

Architectural Guide to Charleston

COL. WILLIAM RHETT HOUSE
c. 1712
54 Hasell Street
No. 2

The dwelling house that Col. Rhett built for himself on a 30-acre tract of land some 50 yards from the city limits of his day is believed to be the city's oldest structure. Its builder was a noted sailor and colonial official best remembered for his capture of the notorious Stede Bonnett and his pirate crew. Small in scale and somewhat lacking in the architectonic qualities which would characterise the houses surviving from Charleston's major building period, this residence offers a suggestion of the size and plan practiced in the colony during its early decades.

Col. Rhett built his two-story brick residence on a high and useable basement, with two rooms adjoining to the west (apparently the main entrance leading into one of these, in what the late Thomas T. Waterman enjoyed calling the Huguenot plan) and two smaller rooms and a center hallway to the east. Numerous changes have been made in the house, the earliest apparently being the addition of plaster wall panels and ornaments in a subdued Rococo in the southwest room on the entrance story, this probably dating from 1745 to 1750.

A very complete renovation was made about 1800, and the rooms to the northwest were extended more than 11 feet to the north; it would also be at this time that the piazzas were added and the wood trim and mantles installed in several rooms.

During the ownership of the house by Christopher Fitz Simons, a wealthy wharf owner, his grandson, Wade Hampton, was born here. Hampton was to become a lieutenant general of the Confederacy and a noted governor of South Carolina.

By the 1930s the Rhett dwelling had experienced such a decline in fortune that it was used as a house of assignation. It was just prior to World War II that the creators of Cypress Gardens on the Cooper River, Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin R. Kittredge, Jr., acquired the house and its two-story neighbor at 60 Hasell (built in the 1840s) and had each restored.

54 Hasell Street
The Colonel William Rhett House

In the early 1700s, Colonel William Rhett and his wife acquired the former estate of Jonathan Amory, who had died in 1699. The estate included 20 acres, 11 adjacent lots, and 8 acres of marshland. It soon became known as "Point Plantation" and "Rhettsbury". Along with the land, the estate also included a brick mansion, built by Amory. It burned down in 1707, and it is on its site that the Colonel William Rhett House was built. Finished around 1712, this two story brick mansion sat on a high usable basement and contained two rooms to the west with two smaller rooms and a central hallway to the east, all of which can be seen today. Between 1745 and 1750, plaster wall panels and ornaments in the Rococo style were added to the Southwest room on the entrance story. The piazzas were added and the rooms to the northwest expanded in 1800.

In 1730, Madame Rhett, by this time a widow of Colonel Rhett, married Chief Justice Trott. During their period of residence, the property was known as Trott's Point. There is not much written information about the owners of the house after the Trotts sold it in 1734. That continued to be the case until 1807, when James Hasell Ancrum, a planter, sold the house and grounds to Christopher Fitzsimons, a merchant, for \$17,142.86. Christopher Fitzsimons was the grandfather of Lieutenant-General Wade Hampton, cavalry leader of Robert E. Lee's army, South Carolina governor, and U.S. Senator, who is said to have been born at the house on March 28th, 1818. The property stayed in the family until 1873 when Elizabeth P. Fitzsimons sold it to Caspar Bart, Henry Beyer, and Henry Steitz, partners in a wholesale produce business known as Caspar Bart and Company.

From the 1920s to the 40s, the house was used as a boarding house by several people. This was the period of time in Charleston when prostitution was very prominent. Countless brothels littered the downtown area. There were also many boarding houses and hotels that occasionally doubled as brothels, or so-called "houses of assignation". It is rumored that 54 Hasell Street was one of those properties.

Sometime in the 1940s, the house, and the one next to it, was bought by Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Kittredge, creators of Cypress Gardens on the Cooper River. With the property having been vacant for a few years, they undertook the difficult task of restoring the house to what it may have once looked like. It truly is amazing that the house is still standing. It has survived a great number of disaster, included the nearby great fire of 1838. Today, it is considered the oldest dwelling house in the city. Its outstanding Georgian plaster walls and ornaments are thought to be the only ones of that kind in Charleston. It truly is an unheralded treasure.

