

*Radcliffe*

PATRICK DUNCAN HOUSE  
**Constructed c. 1816**  
172 Rutledge Avenue

The Patrick Duncan house has elicited much speculation over the years about both its date of construction and its architectural guiding hand. Its clearly unusual floor plan and interior arrangement as well as its elaborate interior detailing have encouraged many to speculate that perhaps an English architect, perhaps William Jay, might have been involved with its design. (Please see 26 Meeting Street for more on William Jay.) No documentary evidence, however, survives to support a connection between Duncan and Jay.

Patrick Duncan, a wealthy tallow chandler purchased a lot in 1798 from Daniel Cannon in the mainly undeveloped area near Cannonsborough. In 1807 he augmented his holdings by purchasing the lot to the south from Elizabeth Combe. When he began construction on his dwelling house is unclear and difficult to pin-down. While a date of ca. 1816 has often been assigned, directories indicate that as early as 1802 Duncan is listed as "tallow chandler, Cannon's Bridge." The 1806, 1807, 1809 and 1813 Directories continue to list Duncan as residing on "Pinckney Street" (as Rutledge Avenue was then known) or "Cannonsboro Road." An 1809 plat recorded in the Charleston County RMC Office which surveys the lands known as Cannonsboro shows the property of Patrick Duncan on Pinckney street and shows three buildings extant. The obvious question posed by the existence of these buildings is whether these buildings indicate an earlier date for the house now standing at 172 Rutledge Avenue or whether this plat only confirms the existence of earlier buildings in which Duncan resided. In 1816 both Duncan and his friend James Nicolson, an attorney, are listed as residents on the "e side, Cannons bridge road." Many have used this as evidence for the completion of the house, believing that Nicolson would not have moved in until the grand house was completed. We must of course ask why it is assumed that Nicolson would not reside in whatever structure Duncan was earlier living or why Nicolson would move in immediately upon completion. By 1819 Duncan and Nicolson are still listed as residing together and both are listed as factors.

Unfortunately, we are left with no answer concerning the construction date of this house. Oral tradition recited by the son-in-law of a late nineteenth century owner indicates that he was told the house was built in 1809 or 1810. Twentieth century scholars have assumed a date of around 1816. Whatever the answer, it is clear that there was a house standing on the property by 1829 when Patrick Duncan of Liverpool (Duncan having returned to England in 1828) conveyed the lot and building, "formerly the residence of Patrick Duncan" to his friend James Nicolson for the sum of \$11,800. In the 1829 Directory there is no listing for Duncan while Nicholson is listed on the east side of Pinckney street. It seems likely that the building was standing at least by 1823 when W. Faux, a British traveller, visited Duncan. He writes on Sunday, April 25th,

Conducted by Mr. Bird to the seat of Patrick Duncan, Esq.; a Scotsman, who emigrated 36 years since, and is now the head of a bank in this city. He is a rich, knowing old gentleman, living in a garden of the choicest flowers and fruits, breaking down the trees with their weight. [p. 44] Although, nine days ago, I was freezing amidst

an icy, snowy winter, yet here is summer in all her gay luxuriance,  
and down every street is the Pride of India (a tree so cllled) in full  
flowery perfection forming an ornamental colonnade on every side.

In 1838 the property and building pass into the hands of James Reid Pringle, and  
in 1845 to George A. Trenholm. It is likely that Trenhold made the many interior  
ornamental embellishments that seem rather out-of-place in the Regency building.  
Since 1909 the house has served as the home of Ashley Hall, a private college  
preperatory school for girls.

Sources:

Faux, W. Memorable Days in America: Being a Journal of a Tour to the United  
States, Principally Undertaken to Ascertain, by Positive Evidence, the  
Condition and probable Prospects of British Emigrants. London, 1823.  
Ravenel, Architects of Charleston.

MDMc

[Maurie D. McInnis]