

11 Fulton

# Building Retains Original Lines

By ROBERT P. STOCKTON  
Special Writer

The building at 11 Fulton St. has been called "Charleston's most famous house."

The word "house," in this case, is a "double entendre," as tradition asserts that the building was a center for "the oldest profession."

The tradition is true, according to F.C. Adams, a mid-19th century critic of Charleston's politics, race relations and morals.

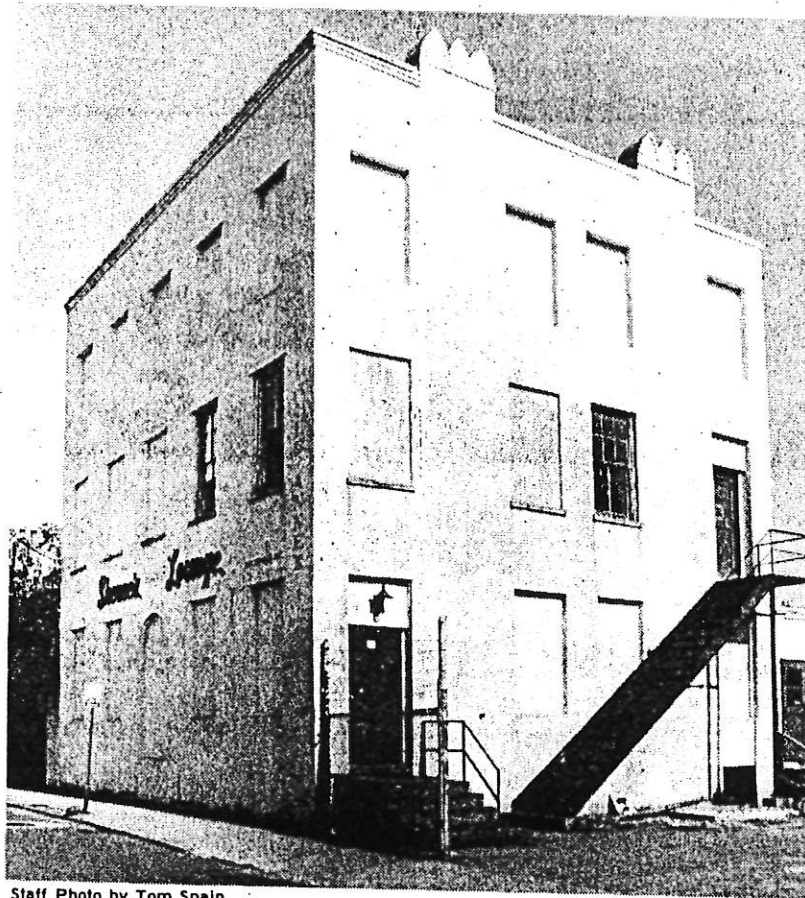
Adams, in his book, "Manuel Pereira, or The Sovereign Rule of South Carolina," published in 1853, characterized the location as one in which women "of every shade" carried on their trade and ribald songs "polluted the air" at all hours of the night. Adams does not quote his sources.

Eleven Fulton appears to have been built in 1852 by Grace Peixotto (Peixotta, Peixotte, Piesaitto).

Miss or Mrs. Peixotto (she is called by both titles in the public records) bought the site of present-day 11 Fulton on March 11, 1851, paying \$2,200 for the lot which measured 62 feet in front on Beresford Street (now Fulton) and 82 feet in depth.

The valuation of the property in tax records jumped from \$2,200 in 1852 to \$12,000 in 1853, and the construction of a "new" three-story brick building is indicated.

In July, 1852, the Charleston Daily Courier, reporting a meeting of City Council, noted a "Letter from Mrs. G. Piesaitto, informing Council, that having recessed her brick building in Beresford-st., at least two feet so as to dedicate it to the use of the citizens of Charleston, if they will pave with flag-stones the front of her lot, respectfully requests that, if accepted,



Staff Photo by Tom Spain

## 11 Fulton St.

the work may be done as soon as possible."

