

ASHLEY HALL SCHOOL
c. 1816
172 Rutledge Avenue

There is conflicting evidence presented by several authorities on when this house was built and for whom, which may be summarized as follows:

A. "THE GEORGIAN PERIOD" being measured drawings of Colonial work. PART X. "American Architect & Building News" CO. 1902. From Page 41, we quote: "Another and more ample monument to the Greek revival, as conventionalized for domestic purposes, is furnished in the Witte residence on Rutledge Avenue, which was designed by an English architect in 1810 for two English bachelors of Charleston. Neither of them lived in it, however, for the death of one caused the other to sell it immediately on its completion."

The "Georgian Period" consists of twelve parts and was the first and most comprehensive survey of the early architecture of our country with a wealth of photographs and drawings.

B. THE DWELLING HOUSES OF CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA, by Alice R. Huger Smith and D. E. Huger Smith, J. B. Lippencott Company, 1917. On Pages 332 and 333 we read the following: "Here on the east side of the street, after 1830, Mr. James Nicholson built the residence which is today (1916) owned and occupied by Miss McBee and her school, known as Ashley Hall.

The late D.E. Huger Smith's interest in the dwelling houses of Charleston was motivated by his life long study of local genealogy and of the transfer of titles to properties as recorded in the County Office of mesne conveyance.

C. THE ARCHITECTS OF CHARLESTON by Beatrice St. Julien Ravenel, Carolina Art Association, 1945. In her chapter on William Jay, Miss Ravenel writes: "Jay belongs to Savannah rather than to Charleston, but the beginning of 1819 found him in the latter city. He probably went back and forth between them."

"Finally he appeared in the directory of 1822."

"Jay, William, architect, 59 Church."

"Soon after he returned to England."

"No.172 Rutledge Avenue (now Ashley Hall School For Girls), the date of which is uncertain, has a riot of curved lines, an oval staircase, and an apse under the portico which suggests Jay's work."

D. THE EARLY ARCHITECTURE OF GEORGIA by Frederick Doveton Nichols, with A PICTORIAL SURVEY by Frances Benjamin Johnson, Chapel Hill University of North Carolina Press, 1957. On Page 33, Mr. Nichols writes of William Jay: "When the boy expressed his desire to become an architect, his father apprenticed him to one in London."

"After finishing his time, he lingered only briefly in London and then went to Savannah, where his sister Anne had married a member of the Bolton family. He arrived in December, 1817, during a period of great prosperity, and before he left in 1822 he had finished the Richard-Owens-Thomas house, the Scarborough house, the Bullock-Habersham house, etc."

E. THIS IS CHARLESTON, A SURVEY OF THE ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE OF A UNIQUE AMERICAN CITY. On Page 91 under the photo we find the caption, "Ashley Hall School, 172 Rutledge Ave. C. 1816 Valuable to City, Patrick Duncan House."

As an active member of the Board of the Historic Charleston Foundation, the late Samuel Gaillard Stoney prepared a number of brief monographs on many of the Charleston dwellings open to visitors during the House Tours sponsored by the Foundation in the spring. Of this house, he wrote as follows:

F. "ASHLEY HALL" 172 Rutledge Avenue, C. 1816.
"In the opening years of the nineteenth century, Patrick Duncan seems to have made a pleasant fortune as a tallow-chandler and then became a factor. At the same time, Cannon Bridge Road was turning into Pinckney Street, in Cannonborough, as it would later become Rutledge Avenue. In the midst of the first changes Duncan built this massive Regency house. Here he resided with his friend, James Nicholson, who remained in the house after Duncan removed to England in his old age. After Nicholson died, the house was bought in 1836 and made a home by James Reid Pringle, etc."

The late Samuel G. Stoney was not only as devoted to genealogical and property research as his predecessor in this field, D. E. Huger Smith, but moreover had had the advantages of the professional education of an architect.

In search of a probable architect, let us compare the floor plan of "Ashley Hall" with two of Jay's important houses in Savannah as shown in Nichols' The Early Architecture of Georgia. In the Richardson-Owen-Thomas House, the main facade is graced with a four-columned portico the height of the main story with a segmental apse receding into the front wall behind. From the apse we enter a vestibule and from behind a screen of twin columns the stairway rises to the second floor. At the Bullock-Habersham House the same theme is varied. Here the portico consists of a half circle of six columns while the other half of the circle consists of the curving wall of an apse. Directly within the vestibule we are confronted by a winding flight of stairs enclosed within a circle of six columns. Both of these arrangements bear resemblances to the articulation of portico, apse, and stairway found at Ashley Hall.

But there have been ingenious planners before William Jay. Let us consider Plate XVIII, Volume III, of Recueil Elementaire D'Architecture Compose' par Sieur de Neufforge, Architecte, Paris, 1760. Here we have the ground floor plan and the front facade showing two stories above a high rusticated basement. In the center of the two upper stories are twin columns set between pilasters. Behind this screen of columns and pilasters the wall curves inward in a semi-circular apse. This scheme in its more heroic scale seems closer akin to Ashley Hall than do the two Jay buildings cited above.

Again the drawing room and parlor of Ashley Hall with their segmental ends opposite each other occur in the Ainsley Hall House in Columbia by Robert Mills, 1823, and the Markoe House, Philadelphia, by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, supervised by Robert Mills and completed in 1810, Benjamin Henry Latrobe by Talbot Hamlin, New York, Oxford University Press, 1955.

Yet in spite of these incidental resemblances in plan, the exterior character of Ashley Hall does not resemble the work of either Jay, Mills, or Latrobe, all of whom exercised a certain classic restraint and grace in their work which is foreign to the exuberance of Ashley Hall. The disparity is even greater on the interior which though quite original and imaginative lacks repose from its excessive elaboration.

One is tempted to believe that much of the interior decor was carried out at later periods by successive owners who were men of wealth and prominence in the community. There is a clue that seems to give credence to this belief. At No. 89 Smith Street not far from "Ashley Hall" there is a frame house with an orthodox Doric portico as "Greek Revival" as possible, but on the south extending across most of that side on the ground and second story is a three-sided bay concave on the two ends and flat in the middle where on the second story a window is simulated with draperies expressed in wood. The pilasters repeat those in the drawing rooms of Ashley Hall, something not elsewhere discovered in this city.

A.S.