

## WILLIAM MASON SMITH HOUSE

*Constructed 1819-1821*

*26 Meeting Street*

*William Jay, attributed architect*

The Greek key fret work in the window brownstone enlivens the subdued roughcast facade of 26 Meeting street and foreshadows innovative Regency details inside. After entering through a small vestibule, one encounters the main stair hall which directs attention upwards in the spiraling sweep of the three story circular staircase. At the end of this visual journey, one encounters the most surprising aspect of this house, the domed roof over the staircase hall. While changes have since been made by a later owner, originally this dome was exposed. Alice R.H. Smith explains, "a later owner in enlarging the house found it convenient to continue to the east line of the projection, and to bring the roof addition over the dome. The earthquake of 1886 threw down part of the wall, when the domed roof showed itself intact." A photograph taken shortly after the 1886 earthquake unmask the dome and reveals the original exterior. Significantly, this dome was likely the first domestic structure in Charleston with an exterior dome.

The facade presents an unusual adaptation of the traditional singlehouse arrangement. While the house in many ways relates to the singlehouse arrangement in presenting only one room to the street, it differs in its attention to the balanced facade. Four bays face the street; the central two projecting forward. Behind the southern bay hides the piazza. The northern door leads into the vestibule of the house, while the southern door leads onto the piazza, the more traditional route of entry for a Charleston house.

This house has been attributed to William Jay. While many of his buildings in Savannah are known, knowledge of his activities in Charleston are unfortunately less clear. In 1820 he advertised in the *Courier*:

"WILLIAM JAY offers his services to the inhabitants of Charleston, and the State generally, in his profession as an ARCHITECT. Any comand left at this office in Jones Building, St. Michael's Alley, will meet with immediate attention."

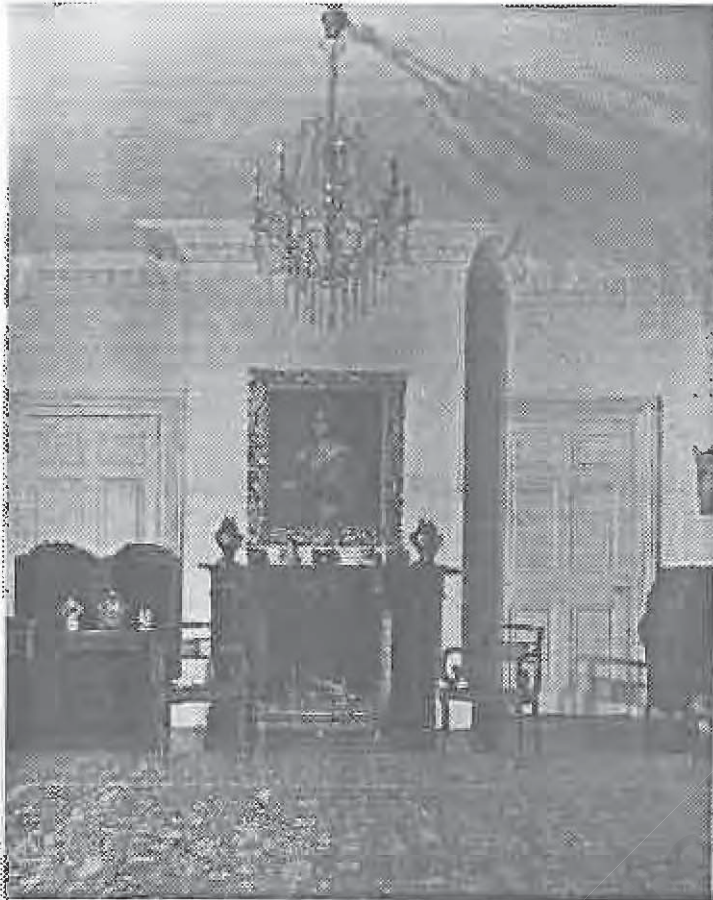


*William Mason Smith House, photograph taken after the 1886 earthquake revealing the domed roof over the stairtower enclosed by a later owner, HCF*

Later that month he was appointed architect to the Board of Public Works, a position which he held for only a short time and which Robert Mills later occupied. It was in this capacity that Jay designed a series of public buildings in Charleston. Jay is last listed in the city directory in 1822, and it was soon thereafter that he returned to England.

An unsigned drawing found with several of Jay's works and believed to be by him, shows a three-bay facade almost exactly like that of the William Mason Smith house. Important details such as the recessed arches of the first story, the lintels over the windows of the second, and the raised basement are present. Yet significantly, the William Mason Smith house has four bays. Perhaps the ultimate design demonstrates a compromise between a more traditional townhouse plan and the Charleston necessity of exterior living spaces. By adding another bay to the facade, and recessing the outer two, the architect was able to maintain the balance present in the original conception while accomodating the Charleston piazza.





*William Mason Smith House, interior, c. 1960, HCF*



*Sketch for classical figure to be "put in Niches...to hold lamps to light part of a Staircase", Middleton Place Foundation, William Mason Smith Papers*



*Sketch for second figure, both to be of "plaster of Paris & coloured Bronze", Middleton Place Foundation, William Mason Smith Papers*



Details of ornamentation strengthen the attribution to Jay. From the Greek key fretwork in the facade, to the black marble columned mantels, to the plaster-arched fans in the vestibule, many details of the house suggest the hand of a professional architect and relate to several of Jay's houses in Savannah. The most compelling argument to date, however, is a recently discovered receipt:

Wm. M. Smith

Bo[ugh]t of Howard

14 thousand best slates — selected and delivered in good order — on the premises — in Meeting Street —  
at 38 per thousand —————  
\$532

Ex.d William Jay

Rec[eive]d Charleston Dec[embe]r 2 — 1820

The amount in full

John Howard

This receipt suggests that Jay was at the very least involved with the construction of the house and it thus seems likely that he might have been responsible for its design as well.

Other details concerning its construction were also discovered. A receipt specifies roughcasting work that it to be executed. In this contract William Kelly, plasterer, agrees to "furnish all materials...Roughcast the mansion of Mr. Wm. M. Smith...with good Stone Lime & sharp gravel from the finishe[sic] of the Cornice at top to....at Bace[sic]....the Bace[sic] to bee[sic] finished with Roman Cement."

While this gives of some knowledge of the exterior finish of the house, at least one aspect of the elegance of the interior finish has also surfaced. In addition to the arched window, the staircase was intended to be lit by lamps held by sculptural figures and placed in the two niches on the stair. At some point "Directions &c to get for Mr Wm Mason Smith &c Images or Effigies of Plaster of Paris Bronzed" were sent and saved by Smith. The unidentified writer, and one has to wonder if that might not be William Jay, directed, (see illustrations)

"This & the figure on the next page are merely sent by way of some direction or to give an idea of 2 which are wanted to put in Niches in the wall to hold lamps to light part of a Staircase but there is no need in procuring them to be confined exactly to the attitude form & drapery of these sent provided they answer the dimensions — especially if any such can be procured ready made. They are to be of plaster of Paris & coloured Bronze."

The dimensions which he specified were 1 foot, 9 1/4 inches wide, 10 inches deep, and 5 feet 2 inches high. Unfortunately, it is not known at the present time whether Smith followed these directions in procuring classical sculptures for his niches. The draped classical ladies would definitely have been at the height of fashion.

#### Sources:

Bennett, Edward G.R. unpublished paper, "The William Mason Smith House."

Werski, Hanna Hryniewiecka. William Jay: Itinerant English Architect, 1792-1837.

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