The letter was referred to the aldermen of Ward 4, according to the Courier. No subsequent mention of the matter appeared in the newspaper, and Council minutes for that period have been lost, so it is not

known whether the city paved the front of the lot.

Adams, however, intimates in his book that he had heard that the request was to be granted.

The building at 11 Fulton St. is now flush with the sidewalk, but an 1882 ward plat and an 1888 insurance map

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indicate the building was formerly recessed and that the street has been widened.

Grace Peixotto is not mentioned in the 1852 city directory but is listed in the next subsequent existing one, that of 1855 which lists her "residence 11 Berresford Street."

A fire of Dec. 12, 1864, which destroyed several buildings in the neighborhood, narrowly missed her building.

Whatever her reputation, Mrs. (or Miss) Peixotto is said to have been a loyal Confederate and after the war her establishment is said to have provided an alibi for members of Hampton's Red Shirts, in much the same manner in which Belle Watling provided an alibi for the Southern gentlemen in "Gone With the Wind."

In gratitude, according to the tradition, several local gentlemen sent their carriages to march in her funeral procession.

Mrs. Peixotto died sometime between Aug. 27, 1879, when she mortgaged her Beresford Street property, and Aug. 11, 1880, when, in the endorsement of a mortgage, Jacob S. Myers is identified as the executor of her estate.

Subsequently, the property was listed in Myers' name in tax records. Myers is listed as a mariner in the 1882 city directory and subsequently as a dealer in cigars and tobacco in Chapel Street. He appears never to

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## ...Building

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have occupied 11 Beresford (Fulton).

City directories from the 1880s to the World War I era list a succession of women as the primary residents of 11 Beresford., with the frank title, "Madame" before their names.

The property at the time contained, in addition to the three story main building, a two story brick building and a three story brick building, arranged around a courtyard in the rear of the main building and linked by piazzas.

According to tradition, the property was used for its original purpose until World War II, when military authorities prevailed upon the city to close down the surrounding "red light district."

Subsequently, the building served as a furniture warehouse, and as storage for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. *at location*

The property was purchased in 1970 by H.T. Rice and subsequently Rice Brothers Air Conditioning and Heating Co. was located on the upper floors, while the Big Brick, a popular local tavern which advertised its location in "Charleston's most famous house," was located on the first floor.

The property remains in the Rice

family but the family business has been relocated and the Big Brick has been replaced by another bar. A furniture refinishing establishment is located on the upper floors.

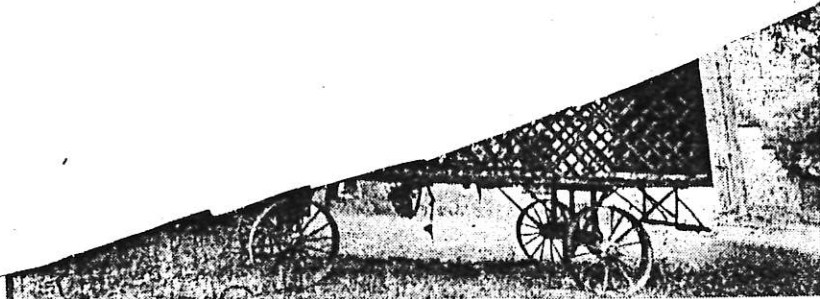
Mrs. Peixotto's House has been extensively altered over the years. Most of the openings have been closed up, including the wide arched main entrance, centered in the first level of the street facade.

The building, however, retains its original, rather imposing lines and substantial proportions, being five bays wide and four bays deep, with large openings, a simple corbelled brick cornice and four large chimneys with pointed-arch hoods. The exterior stucco is scored to resemble stone.

In the interior, the staircase was removed after fire damage and most of the interior has been gutted or altered. The original plan appears to have been a simple one of a central hallway and four square rooms on each floor.

