

The William Mason Smith House  
Charleston, South Carolina

Arch His. 552  
Mr. Nichols

Edward G. R. Bennett  
April 28, 1980

In the immediate years after the War of 1812, the South, like many post war nations, riding on the tide of frenetic war-time energy, enjoyed something of an industrial and financial boom. This boom, however, was rather short lived, for in 1819 came the great agricultural crash brought on by the failure of the Southern cotton crop. This crash developed into a long term financial depression throughout the nation, with bank failures rampant and a general slackening of business activity throughout the economy. Because of the extremely limited building done in this period, the South has very few examples of High Regency architecture, the style which was fashionable during those years. The inevitable result of this situation is that the houses which were constructed during these years tend to be all the more notable because of their relative scarcity within the architectural milieu of the South.

On April fifth, 1822, William Mason Smith purchased from James D. Mitchell a parcel of land for \$4500. This land was to be the site of his new home, the elegant regency structure which stands today at 26 Meeting Street, in Charleston, South Carolina. The architectural history of this house is one of growth and, to some extent, change. The legal history, however, is almost entirely a history of two families. Various members of the Smith family owned the house from the time it was built (1822-1823) until 1929, at which point it was transferred to Douglas C. Goodwin. Goodwin

held the house only one year, transferring it in 1930 to Sallie R. M. Bennett. For the remaining fifty years, it has remained in the Bennett family, being held today by Craig M. Bennett.

While it is a rather dry exercise to simply recite these various changes in ownership, it is interesting to note why some of these transfers might have been effected and how they might have affected the architectural character of the house. Because I do not have available a geneological history of the Smith family, a brief discussion of the Bennett transfers might be interesting.

Sallie Rutherford Miller Bennett was the wife of John Rutherford Bennett, a son of a Charleston family. Having spent several years with the Miller family in Huntington, West Virginia, the couple returned to Charleston and purchased this house in 1930, placing the actual title in Mrs. Bennett's name. Mr. Bennett died in 1935, however Mrs. Bennett decided to remain in Charleston to raise the family. In 1967, following tax advice, that great stimulus of so much financial planning, Mrs. Bennett transferred a  $\frac{1}{8}$  interest in the property to each of her 4 children, retaining for herself one half interest. The following tax year, 1968, she transferred the other half interest to give each child a total  $\frac{1}{2}$  interest in the house, to relieve her from all ownership of the house, thus preventing the imposition of estate taxes on the transfer at the time of her death. In 1970, one of the four children, John R. Bennett, junior, having settled in another city, sold

his  $\frac{1}{4}$  interest to the other three. In 1972, after Mrs. Bennett's death, Craig M. Bennett purchased the remaining  $\frac{2}{3}$  interest in the house from his brother Thomas R. Bennett and sister Mary M. B. Drury. Today, Craig M. Bennett owns the entire property.

The point to the above discussion of transfers is, of course, but to illustrate the various reasons (tax/inheritance, convenience, etc.) why multiple legal transfers may take place within a single families' ownership of a piece of property. In a like manner, changes in a families' size and needs may significantly affect the architectural and structural character of a house. Some changes of this sort will be discussed in the section on architectural development. Below is a list of the actual transfers which did take place in this property between 1822 and 1980.

- |    |  |                          |
|----|--|--------------------------|
| 1. | James D. Mitchell<br>to<br>William M. Smith        | K 9-295<br>April 5, 1822 |
| 2. | William M. Smith<br>to<br>Susan P. Smith           | September 4, 1838        |
| 3. | Susan P. Smith<br>to<br>Robert Pringle, et al.     | October 23, 1846         |
| 4. | Robert Pringle, et al.<br>to<br>Elizabeth P. Smith | June 1, 1848             |

