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Beyond the Big House
Fences, Walls, and Work Yards
August 3, 2017

Eighteenth and nineteenth-century Charleston town houses required a number of outbuildings to support the genteel lifestyle of the white elites. While often only the main house, and perhaps a formal garden, was visible to the public from the street, a complex compound of outbuildings, storage, work, and living spaces for the enslaved existed behind. More mundane functional spaces like privies, wells and/or cisterns for water, and space for keeping animals were also necessary and hidden in the back lot.[1] The precise organization of the back lot and its architecture varied throughout the city based on the shape and size of the lot, the wealth and desires of the owners, the size of the white owner's family and their enslaved population, and the architectural form of the main house.[2]

Most Charleston town lots contained the main house on the street, with several points of entry. A gated pedestrian passage might lead to the front yard and then to the piazza of the main house, ultimately to the front door, if the visitor were of the same social status as the homeowner. With the predominance of single houses, the plan of most town lots was linear. The outbuildings were generally located behind the single house, usually with the kitchen in closest proximity to the main house. The yard and outbuildings were "enclosed with a tall board fence or brick wall." The 1774 Pringle House on Tradd Street is a good example of a fenced-in lot (later on, fences were replaced by brick walls) containing a single house with piazza at the street, outbuildings, a work yard, and a secondary fenced surrounding a garden at the back of the lot.[3] (Figure 1)

There was also another possible lot configuration, one for double houses in Charleston—a U-shaped layout with a main house at the street and outbuildings behind the main house, pushed up against the two side lot lines. Double houses were often in the Georgian style, so the symmetry and balance of the outbuildings would continue the symmetry found in the main house. The lot was usually surrounded by a fence, often later replaced with a brick wall post-188 Denmark Vesey slave plot. [4] 39 Church Street (Figure 2) is an example of the Georgian double house with this symmetrical layout of outbuildings behind the main house, rather than a line of outbuildings on only one side of the lot.

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[1] Maurie D. McInnis, *The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 160.
[2] Bernard L. Herman, "Slave and Servant Housing in Charleston, 1770-1820," *Historical Archaeology,* Vol. 33, No. 3, Charleston in the Context of Trans-Atlantic Culture (1999): 91, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25616727.
[3] Ibid., 98.
[4] Martha Zierden, "Landscape and Social Relations at Charleston Townhouse Site (1770-1850), *International Journal of Historical Archaeology,* Vol. 14, No. 4 (2010): 536.

These fences and walls limited the sight lines of the enslaved people working in the yard, while also keeping the enslaved people contained and visible from the elevated main house and piazza by the white family. A carriageway would allow entry for both enslaved people walking in at street level and white owners and guests riding on horses or in carriages. From the carriageway, enslaved people would venture further into the work yard and white people would typically stop at the back steps of the piazza, to then enter the main house.[5] As urban historian Richard C. Wade explained, "High walls and buildings hemmed in the slaves while on the premises, and drew the lines of life around their owner. This 'compound' was the urban equivalent of the plantation. Like its rural analogue, it provided a means of social control as well as of shelter."[6]

Art historian Maurie D. McInnis explains, "Residential properties, which earlier had porous borders of palisade fences, were increasingly surrounded by high brick walls in order to create privacy and control the slave population."[7] In response to the discovery of the Denmark Vesey slave insurrection plot of 1822, city-wide controls were put into effect and individual slave-owners tightened their control of the work yard and their own enslaved population. Generally, wooden fences were replaced by high brick walls, but there are to-date no statistics on how frequently this occurred. The Miles-Brewton house, with its iron *chevaux de frise* on top of its brick wall, has become the quintessential example of post-Denmark Vesey social control. [8]

In addition to the sight of the outbuildings and the work of the enslaved people in the back lot, the sounds and smells of animals (both pets, livestock, and other unwanted animals like mice, insects and frogs) joined the smells of cooking, laundry, and the privies in the back lot. Townhouse complexes frequently included domestic animals such as pigs, cows, and fowl of varying kinds, to provide meat, milk, and eggs. Fences were used to keep cows and pigs out of the kitchen garden and more formal areas of the yard. Dogs, cats, rodents, horses and mules, song birds, and even snakes were also present in the work yard of elite townhouses contributing to the olfactory environment.[9] According to archaeologists Martha Zierden and Elizabeth Reitz, in addition to storing livestock on their townhouse lots, cattle and other animals were slaughtered in work yards and kitchens, and fish bones and other food remains were often discarded directly into the yard. Although some yards were paved, or partially paved with bricks, many of them simply had dirt floors that continued to collect animal remains and anything else that might enter the work yard, subsequently leading to rich archaeological discoveries today.[10]

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[5] Bernard L. Herman, "Slave and Servant Housing in Charleston, 1770-1820," *Historical Archaeology,* Vol. 33, No. 3, Charleston in the Context of Trans-Atlantic Culture (1999): 96, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25616727.
[6] Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 62.
[7] Maurie D. McInnis, *The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 18.
[8] Ibid., 164.
[9] Martha A. Zierden and Elizabeth J. Reitz, "Animal Use and the Urban Landscape in Colonial Charleston, South Carolina, USA," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology,* Vol. 13, No. 3 (September 2009), 357.
[10] Ibid., 355-356.

