

# Distinguishing Characteristics of the Colonel William Rhett House c. 1712

## National Register of Historic Places



Considered one of the “Charleston Seven”<sup>1</sup> (Rogers 1970, 540). “Although Charleston was founded in 1670, the oldest house which survives the city itself – Colonel William Rhett’s – was built some forty years later. The disappearance of earlier habitations may be explained by the transfer of the town in 1680 from the west bank of the Ashley to the present location on the peninsula; by the fact that timber, for many years was the principal building material, has proved perishable with time; by the fact that the early dwellings provided merest shelter and were replaced with more spacious houses as the wealth of the province increased; and, most important of all, by losses caused by a series of disastrous fires” (Simons 1970, 545).

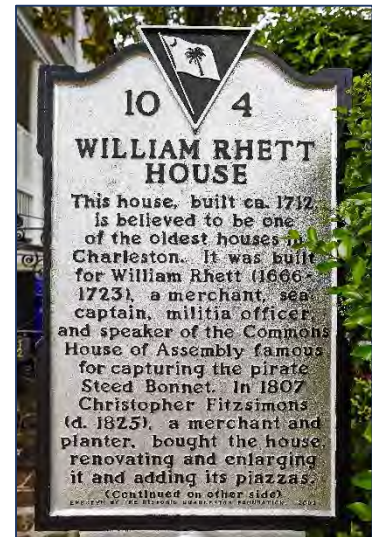


### Built c 1712



Among the oldest dwellings in Charleston. Significant for having experienced the city’s entire history. “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 Rhettisbury. 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 Hasell Street. Constructed on a high basement, the two-story dwelling was made with



<sup>1</sup>W. H. Johnson Thomas (1970): “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” (Thomas 1970, 556). The “seven” by Thomas are: Colonel William Rhett House (c. 1712), The Daniel Huger House (c. 1760), The Miles Brewton House (c. 1769), The Heyward-Washington House (c. 1770), The William Gibbes House (c.1772), The Joseph Manigault House (c. 1790-1803), and The Nathaniel Russell House (c. 1809).

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” (Thomas 1970, 559-60).

**Architecture - Georgian/Rococo plasterwork dates c.1750, the earliest period of stucco decoration in North America.**



“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” (Thomas 1970, 560).

Constructed outside the fortification of Charles Town, this former plantation escaped several significant fires in Charleston’s history – in 1740, “a fire at the corner of Broad and Church Streets destroyed almost half of the city, some 300 buildings” (Phillips 1992, 10) and in 1838, a fire ripped through Ansonborough [Hasell Street and surrounds]. In 1861, “the city’s most destructive fire [started] at the foot of Hasell St. along the Cooper River” (Phillips 1992, 31). The 1861 fire burned 540 acres, from Hasell Street to the foot of Tradd Street along the Ashley River (Phillips 1992, 31).



**Garden - Umberto Innocenti - Historic Landscaper Designer**



One of the largest private gardens in the city. The main house and dependencies sit on a half-acre of garden park surrounded by churches on two sides and another large property on a third side. Through hedges and walls the numerous outdoor rooms are created, each with its own special purpose. Simple, well-proportioned beds make this garden one of special interest. The Kittredge family, who purchased the property in 1941, hired the famous landscape



architect Umberto Innocenti (who with his partner, Richard Webb, began the firm Innocenti & Webb) to design the outdoor spaces.

The enchanting garden retains much of his aesthetics and original design. The classic *parterres* are bordered in boxwood and hollies of several varieties. The garden has strong structural lines that define five outdoor rooms. The overall effect is that of organization, tranquility, and beauty. The formal garden to the west of the piazza contains boxwood hedges that enclose masses of late-blooming azaleas. The



armillary sphere is in the center of the court. Just inside the garden gate of iron arrows is the family pet cemetery spanning 70 years.

The garden walls are cloaked in fig vine, popular in Charleston. The brick patterns throughout the garden show great variety. Historically, solid bricks (brought over as ship ballast) were used for walls and any bits and pieces were thrown down by masons for the gardeners to use as hardscape. This is referred to as a “bitsy-piecy” garden. Looking from the

north end of the piazza is a lovely vista of numerous textures and shades of green.

The raised bed forming an elliptical curve has a backdrop of native Carolina olive. The four vines growing on standards are the state vine, Carolina yellow jasmine. The native live oaks form a canopy and the state tree, the cabbage palmetto (*Sabal palmetto*), can be seen in the background. The oak forest was once a hedge, planned by Mr. Innocenti to act as a screen between Mrs. Kittredge, Sr. and Mrs. Kittredge, Jr. Large-leaf Algerian ivy is used as a groundcover throughout the garden. Path ways of the early-blooming, large azaleas, in purple, create a beautiful spring *allée*.

**Property - Sale includes lots 54 & 56 Hasell Street - a portion of TMS. Separate income producing rental house.**

“The house remained in the Rhett family until 1807 when it was purchased by Christopher FitzSimons, a wealthy wharf owner . . . 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” (Thomas 1970, 560). The late Andrew Simonds Drury, Sr. and his wife, Mary Murray Bennett Drury, purchased the home in 1977.



**Easement - Property is not encumbered by conservation easements. Ingress/egress easement available to the property via the driveway west of 58 Hasell St. (See Supplement in MLS Documents).** Unique for its age, the Colonel William Rhett House is an 18<sup>th</sup> century private residence unencumbered by conservation easements.



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