5. Elizabeth P. Smith, Est.  
to  
Henry A. Middleton  
1 16-49  
June 31, 1873
6. Henry A. Middleton  
to  
Elizabeth M. Smith  
1 20-159  
February 9, 1888
7. Elizabeth M. Smith, Est.  
to  
William E. Huger  
N 24-224
8. William E. Huger  
to  
Henry A. M. Smith  
D 22-90  
March 26, 1906
9. Henry A. M. Smith  
to  
Emma R. Smith  
September 22, 1923
10. Emma R. Smith  
to  
Douglas C. Goodwin  
F 35-140  
March 17, 1929
11. Douglas C. Goodwin  
to  
Sallie R. M. Bennett  
F 35-518  
April 29, 1930
12. Sallie R. M. Bennett  
to  
J.R.B, JR., M.M.B.D.,  
C.M.B., & T.R.B. ( $\frac{1}{2}$  Interest)  
K 89-105  
December 27, 1967
13. Sallie R. M. Bennett  
to  
J.R.B., Jr., M.M.B.D.,  
C.M.B., & T.R.B. ( $\frac{1}{2}$  Interest)  
N 89-285  
January 19, 1968
14. John R. Bennett, junior  
to  
M.M.B.D., C.M.B., &  
T.R.B. ( $\frac{1}{4}$  Interest)  
H 94-322  
February 2, 1970

15. M.M.B.D & T.R.B.  
to  
Craig M. Bennett  
(2/3 Interest)

G 100-358

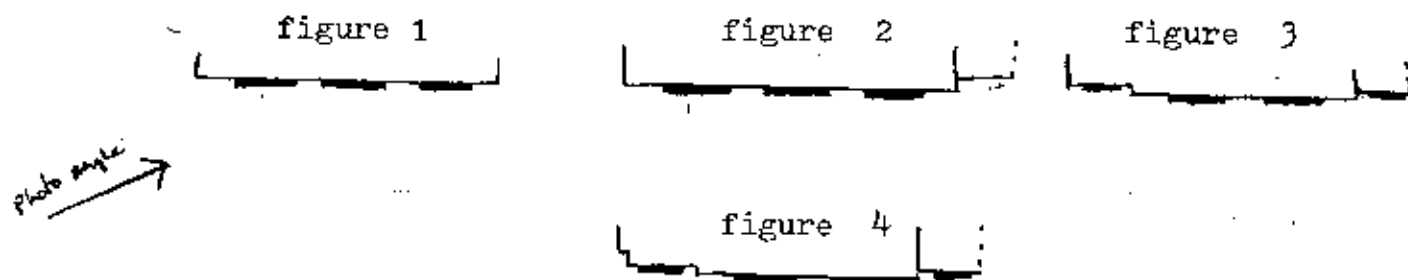
October 9, 1972

The William Mason Smith house is one of the few houses in Charleston with the neo-classical elegance of high regency work. While the house may be thought of as being comprised of three separate sections (see plans), the front, or streetside section is the older and more important of the house's parts. The entire building, however, is fascinating in that it is a living example of the manner in which houses may be modified and adapted to an owners needs. Its changes and modifications have been effected with but a minimal amount of disruption to the essential character of the house, leaving it today with the dramatic elegance of a bygone era.

For many years this house has been attributed to the Savannah architect William Jay. While no documentation has been found which would prove this, the house contains many of the detailing elements Jay used and carries with it the distinctly Jay flavor of a sophisticated and formal elegance softened by gentle curves, airy halls, and high ceilings. As the attached plan suggests, this house was probably constructed originally as a three story six room house. Possibly the most interesting aspect of this house is the treatment of its three story portico on the south side. While the use of such a portico in Charleston is quite common, its very existence will inevitably throw off the balance of a symmetrically built house.

In a roll of drawings by William Jay was found the unidentified town house included here. As can be seen, this

opposite side of the house have been recessed. The logical progression for this is as in figures 1, 2, 3. These are line drawings as the facade would look from above. Figure 4 is the way the house is today, with the attachment of an addition on the north side for the stair hall. (the photograph on the preceding page is the northern angle.)

