

In 1830, 85 Tradd wasn't exactly a grand mansion

By DAVID A. FARROW
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The house at 85 Tradd St. is one of the most unusual and attractive homes in the city of Charleston with the least amount of secondary historical information.

There is no mention of it in the guidebook for tour guides.

It has not been featured in previous "Do You Know Your Charleston" columns that have appeared sporadically in this newspaper for scores of years.

Jonathan Poston made no mention of the house in his recent inventory of important Charleston buildings so the history lies deep in the archives.

Ironically, an Oct. 7, 1979, article in The News and Courier-Evening Post that detailed the important properties on the peninsula listed 85 Tradd as "excellent."

A cursory view of the primary records shows little more information on the house, but this much is known.

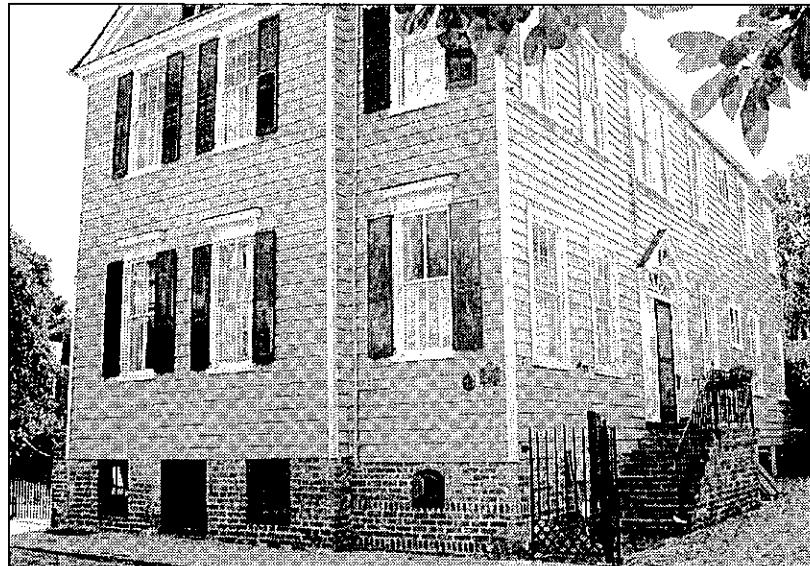
The property at 85 Tradd sits on a bluff. When one looks at re-creations of 1680 maps, one sees that Vanderhorst Creek ran from where East Battery lies today to the north end of Prices Alley, right behind the property itself.

One hundred and ten years later, the Iconography of 1790 shows that the land had been filled in and developed.

There are structures scattered on the south side of Tradd Street, although it is impossible to ascertain whether there is anything on this particular lot.

The recent owner of the property, Charles Thompson Jr., says Mrs. Elizabeth Johnson Wilkes, who sold him the house in 1979, told him that his was only the third family to own the domicile.

According to Thompson, Mrs. Wilkes estimated that the house was built around the 1830s. When the house appeared, it was modest compared to the grand brick struc-



Staff Photo by Ron Menchaca

The house at 85 Tradd St. originally had four rooms but later was expanded.

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tures that surrounded it.

The structure was a primitive, four-room wooden house built amid mansions. According to the federal census of 1830, many houses along this stretch of Tradd were built by freed blacks who were merchants and artisans ranging from barbers to bricklayers.

The four-room house seems to have survived the 587-day shelling of the peninsula during the Civil War, and at the turn of the century, it was bought by Emmett Johnson of Mississippi.

Johnson raised three children, one of whom was a sea captain.

When Johnson acquired the property, Thompson says the original house was only four rooms — two upstairs, two down, with a two-story porch fronting its east side, where the entrance is today.

Built at the time that it was, the kitchen had to be separate from the house for insurance purposes.

After one enters the foyer, one can see where the porch once stood. The porch ran the length of the original house, as can be seen in all of the front rooms.

The living room boasts the original floors, made of heart of pine. There were originally four fireplaces.

There is a trap door in what is now the den, and it led to the cistern and the basement. The large cistern under the house once supplied the house with water. It was originally out in the open but now sits under a later addition.

There's another trap door upstairs, so it is possible for a person to go from the second floor to the basement through these trap doors. The house at 85 Tradd St. recently sold for \$712,500. What was once a place for someone of modest means is now a bastion of princes.

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