The work yards behind Charleston town house lots, with their high walls and fences, were indeed physical manifestations of the separation between master and enslaved. However, despite these restrictions and the harsh labor required, the enslaved people formed lives for themselves in this space. The work yard, outbuildings, and quarters were where food was grown and prepared, friendships and relationships of love formed, where people were born and died, in addition to working and living their daily lives.[11]

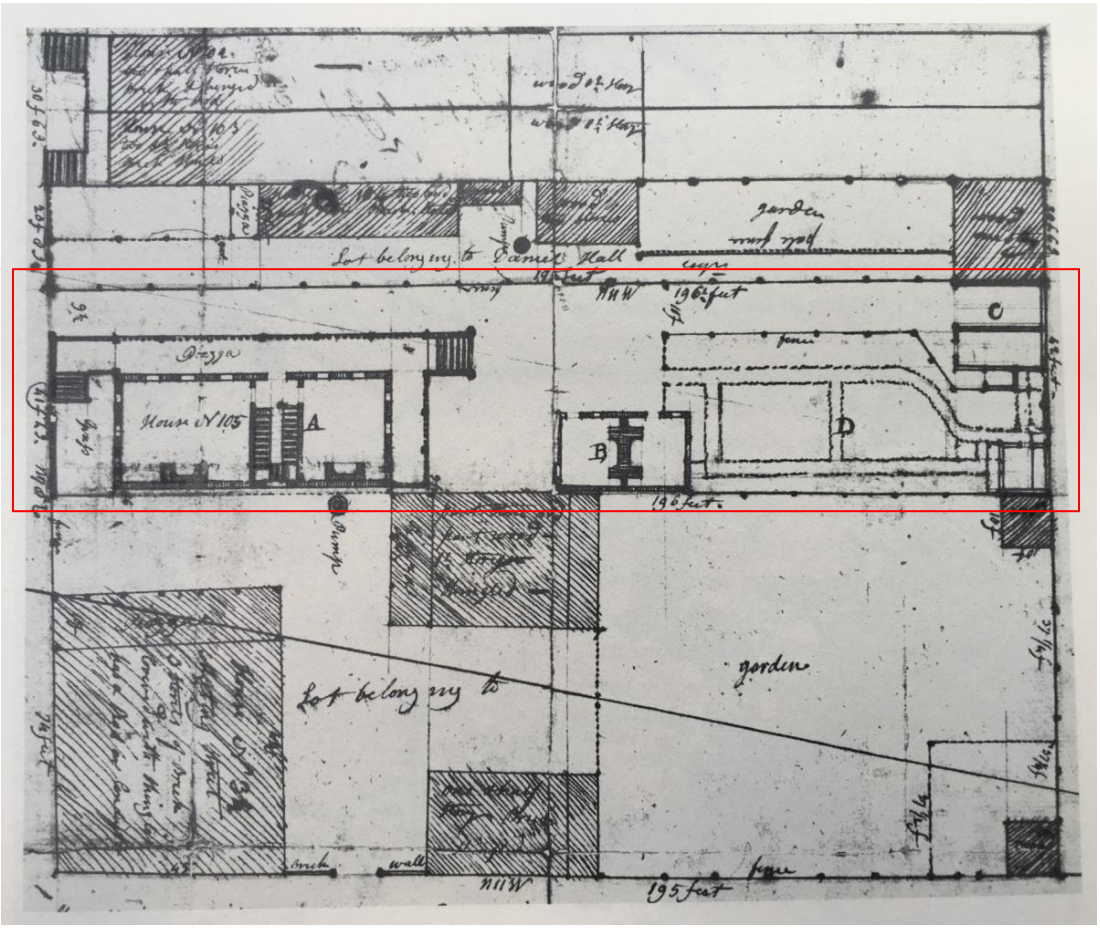

Figure 1

McCrady Plat 569 from 1789 showing the Robert Pringle House (red rectangle). According to the key on the plat: A is a dwelling house three stories of brick with cellars- covered with shingles has a rod or conductor. B is a kitchen and wash room two stories of wood. C is a carriage house and stables one story lofts of wood. D is a garden &C.

