navy entertainment activities moved up to North Charleston, closer to the Navy Base, and the rooms were converted to small apartments. They were rented to college students who didn't even have to pay for their women. Modernity had arrived. 20 South Battery was all about romance and free love. By the 80's it was again rooms by the night, and we have stayed that way. The rooms are small and "European" in feel, but that coziness is just right for many 21st century lovers. We also have a great collection of "spirits" who hover about. See the website for the Ghost History and guest testimonials: www.batterycarriagehouse.com.

In the interest of decency, I will spare you the full history of my family during the last half of the 20th century. In brief, my wife and I repurchased the house, wrecked by Hurricane Hugo, in 1992 and lived among big tubs catching water leaking from what seemed like all the roofs for what seemed like forever.

Please go back to see the Inn. And come and stay!!