

Little Interest Shown In Row Houses

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Charleston builders during the 18th and 19th century planned their houses with a consideration of the city's climate and the need for good circulation of whatever breeze one could catch in the summer months.

The "single" house gained a hold, therefore, on Charlestonians, but the row house, so popular in Philadelphia, Baltimore and Boston, did not apparently interest builders.

Today the city may boast only one group of period row

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houses that were constructed along a single plan in the Baltimore or Philadelphia manner. The four, tall dwellings at 101, 103, 105 and 107 Bull St. are the only survivors of an attempt to bring this concept to Charleston.

If one excludes Vanderhorst Row on East Bay, because it was never intended to be part of a block-long scheme, the only group to compare with the Bull Street tenement would be the former structure on Meeting Street that until recently contained the Timrod Hotel.

The structure that was demolished to clear room for the new county office building was originally built as four houses of a rather severe design. They must not have proved popular, for they became apartments, then a commercial club, and finally a hotel.

Bull Street gained its tene-

ment row in the early 1850s. Most of the south side of Bull Street, between Rutledge and Ashley (then called Lynch Street), was bought under the name of Sarah Smith in 1849. She began selling these pieces of property as early as 1853 and a plat of 1854 shows all four dwellings and their long rear houses in existence at the time she had a rear court (now Wasbee Range) laid out.

They were designed in what must have been the high fashion of this period. Such block - long speculative schemes could be found in many of the larger American cities at this time, probably based on the successful grand terraces and crescents of London and Bath in England.

It is believed that the Smith interests were originally from Baltimore and were planning a fifth Bull Street addition when the Civil War broke out. The war halted further plans and it is believed that the builder left Charleston.

This is when the Bull Street row began another interesting involvement with the city's history. With the Civil War, the ships of the United States Navy began a blockade of the ports of the Confederate States. Its effectiveness however, was rendered imperfect by a fleet of small, fast ships, drawing little water and taking great chances at low tide. Charleston was a center for the activity of this fleet of blockade runners.

Available lists show twice as many blockade runners leaving from Charleston as from Galveston, and four times as many as from Savannah or Mobile. At first these ships docked at Cooper River wharves but this was no longer possible after bombardment of the lower parts of the city began.

At this time William C. Bee and Co., which was also called the Importing and Exporting Co. of South Carolina, took over the row and the houses became Bee Store or Bee Block, with the alley or court in the rear becoming Bee Range.

The buildings were beyond the range of Union guns and near the West Point Mill

wharves where the blockade runners brought in their vessels. Goods of every sort were hard to come by in blockaded Charleston. Bee Block was therefore much patronized if one had the money.

But the market made life possible and Caroline Jenkins' Diary of 1864 contains references to buying tea, thread, lemons, one-half pound of brown sugar, a small tin of flour, tomatoes, green peppers and calico there. One entry reads: "I saw Lavinia on Bee Block today, where one may still purchase food if one brings the amount of money one formerly paid for a house."

After the war one of the

houses, 105 Bull, was bought by Pauline Rhett. Her sister Claudia was a dancer and formerly held a dancing school in a large house downtown.

With the move to Bull, she opened her school there, training all the debutantes for two generations and bringing about a style of etiquette that dominated the Charleston ballrooms for many years.

Although the row houses, with one exception, have been made into spacious apartments, the unit retains a pleasant aspect on this quiet end of Bull Street that could not be too different from what the builder intended some 115 years ago in attempting to create a group of large and dignified single family dwellings.

The interiors still contain much of the original plaster work with all the elaborate swags and rosettes. Colored glass panels etched in white may be seen in the doors of the entrance hallways. Black granite mantles with brass rails may be seen at 107, though it is believed the original mantles were iron.

On the exterior may be seen the rococo terra cotta pediments over the doorways not unlike those on the old St. John Hotel or the Rutledge house at 116 Broad St. One may also see early examples of cast iron in the low fences in front. Wrought iron was being replaced steadily in the early 1850s by this coarser form of workmanship.

These houses show that final high style popular at the time the Civil War put a check to virtually all building activity in Charleston.



BULL STREET ROW IS UNUSUAL FOR CHARLESTON
Four dwellings were constructed before 1854. (Staff Photo by Smoak)

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