

Kitchen-Laundry-Quarters Buildings – Alena Franco, rev. Mary Fesak (HCF Interns, 2017)

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, kitchen-laundry-quarters buildings were a ubiquitous feature of urban residential lots in Charleston. Reflective of the social hierarchies of the time, the main house most often fronted the street with service buildings and a work yard located to the rear. Enslaved people labored in and occupied these work spaces to provide the services that supported their owners' ways of life in the main house. Although there were different spatial arrangements to accommodate different lot shapes and uses, the kitchen buildings were frequently located directly behind the main house. In the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, property owners usually constructed the kitchen-laundry-quarters as free-standing buildings to reduce the risk of fire spreading to the main house. Often, owners later connected the kitchen buildings to the main house for convenience using an intermediate structure called a hyphen.¹

Kitchen-laundry-quarters primarily had two different layouts in Charleston. Eighteenth-century kitchen houses were one room wide and two rooms deep. On the first floor, the kitchen was located in one room and the laundry in the other. A central chimney with fireboxes in each room provided a heat source. Interior staircases accessed the second floor where enslaved people were quartered. The layout of the second floor either had two rooms mirroring the ground floor or the space was subdivided into four rooms. Some kitchen-laundry-quarters had additional quarters located in the garret. Since the pitch of the roof decreased livable space, garrets often only had two rooms, even if the second floor had four. The kitchen-laundry-quarters at the Heyward-Washington House exemplify this spatial arrangement with the kitchen and laundry on the ground floor, four rooms on the second floor, and two rooms in the garret.² The mid-eighteenth century kitchen building at 43 East Bay Street also has a central chimney arrangement.

A second layout for kitchen-laundry-quarters became popular in Charleston during the late-eighteenth century. In this building form, the central chimney was replaced by exterior chimneys located on the back wall of the kitchen and laundry rooms. The removal of the chimney from the center of the building allowed for a central staircase accessing the slave quarters on the second floor. The kitchen-laundry-quarters building at the Nathaniel Russell House consisting of the kitchen and laundry on the first floor with a central staircase leading to two rooms on the second floor is an example. By the early-nineteenth century, this layout became the preferred form in Charleston.³

Enslaved people cooked the food in the kitchen before carrying the dishes into the main house. Some of the houses owned by elites, like the Aiken-Rhett House, had warming kitchens inside the main house where final steps in food preparation took place. Doing the laundry for the main house was also an incredibly labor intensive chore. Most clothing had to be brushed clean because the dye was not colorfast. Enslaved laundresses soaked, washed, and boiled linen and

¹ Bernard L. Herman, "Slave and Servant Housing in Charleston, 1770-1820," *Historical Archaeology* 33, no. 3 (September 1999): 91.

² Ibid., 92.

³ Ibid., 93.

cotton fabrics that could be washed. They then stiffened the fabric with starch.⁴

Sources

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⁴ Erin Marie McNicholl, "Gothic Revival Outbuildings of Antebellum Charleston, South Carolina" (master's terminal project , Clemson University, 2010), 9.