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58 ANSON ST. WAS CONSTRUCTED BY 1851

Dwelling was part of Robert Venning's complex. (Staff Photo by Evans)

## New Styles Failed To Attract Robert Venning

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Sixth in a series of articles on recent restorations in Ansonborough. The seventh will appear in this column next Monday.)

By W. H. J. THOMAS  
Staff Reporter

Robert M. Venning, a Charleston factor, began rebuilding his little complex of houses, store and dependencies at a time of increasing prosperity for the city. He had owned this property, occupying the southeast corner of Society and Anson, since the 1820s, having purchased it as a group of small lots from several different owners.

The fire of 1838 apparently leveled what he had previously built there (we have evidence that Venning had a home at Society and Anson as early as 1831), but by 1850 he had begun again. The city at this time was seeing the construction of very new and refined versions of the Charleston dwelling house as a reflection of the improved

economic life here. The new styles did not, however, apparently attract Venning, and he held out for a home which by its design could have dated from anytime after 1835.

We probably have two choices in making a decision about the design and ornamental treatment of the house: either it had to do with that special conservatism which appears to hang over Charleston architecture, so that designs are repeated years after other fashion have been introduced; or Venning may have been set on reproducing an earlier home, perhaps the one that went with the great fire.

The lot now occupied as 58 Anson was purchased by Venning in 1821 for \$900 from Catherine Johnson. As it does today, it then measured approximately 72 feet along Anson and extended back 42 feet.

In constructing the house, Venning kept to the property line without straying over onto his lot to the north which he had purchased from a John

Myer for \$2,000 in 1821. The shallowness of the lot and the need to stick to the line explains the unusual ell construction of the dwelling as the main house is on the eastern limit; examination of the ell dependency shows it to be roughly as old as the main house.

Venning constructed his two-story brick residence over a high basement and with a full-height attic floor. The means of bonding on all sides is commercial bond, with flat arches over the windows. Apparently the builder ran low on brick as he was finishing the project, as part of the rear gable is completed in Philadelphia red brick rather than in the Charleston gray of the rest of the house.

In the proportions of the windows, we come upon another problem that suggests that Venning may have been copying the measurements of an earlier home, even one from the 1820s. The windows are as high and narrow as a home from the 1820s and do not match the broader open-

ings of a house from roughly 1838 to 1850. Because of these measurements, the nine light sashes of the present windows look quite proper. Nine light sashes were almost completely replaced by six light sashes in dwellings put up after the mid-1830s.

### Do You Know Your Charleston?

The levels of the two stories of the ell are lower for both its floors in relation to the matching floors of the main house. Restoration has removed any special use characteristics from the ell that may have been original, but, while these dependency levels now connect to the main house, there is no reason to believe that they may have originally been connected. The ell was obviously a kitchen and laundry building.

Interior details of the principal rooms of the main house are simple in keeping with

one extreme of design from 1838 to 1850. The mantles and door and window frames, which are original, are simple and utilize a gentle degree of classical details.

When the house was restored in 1968, the floors and woodwork were found to be in good condition as was the brickwork. But much of the plaster had to be removed. It was a matter of a very complete renovation.

To help in maintaining the period expression in the first story sitting room and dining room, a *cyma recta* cornice in wood was added to each room as a replacement of the earlier faulty plaster. The interior of the ell was paneled as a study, while a kitchen was placed in the filled-in rear piazza.

Robert Venning had apparently died by 1858, as his three sons, acting as executors of his estate, sold the house and lot on Sept. 24 of that year to Charles Macbeth for \$4,000.

Macbeth was a wealthy attorney who served as mayor

of Charleston from 1857 to 1865 and is usually credited with saving the city from destruction following the evacuation of the city by the

present owners soon after completing it.

The dwelling is now the residence of Dr. and Mrs. Sam H. Ross III.