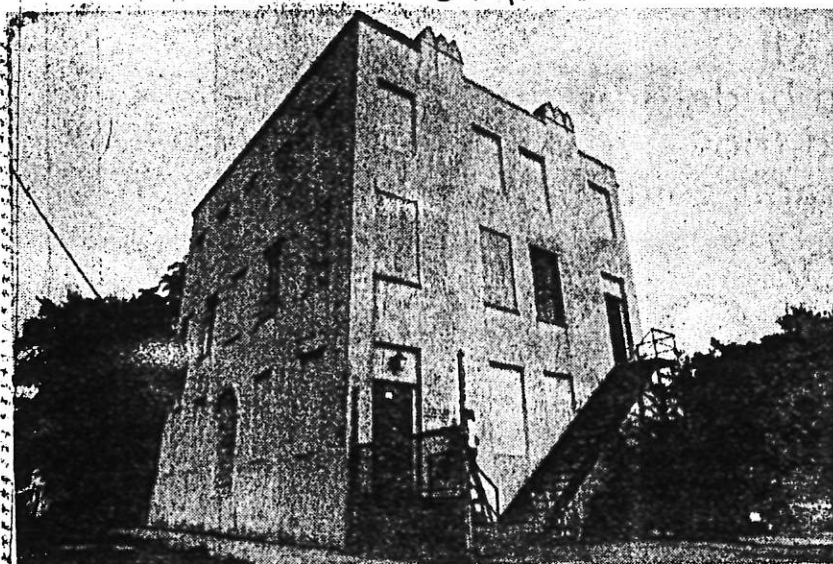
Two wooden mantels, in a modified Greek Revival style with sunk panels in the pilasters, remain on the second level. The plain architrave surrounds of windows also remain in the interior.





3. The Jail

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4. The Brothel

to be con-  
es argued that  
example of ante-  
rial construction. The  
Authority, which owned  
property, finally gave the groups  
permission to brace the four walls if  
they agreed to remove the interior.

However, in 1960 a tornado ripped  
into the mill and nearly destroyed the  
north, east and south walls. Earlier,  
the mill had suffered extensive damage  
from the 1886 earthquake. Since  
1961, only the facade has remained.

#### 4. The Brothel

In the late 1800s and early 1900s,  
the house at 11 Fulton St. (then Beres-  
ford Street) was one of the best known  
brothels in Charleston and one of  
America's most historic whorehouses.

The Big Brick, as it was called,  
dates back to 1852 and is thought to  
be one of the few buildings to be  
erected solely for use as a house of  
prostitution. The building appears to  
have been built by a Grace Piesetto.

In July of 1852, the Charleston  
Daily Courier printed an account of a  
city council meeting that included a  
request from Mrs. Piesetto. She  
asked if the city, "...so to dedicate it  
(the building) to the use of the citizens  
of Charleston, if they will pave with  
flag-stones the front of the lot..."

The Big Brick was located in the  
heart of Charleston's Red Light dis-  
trict and was used for its original pur-  
pose until World War II. At that time,  
military authorities prevailed upon  
the city to close down its "Red Light"  
district.

Since then the building has served  
many purposes, including a furniture  
warehouse, storage for the U.S. Army  
Corps of Engineers and office space  
for various concerns.



# Fulton St. House One Of Last Relics of Red Light District

By JACK LELAND  
Special Writer

The four-square masonry house at 11 Fulton St. is one of the last relics of Charleston's famous, or infamous, Red Light District, catering to merchant seamen long before the city became a site for military bases.

The building has a history that is as shadowy and uncertain as the district itself, but for more than a century before the end of World War II, the Big Brick, as it was known, was the queen of Charleston's bordellos.

The derivation of its name is not certain, but it was known as the Big Brick throughout its history. Its stucco exterior, applied over a solid brick wall, is scored into large rectangles, as is the case with many of Charleston's older buildings. Legend has it that this was an attempt to imitate the large stones used in buildings in England.

Just when the large structure was built is unclear. However, it's thought that it was constructed for use as a bordello in the third decade of the 19th century. Legend also attributes its original ownership to a French courtesan who escaped the bloody massacres of whites by blacks during the slave revolutions in Hispaniola — Santo Domingo and Haiti.