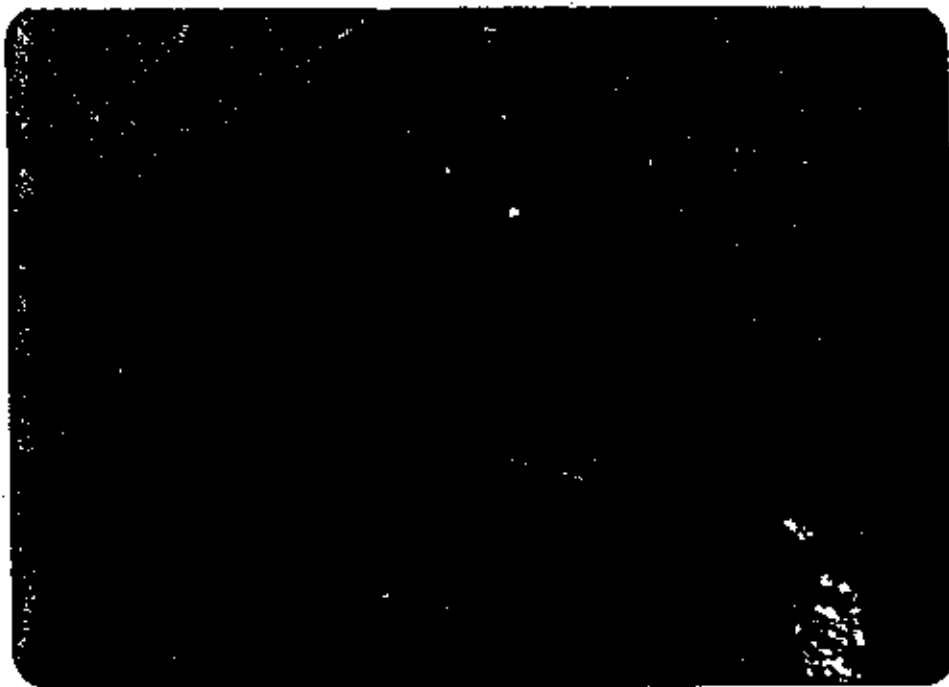


Thus, the house remains balanced, yet is still able to accomodate a fine set of piazzas on the south side and a magnificent entrance and stair hall on the north. The similarities between this drawing and the Smith house facade are, of course, obvious. From the exact form of window on all three floor, to the arched door, to the actual siting of the house on a high basement, the design is unmistakable. The house facade contains characteristics which are quintessentially Jay, ranging from the Greek key (in sand-stone under the windows) to the arched fan over the door and first floor windows.

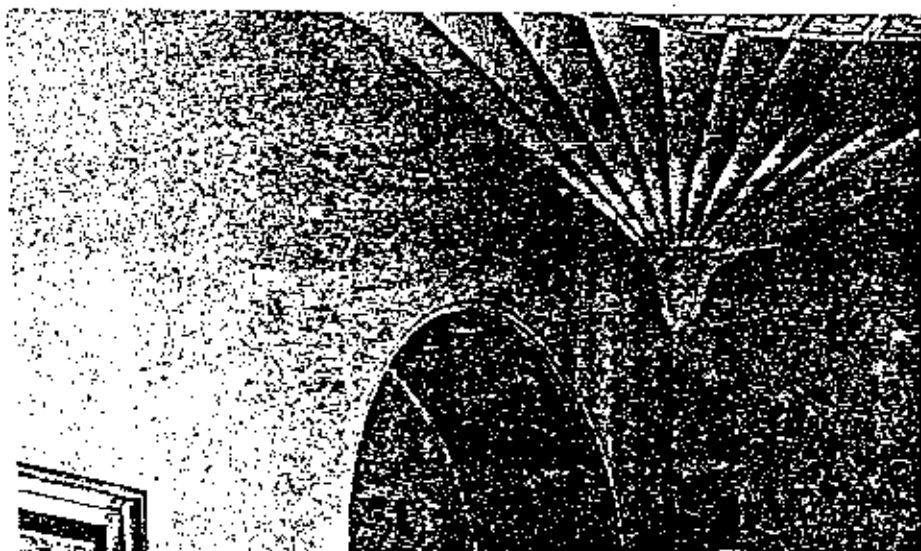
The entrance hall to the Smith house is a fine example of a space which welcomes, then awes, the visitor. One enters this hall into a warm, small semi-chamber with a lovely ceiling ornamented with arched fans, reminiscent of the fans used in the drawing room of the Richardson-Owens-Thomas House in