Sources:

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Author not indicated

William Rhett House May Be Oldest Structure In City

By Samuel G. Stoney

As well as can be reckoned, Col. William Rhett's house at 54 Hasell St. is now the oldest structure in Charleston. It was not in the town, however, for sometime after it was built. Then, though its site was only about 50 yards from the town line, as established about 1672, it was rated as a plantation house, even though its "plantation" measured as of today only about four city squares in length and somewhat more than two in breadth. The term plantation was then rather freely used.

The Lords Proprietors of Carolina possibly as a come-on to the colonists who were purchasing lands in their big development (on parchment, at least, it ran over to the Pacific) called any grant they made a plantation, if it was not definitely a town lot.

When the Rhetts got this one in 1711, it was apparently called the Point Plantation. They renamed it Rhettbury. Then it ran from "The" Highway, that would become Kings Street, to the Cooper, measuring about 30 acres. It was certainly the nearest plantation to the town as its south boundary lapped over into it to take in several town lots and bordered on a branch of the creek that now lies buried under the Markets.

A GOOD house had already stood on this site. It had been built in the 1690's by Jonathan Armory, who was flourishing in that time as a merchant and office holder. His house had sufficient distinction to be rented twice by governors of the Province during their terms in office. Armory died in the yellow fever epidemic of

1699 — one of Charleston's earliest bad years. His house burned.

His son returned to Carolina, stayed but a short time, went on to Boston to remain there and found a family of "Brahmins" that are still thriving — witness social writer Cleveland, of the name. The Rhetts then got the Point and started building on the site (and possibly on the foundations of the old house).

They were then, husband and wife, two parts of a triumvirate that held a remarkable amount of power during the last years of the proprietorial regime. Col. Rhett was a daring, courageous, high-tempered man, trained as a sailor, but an adventurer in other ways. He held a number of public offices. He twice distinguished himself. In 1706, dur-

ing the War of Spanish Succession, he first organized the defenses of Charles Town against a French-Spanish invasion, then gathered a flotilla that chased them back towards Florida.

From this house in 1717, he would take another flotilla to the Cape Fear. There he would break up a pirates nest, and bring from it Stede Bonnet and his gang to be duly tried, hanged and gibbeted at Charles Town. They were tried by Chief Justice Trott, the third triumvir. To put it shortly he was then judge of high, low and middle justice in South Carolina.

WHILST writing learnedly on Hebrew, he was not averse to profiting by his responsibilities. He had married Madame Rhett's sister. Later he would marry her.

She, in this time, was engaged on her own account as a merchant, doing business at the wharf (they called them "bridges" then) belonging to the family.

She was by no means slothful in business. The house she and her husband built at Rhettbury was subsidiary to one they had on the bay, but important on its own account, and theirs.

It stood as nearly as possible in the center of the little plantation, as it is shown on Roberts and Toms "The Ichnography of Charles Town at High Water" a map published in 1739. On it the place is outlined in divisions that suggest rather a park or a large garden than a working plantation. An avenue, with a recessed entrance at the highway, quite like the one at Middleton Place

ran directly to the house. Another ran directly from it to the line of what would become East Bay, where there were, in 1739, several large buildings on the property.

THE RHETTs chose a then popular plan. They provided a high useable basement, its floor just above ground level. Reaching to the principal floor were two entrance stairs with platforms, all of masonry. The one on the land side led into the largest of the four rooms, the one on the river side, into the stair hall.

The style of the house is still shown in the small northeast room with its stout paneling and moulding. The large room served most of the public purposes. It has been considerably altered.

After the proprietorial government fell, Col. Rhett died of an apoplexy, somewhat as a result of his loss of power. Madame Rhett married the ex-chief justice in 1730. The place began to be called Trott's Point. Here Trott evidently prepared for publication that masterpiece of Peter Timothy's early Carolina printing "The Laws of the Province of South Carolina," now eminently a collector's item.

The first notable change the house shows is in the decoration of the former entrance room. It was revamped a subdued version of Rococo. Eschewed by the English, possibly because it was so popular with the French, it was taken up by the Irish in Dublin town houses, and all about in the seats of the nobility and gentry.