The house was built in an area that had, willy-nilly, become the center of the city's downtown tenderloin district. The city's first bordellos, quite naturally, came into being near the wharves and finger-piers that were built off of The Bay (East Bay Street) during and after the 1680s when the walled city of Charles Towne was established to replace what is known as Old Town or Charles Towne Landing.

The waterfront's first entertainment places for seamen were taverns along The Bay, Union (State) Street, Mulatto or Beresford Alley (Chalmers Street), Dock Street (Queen Street) and Cumberland Street.

The more-or-less formally operated bordello did not come into being

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in this country until the 19th century. Prior to that, however, Charleston's tenderloin had made itself felt. The earliest mention of prostitution is of three women who were ordered deported from the city in 1693. Their crime was having infected a goodly number of the militia with the pox while frequenting a Concord Street tavern.

Thomas Elfe, Charleston's best known cabinetmaker, headed a movement that forced the colonial government to order the taverners to move from their locations near the waterfront. In a letter, Elfe complained that the women in these places were debauching the apprentices.

When ordered to move, the city's night life simply went about three or four blocks to the northwest, to the area near St. John's Lutheran Church and outside the old walled city. This area then was known as Dutch Town, because of the large number of German immigrants living there.

Coincidentally, the street called Fulton then was called Beresford, named for a very reputable English family that was owner of much real estate. The first bordellos developed on Clifford, Beresford, Princess, West Market, upper Archdale, West, Beaufain, lower Coming and upper Logan Street, a thoroughfare then called Mazyck Street.

Judging by city directories, real estate records and newspaper crime accounts, there apparently were more than a dozen or so bordellos.

West Street and Beresford Alley had the most red light houses, and all of them, except for 11 Fulton St., were former residences that had been converted to that use. The name

of the builder of 11 Fulton St. is not certain.

In 1852, a Yankee abolitionist writer, F.C. Adams, published a book called "Manuel Periera," a fictional detailing of the fate of a Portuguese seaman who happened to be on a ship calling at Charleston.

Periera's imprisonment here was a direct result of an abortive slave rebellion in 1822, the Denmark Vesey Affair, after which the state passed strict laws governing the activities of blacks. Black seamen on ships docking here were imprisoned while the ship was in port. In Adams' book, he has the city's officials classifying Periera as a Negro although he had papers certifying he was a citizen of Portugal.

Adams used this fictional character as part of his attempt to paint an immoral picture of Charleston. In the book he uses a real letter that the madam of 11 Beresford St. had written to City Council requesting that the large paving stones, then being used on sidewalks downtown, also be used in front of 11 Beresford St.

Adams wrote: "A notorious woman who has kept the worst kind of brothel for years, where harlots of all shades and importations break the quietude of night with their polluted songs, becomes so bold in her infamy that she appeals to the gracious considerations of the city council board of aldermen. She remained unmolested in her trade of demoralization, amassed a fortune which gave her boldness, while her open display was considered very fine fun for the joking propensities of officials and gallants." Adams' diatribe continued at length. The madam's request was presented at a meeting of City Council where it was referred to the aldermen from Ward Four. There is no city record of the placement of any paving stones on Beresford Street and, certainly, none exists there today.

At the peak of its activities, 11 Ful-

ton St. had two two-story flankers at either side at the rear, extending southward toward Clifford Street. The house still standing at 9 Fulton St. perhaps also was an adjunct of the 11 Fulton St. bordello. No. 9 Fulton St. became a "house of assignation" during the 1920s and still played that role as late as the 1950s.

After World War II, the United States military had time to study statistics. One such showed that venereal disease among troops serving in the Charleston area was much above normal. The military decided that the bordellos were the source and ordered the city to close all of them or face having the city placed off limits to the military.

The closure was ordered and the outpouring of hundreds of hookers into tourist cabins and rooming houses near the Naval Base in a real way contributed to the ultimate development of Reynolds Avenue as the North Charleston "strip."