Savannah (see photographs below for a comparison)

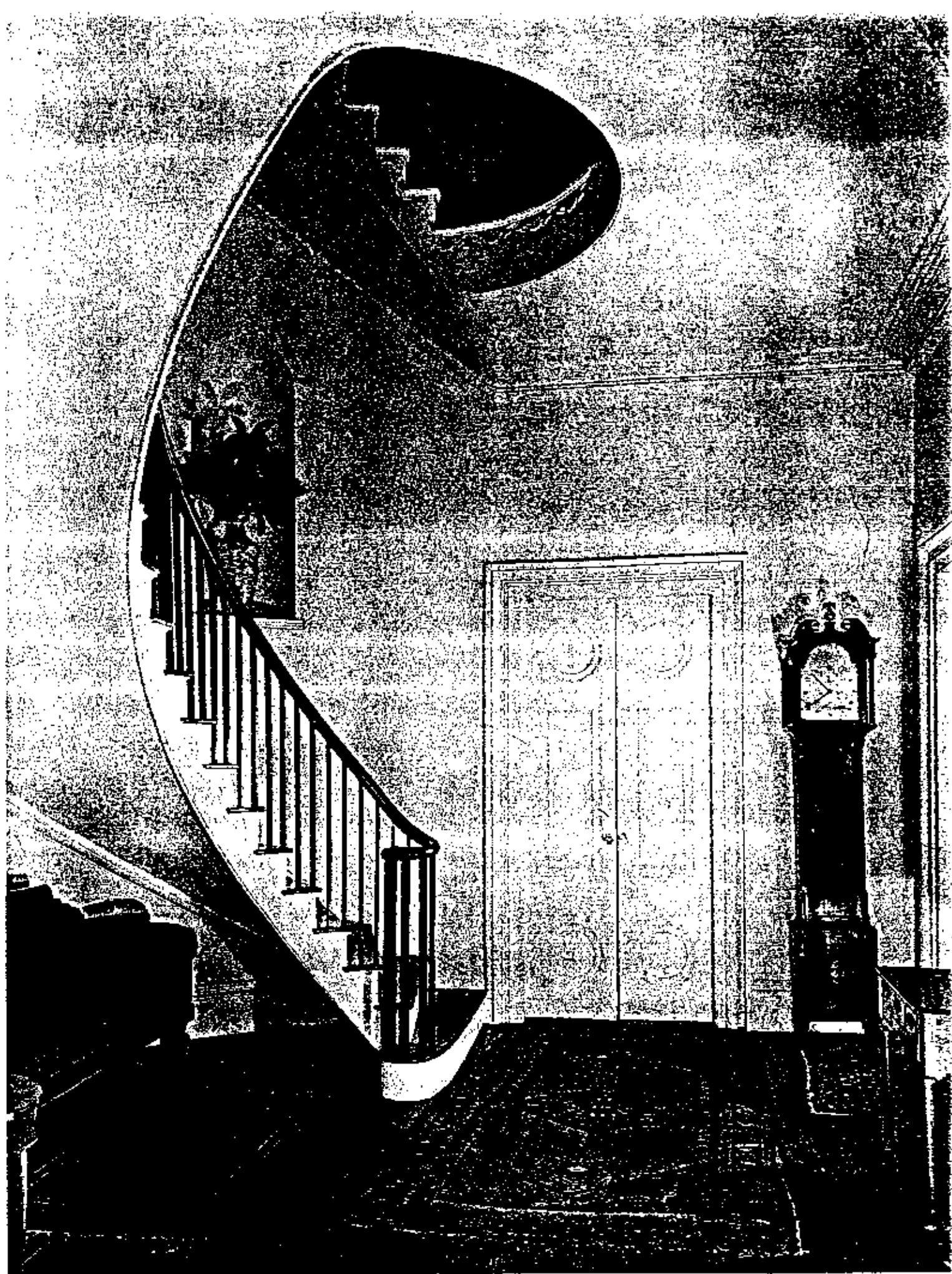


Front Hall Ceiling - Smith House



Drawing Room Ceiling - Richardson-Owens-Thomas House

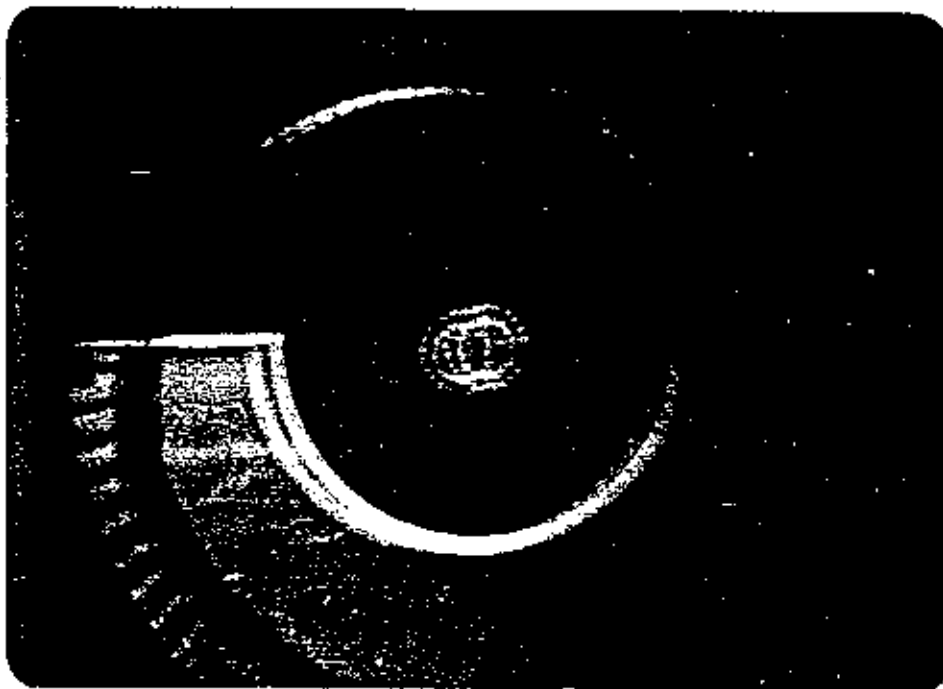
After being admitted to this small, almost anti-chamber, area, the visitor moves into the dramatic elegance of the main stair hall, an impressive area which focuses on a sweeping



The full sweep of the staircase is seen from the other end of the hall. The tall-case clock was made

*The William A*

three story circular staircase. It is this hall which is the focal point of the entire house and from this hall the visitor has access to the two main rooms of each floor. With an alcove for sculpture in the wall part of the way up the stairs, this hall is surely one of the most elegant in Charleston. (The picture below is terribly blurred, but looks up at the domed ceiling at the top of the stairs.)