Madame Rhett just may have redecorated the room like one in Ireland before she died in 1745. That seems early. Her granddaughter and namesake, Sarah Wright,

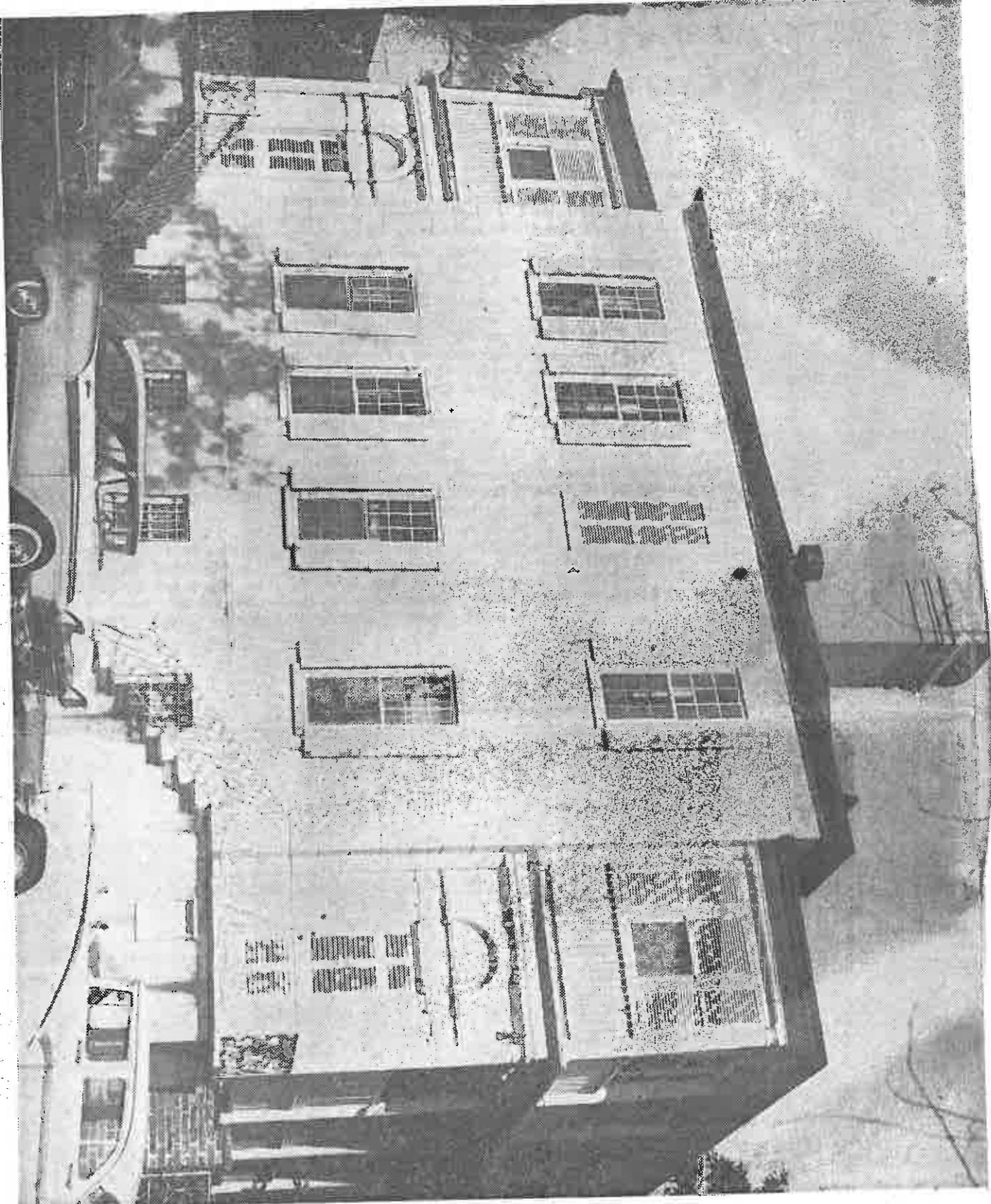
wife of James Hasell, may have done it later, after her marriage in 1750.

There is usually a lag in timing from the periods when a style was popular across the Atlantic and its arrival here, so this change may have been delayed to the ownership of Nicholas Sarazin.

THE ENGLISH permitted Rococo on their silverware. Sarazin was a practicing silversmith while he owned this house between 1774 and 1788. The connection between the profession and its art might have been pregnant. But these are conjectures.