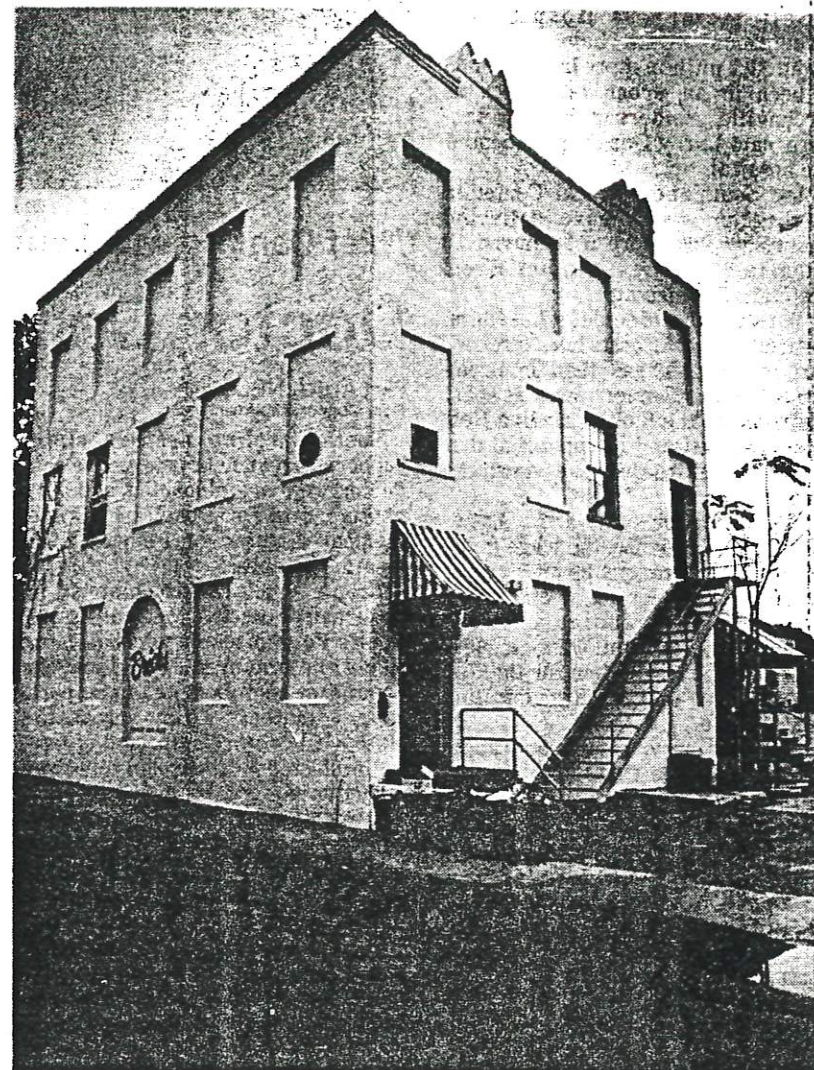
No. 11 Beresford St. was converted into small apartments by its owner. These rental units were mostly rented by Navy petty officers and their wives.

Legend has it that one of the wives became suspicious when sales clerks in department stores snickered when she gave her address. She told her husband, who discovered the apartment building had been a bordello a short time before.

Tenants vanished and the owner went before City Council's Streets Committee with a plea to have the name of the street changed. After some members facetiously suggested a number of risqué titles, the street was named Fulton, there being a bust of Robert Fulton, steamboat inventor, in the committee meeting room at City Hall.

Its use as apartments still was not a success and it was then rented by the U.S. Corps of Engineers.

That agency sealed its doors and windows and installed a dehumidify-



Staff Photo by Stephanie Harvin

## The 'Big Brick' was once a bordello.

ing machine to protect instruments stored there.

Subsequently it was a storage warehouse for a furniture company and then one floor was converted into a tavern known simply as The Brick. Today, the Big Brick houses an an-

tique furniture repair shop.

In its day, however, it played host, or hostess, to Charleston's movers and shakers, its politicians and judicial leaders along with the normal tenderloin trade from the ships that sail the seas.