[11] Maurie D. McInnis, *The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 267.

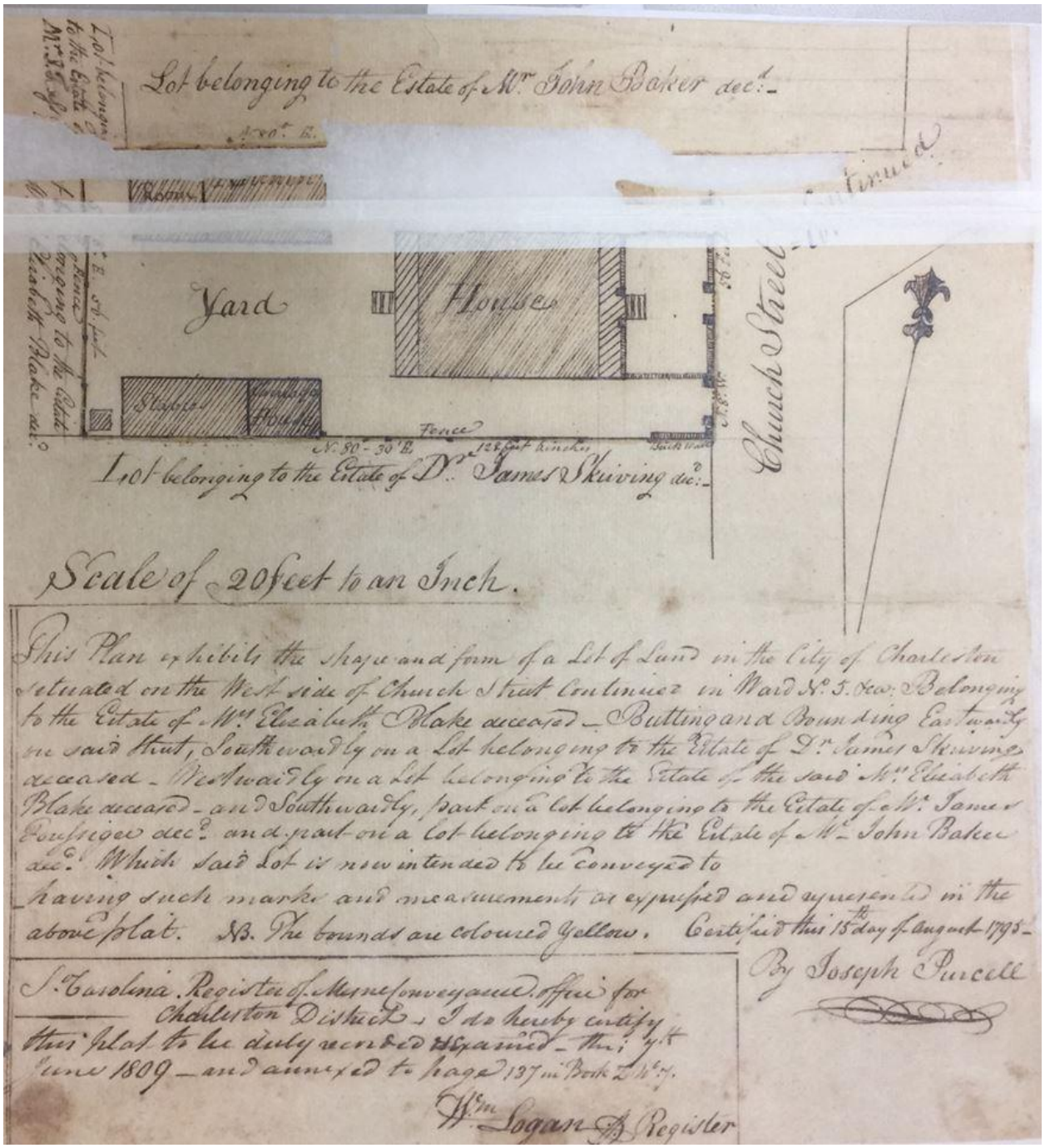

Figure 2

A plat from Deed Book N6, page 443 showing the house at 39 Church Street fronting the street, with a carriage house and stable on the southern side of the lot and another outbuilding (in the portion of the plat that is missing, but likely a kitchen and wash room) on the northern lot line, with a yard in between.

Bibliography

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Plat of the house and lot No. 105 on Tradd Street, McCrady Plat Collection, Charleston, South Carolina. Plat No. 569, August 1789. [Digital image] Charleston Country Register of Mesne Conveyance Office.

Plat of the Property of the Estate of Elizabeth Blake, Deed Book N6, page 443, August 15, 1795. Charleston County Register of Mesne Conveyance Office.

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