The Hasell's two daughters in 1773 divided the plantation with streets and lots and shared it between

1960s



54 HASELL STREET, ONCE THE PLANTATION HOME OF COL. WILLIAM RHETT

Photo By Jessie O'Connell

them. The streets got family names.

The elder sister was Mrs. Quince, her street has lost its name to Anson. Trott street has likewise succumbed to Wentworth. Ha-

sell alone remains.

The other sister, then Mrs. Ancrum, married twice again by the time she was 34. The Quinces had gotten the house in the sharing and sold it to Sarrazin. In 1788 Mrs. Ancrum, by then Mrs. McAlister, got it back and lived in it with her planter husband from Cape Fear. Her son sold it out of the family again in 1807 to Christopher Fitz Simons.

LIKE the Rhetts, he was a wealthy wharf owner and merchant. His daughter Anne married the second of the three notable Wade Hampton sons. In 1818 she gave birth here in her father's house to

up to be a "niece" of the "Lowcountry,"

Fitz Simons.

THIS IS the third in a

series of articles by Sam-

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In 1941, Mr. and Mrs. Kittredge bought this house and that to the west of it. Making this one their residence they repaired and restored it. They improved the other and the subsidiary buildings of both, making a very handsome and interesting private "housing development" that has done credit ever since to themselves and the city. Lately, they have furthered their claim to Charleston's gratitude by their splendid gift of Cypress Gardens, so romantically developed by their family from the old Reserves of Dean Hall Plantation.

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THIS IS the third in a series of articles by Samuel Gaillard Stoney, local historian, architect, author and raconteur. The bearded Mr. Stoney is widely acknowledged as an authority on Lowcountry and South Carolina history. Literally a fountainhead of information on Charlestoniana, he is the author of "This is Charleston," "Charleston: Azaleas and Old Brick" and "Plantations of the South Carolina Lowcountry."

THE WILLIAM RHETT HOUSE

Constructed 1712
54 Hasell Street

This dwelling is located on a remnant of a thirty acre tract of land which was at one time divided from the rest of the "Old City" by a creek that is the market area now. A map dated 1739, has a plan of estate, called "The Point or Rhettsbury", with its recessed gateway along "The High Way", now called King Street.

The house was built by Col. William Rhett and has traditionally been dated at 1712. This brick dwelling is still set apart from the Greek revival residences that have grown around it because of its origin as a plantation house. It is built on a high, usable basement with two rooms adjoining to the west and two smaller rooms and a central hallway to the east.

The house was acquired in 1725 by George Anson. In 1800 the piazzas were added and the rooms to the northwest were expanded 11 feet.



The Colonel William Rhett House in 1898 showing the nineteenth century piazzas on its former front and rear elevations, HCF

Seven great



The Colonel William Rhett House. The handsome dwelling Rhett built for himself c. 1712 is the earliest surviving house in Charleston. *Photograph by Samuel Chamberlain.*

The drawing room of the Rhett House represents a successful merging of English and French eighteenth-century furnishings. The Aubusson rugs have an unusual dove-color background. Against the wall is an English sofa of Sheraton design, flanked by two Louis XV chairs. The other sofa is French, also Louis XV, with two fine Adam chairs on either side. The portrait at the far end of the room is by Coningsby-Smith. Above the English sofa, on either side of the large portrait of the 1830's, are two silk embroideries, c. 1800, and, above these, two Italian water colors of Virgil making his will. *Except as noted, photographs are by Helga Photo Studio.*

CHARLESTON'S REPUTATION as a city of unusual architectural distinction has never rested on the possession of only a few fine dwellings, churches, and public buildings but rather on entire groupings of buildings that form a highly individual townscape. Within these heavy concentrations of buildings, however, will be found a number of houses of great importance, equal in finish and design to the finest in America of comparable periods.