There are three doors which lead from this hall on the first floor. One of these is a door which leads to a rear hall and on to the back of house. This is quite possibly one which was cut into the house was added to. The other two, however, are two very handsome large doors which lead to the two main rooms on the first floor. While these rooms are quite large and finished with lovely plasterwork, they do not have quite the formal feel as the rooms on the second

floor. The second floor rooms, like those below, have very high ceilings, magnificent plaster work, and open into each other to form what almost becomes one elegant parlor, fifty feet in length by perhaps twenty two feet in width. Both of these rooms have wide "French" doors which open to the second floor porch, permitting one to open the rooms to summer breezes and, with the high ceilings, they serve to keep the house remarkably cool in the hot Charleston summers. Both the first and ~~third~~ floor rooms also have these doors thus permitting a comfortable breeze throughout the house on even the warmest of evenings.



These two pictures are of the two rooms on the second floor of the house. To the left is the front room, above the rear room.

Yet the house does not stop with these six main rooms and the stairhall. It is thought that when the house was originally built, there was both the main house and a kitchen building. Today, the house is one large building made up of essentially three sections. Whereas the front section of the house is three levels with high ceilings, the next section going back is four levels with somewhat lower ceilings. This section appears to have been built as a connecting link between the two original buildings and contains rooms which would have been needed by a larger family than the front could handle. In this section, there are three main bedrooms, one with a sitting room and all with their own baths. On the first floor is a small study and kitchen. The photograph below is a view of this section of the house, looking up from the yard to the south at the second, third, and fourth levels.