The Colonel William Rhett House

Something of a lone survivor from an earlier period is the Colonel William Rhett House at 54 Hasell Street, a handsomely restored dwelling that is believed to be the oldest structure in the city. The Rhetts purchased the property in 1711 and changed its name from the Point Plantation to Rhett'sbury. A 1739 plat of the plantation (it measured about thirty acres and was fifty yards from the town line) shows an avenue reaching from King Street, then known as the High Way, to the house and then extending east to the Cooper River. On this plan the property is divided to form a large garden and park rather than what we might think of as a working country unit. It was probably not long after 1712 that Colonel Rhett built the house that now stands on



Charleston houses

BY W. H. JOHNSON THOMAS

The sitting room on the entrance level of the Daniel Huger House has an unusual marble fireplace surround which appears to be of French origin. On the overmantel panel hangs a fine eighteenth-century water color attributed to François Keizerman, showing an Italian rustic scene. The miniatures on the mantel are of members of the Huger and Izard families. On the south wall are two mid-nineteenth-century *gouaches* of the harbor of Naples. The early nineteenth-century sofa and chairs have been in the Huger family for several generations.

In the dining room of the Huger House, unpaneled except for the dado, as is typical of the north side of Charleston double houses, are a number of late eighteenth - century Charleston - made pieces, including the set of eight chairs and the sideboard. The table was purchased by the Hugers in Virginia at the start of this century. Over the mantel hangs a portrait of Stephen Richard Proctor, attributed to Samuel F. B. Morse (1791-1872). The other two portraits are of Daniel Huger Jr. (left) and Daniel Huger.



The Colonel William Rhett House



The unusual plasterwork on the walls of the dining room—the only remaining example in Charleston—dates from c. 1750, the earliest period of stucco decoration in America. All of the furniture in the room is English; the chairs are Sheraton. On the table are four matching candlesticks of Adam design (c. 1770) and an English tankard dated 1711. The English Chippendale mirror is one of a pair. Over the mantel is a self-portrait by Christian Seybold (1697-1768), court painter to Maria Theresa, wife of Holy Roman Emperor Francis I.

The Daniel Huger House



The spacious second-story drawing room is noted for its handsome cornice and ornamental plasterwork ceiling, which includes trophies composed of musical instruments. The room contains many family pieces, among which are miniatures of the Horry family by Charles Fraser (1782-1860), a pair of Chippendale mirrors, and a pair of inlaid tables from the Laurens household.

Hasell Street. Constructed on a high basement, the two-story dwelling was made with two rooms across the west side (with what was possibly the main entrance leading into the drawing room) and two small rooms and an entrance hallway with staircase on the east.

There is evidence of several important changes in the house; perhaps the earliest was the addition of unusual plaster wall panels and ornaments in a subdued version of rococo in what is now the dining room. Following a treatment similar to that found in Irish houses of the period, the plasterwork was probably added by Rhett's widow about 1745 or by his granddaughter, Sarah Wright Hasell, not long after 1750. Much of the existing interior today would appear to date from a very complete redecoration about 1800. Possibly at this time the northwest room of the house was extended eleven feet, three inches to the north; the west and east piazzas with their slender columns were added; and the wooden mantels and trim in several rooms installed.

The house remained in the Rhett family until 1807 when it was purchased by Christopher FitzSimons, a wealthy wharf owner. The fortunes of the Rhett House had declined considerably by the early decades of the present century. Shortly before World War II it attracted the attention of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Kittredge Jr. They bought the house and its Greek revival neighbor just to the west, making an unusually handsome unit with connecting gardens. They also restored the interior, but few features of the house were altered. The Rhett House is now the home of Mr. and Mrs. Bushrod B. Howard.



The Miles Brewton House was built for a wealthy Charleston merchant c. 1769. Its elaborate carving is the work of Ezra Waite, a carver and builder from London. The house and its extensive dependencies are virtually unchanged from the time of construction and have never left the ownership of the family of Miles Brewton. *Chamberlain photograph.*



The table in the Brewton House dining room was brought from one of the family plantations before the turn of the century. On the table are silver candelabra and a tureen from the Ravenel family. The chandelier of bronze and Waterford glass was brought from a family plantation at Waccamaw Neck c. 1791. In the panel over the mantel is a painting of the *Mackinaw* (c. 1840), a ship owned by John Ravenel who had a fleet of vessels sailing to Russia, Europe, and the Orient. On the mantel are pieces of Manigault armorial China Trade porcelain and English silver candlesticks that belonged to Miles Brewton. The chest-on-chest is attributed to Thomas Elfe.