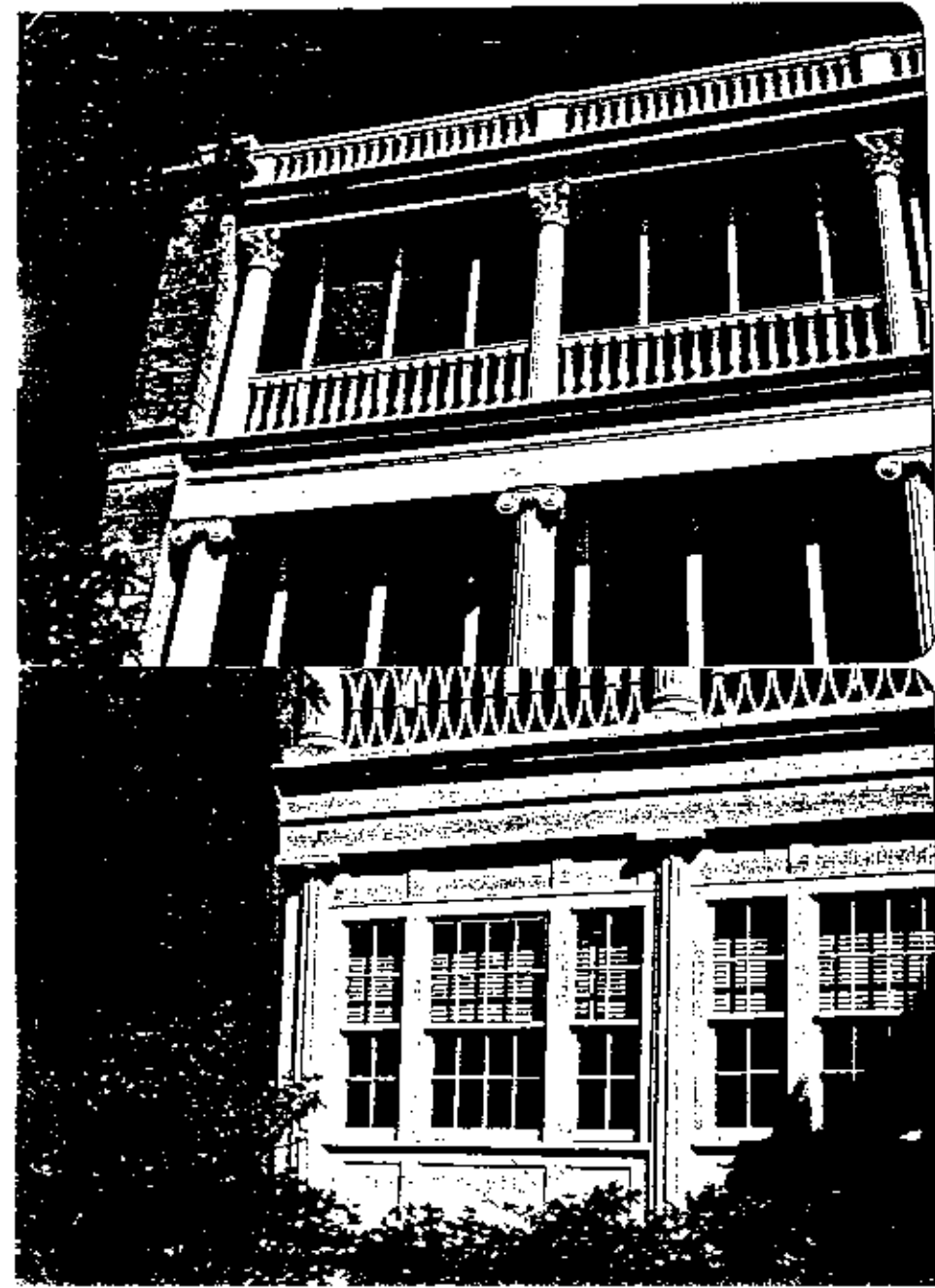


The middle section of the house connects with the older kitchen building which has been changed such that now it accomodates three pantries, a livingroom/dining room/kitchen combination, and two bedrooms with a bath. The picture below is taken from the yard looking back at this section . . . it is interesting to note the bays which have been added above.



While neither the middle nor the rear section is significant from a design standpoint, they are both quite important in developing an understanding of how a house grows and is modified to accomodate the needs of both a growing family and a technologically advancing society.

The exterior of the house, while distinguished in its classical lines, is perhaps most outstanding for the classical orders on its piazzas. While some people have suggested that the third floor porch is not original to the house, it seems likely that it is because each porch is built with columns of a different order. As a trio, therefore, these porches rise from the first floor Doric to the third floor Corinthian, with a handsome form of Ionic columns at the second level. These are pictured below.



The sources of design for this house are unknown simply by the fact that the original design is not known absolutely. It is apparent from the plasterwork and the paneled doors shown in the pictures that the architect was well familiar with the sophisticated use of ornamentation. The plaster walls with solid Ionic bases are topped with plaster cornices using both egg and dart as well as various types of foliage designs. This type of ornamentation could suggest the work of William Jay or Charles B. Cluskey. It is interior detailing which is perhaps more typical of a period and locale than of a specific architect. Taken as a whole, however, the very ingenuous exterior facade, the light feel of airy halls and rooms, and the delicate detailing strongly suggest the work of Jay, who was known to make numerous trips to Charleston. It is a house which is lived in and is flexible for changing needs without changes to the essential character of the building. . . a house which we hope will remain as a single family dwelling within a lovely residential community.



The question of what the future should hold for the William Mason Smith house must be broader in scope than simply a focus on the house itself. While this house is almost singular in its particular style, it is nestled in the heart of an old, historic, and very beautiful district in Charleston. Although the house itself is a fine piece of work and one of the more handsome houses in the area, it would be incorrect to call it the finest. Its position in the overall community is significant and although it remains very valuable to the area, it is but a piece of a much larger mosaic of historic property. Its future, therefore, will be discussed from the standpoint of the house within its environment.

As has been discussed, the main part of this house has been little changed since it was built. The essential uses of it have remained unchanged in that it remains a residence, although today it is divided into three separate apartments. With the opening of approximately three or four doors, however, it may easily be converted back to a single family dwelling.

This house, as have many houses in Charleston, has tended to remain in one family for long periods of time. While current property values in Charleston are rising dramatically, it is nevertheless hoped that this writer, or his brother, will convert the house back to its original state as a single family building within ten or fifteen years. While such a plan is, of course, subject to both financial

ability and family needs, we currently aim at such a plan.

The changes which have been made to the house through the years have little changed the essential character of the structure. While it seems obvious that the first floor porch was enclosed some years after the house was build, this is only one of the noticable changes to the casual observer. It goes without saying that the one bathroom in the original structure (between the two bedrooms on the third floor) is not original to the building. These changes, however, are ever so slight and cannot be said to be true changes to the building. As a relatively untouched building, therefore, the house has been on a number of historic home tours. Because of <sup>its</sup> current status as a form of apartment building (it is currently divided into 3 apartments until a member of the family is ready to use it), it does not lend itself to tours today as it did in the days when Mrs. Bennett had it exquisitely furnished with antiques of the period. It is expected, however, that it will again be opened to the public on something approaching an annual basis and that it will eventually be furnished as it has been in the past.

Structural changes to the building have been minor over the years for one predominating reason. There is no need to change the original structure, for the house has so much space in the rear building that any needs which may arise can be accomodated through changes to these newer additions. Changes in the future, one would expect, will follow a similar

pattern. As the size of families which occupy the house change, the changes can be made to the rear sections. The conformation of the house tends to lend itself to a "formal" and an "informal" type of living arrangement. With four formal rooms to the front, informal libraries, sitting rooms, and eating areas seem comfortably destined for the rear buildings. The only change to the main portion of the house which is expected is a change in the heating and cooling system. The building is currently heated by steam radiators and cooled by window air-conditioning units. It is expected that these will be eventually replaced with a central unit to serve both purposes.

Earlier I spoke of the house in its environment. The historic district of Charleston has a rather strong Board of Architectural Review (BAR) and tight zoning laws. Changes ranging from structural modifications to even paint color selections have to be approved by the BAR. In the area of legal support for this type of work, the case of Penn Central Transportation Co. v. City of New York, decided in 1978, has been a great support and help to the historic preservation movement. This case upheld the right of New York City to protect historic landmarks under zoning laws and to prevent their destruction. The impact of cases of this sort at the local level, for an area such as Charleston, is that it permits localities to protect both areas and individual buildings. In Charleston, this house will remain under the review and protection of such public land use controls.

Yet preservation laws do not stop here, for there are a number of private land use controls as well. Possibly the best known of these is the "preservation easement" which has been defined as a voluntary limitation on one's use of property enforceable by another. The person or group which holds the easement and thus the right of enforcement is usually a non-profit landmark preservation organization or government agency. The effect of such an easement is that it secures the continued preservation of a structure. While it is obvious that the gift of such an easement is substantial in that it could be drawn to place significant restrictions on a property, there are several motives which could influence an owner to place such a limitation on his property. An owner who is absolutely committed to his property could desire that it remain untouched forever and thus place such an easement on his property. A more common reason, however, is that while the limiting easement reduces the value of an asset for real estate valuation purposes, the owner is permitted to take certain tax deductions to offset these losses in value.

If we consider that a property may well be in a highly restricted area (from the standpoint of the BAR), the granting of an easement often does very little to change the value of the land. Rather, it serves to strengthen the area by "locking in" a commitment to original form while still permitting substantial flexibility in property usage. For the Smith house, it would make very good sense that at some point in the future an owner grant an easement of this form.

Because of long family ownership, the property has a relatively low tax basis and thus the owners could gain an advantage on the taxation of property transfers. While I do not expect such easements or restrictions to be placed on 26 Meeting Street in the near future, I hope that someday we may be able to legally lock in the building in its unchanged state. For the near future, however, I believe the house is in safe hands with no changes contemplated, a preservation minded owner, and a watchdog BAR.

Mr. M. Smith - Ac. of Howard

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Ed. W. W. J. J.

Rec'd Charleston Dec 7 - 1820

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35