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An iconic part of Charleston history missing since 1886 will soon return

BY LEIGH JONES HANDAL SPECIAL TO THE POST AND COURIER
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The William Ravenel House, 13 East Battery St., Charleston
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Even architectural neophytes casually strolling along Charleston's scenic High Battery could sense that something seemed off-kilter about the grand house at 13 East Battery St., though few could put their finger on the problem. That's about to change as Charleston regains a part of its architectural history that's been missing for 140 years.

The completion of Charleston's southeastern seawall and its ensuing infill in the early 19th century created a new street, East Battery, with residential lots just south of the city's colonial footprint. It was here some of the Lowcountry's most prominent families built magnificent town houses with expansive views of Charleston Harbor. Among them were brothers John and William Ravenel, successful merchants in the new steamship industry.

John's recently restored house at 5 East Battery was sold last year by financier and U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent for \$21.25 million (with furnishings), at the time a record high sales price for a South of Broad residence.

Younger brother William, who began working for Ravenel & Stevens company when he was just 16, eventually became a partner. With wealth earned through his business success, William had completed his town house at 13 East Battery by 1845. Here, in addition to their St. Andrew's Parish plantation, he and his wife, Eliza Butler Pringle Ravenel, raised their 11 children — certainly at least one justification of his need for a large house.



Dating from 1848, the pink stucco home at 5 East Battery St. in downtown Charleston was owned by John Ravenel.
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The William Ravenel House, 13 East Battery St., Charleston
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On a deep, narrow lot just slightly over a half acre, Ravenel designed his nearly 15,000-square-foot residential complex, which retains its original outbuildings including a kitchen house and two carriage houses. In "The Dwelling Houses of Charleston," published in 1917, author Alice Ravenel Huger Smith describes the house's first floor as having a long entry hall, large dining room and narrow side rooms with folding doors that would open to create a larger entertaining space.

Running the entire 36-foot width of the house, the second-floor piano nobile (an Italian term for the principal floor of a villa with high ceilings and scenic views, located above the noise and unpleasant odors of the street) is still one of the historic district's largest residential rooms.

Yet the visual highlight of Ravenel's house was its Greek Revival portico with an arched base as high as the first floor. Above that, four giant Corinthian columns made of brownstone with ornate Tower of the Winds capitals rose another two stories to support a pedimented roof. From his portico, Ravenel could look out over High Battery, watching his ships in the harbor.

In less than two minutes, on Aug. 31, 1886, at 9:51 p.m., one of the largest earthquakes ever recorded east of the Mississippi River brought all four of Ravenel's iconic columns crashing down into the street. Its reverberations, believed to have measured around a 7.2 on today's Richter scale, left only the portico's base and a destroyed gable hanging. Given the poverty and destruction in the decades following the Civil War, the columns were never replaced.

In 1959, Hurricane Gracie uprooted a large tree in the yard, and to everyone's surprise uncovered one of the capitals that had spent decades buried underneath it, driven deep into the ground by the force of the columns' fall.

William Ravenel died two years after the quake, though his family continued to live in the house for nearly a century before it was sold in the 1930s, by which time it had fallen into disrepair as had so many other downtown properties.

In 1965 it was purchased by William and Edith Corry, who worked to repair and restore much of the property before placing it in a trust.

After Edith Corry's death in 2013 at the age of 97, her niece, the sole trustee of the estate, and her husband lived there. They continued her aunt's restoration efforts using historically correct materials, restoring plaster and installing new roofing and HVAC systems, according to a [Post and Courier article by Warren Wise](#) (Nov. 3, 2023).



The William Ravenel House at 13 East Battery St. in Charleston was damaged in the 1886 earthquake.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

According to a 2023 real estate listing, the complex included 15 bedrooms, 11 bathrooms and two half-baths, and had been divided into several separate residences. Since its sale in October of that year, its owners have continued its restoration and reconfiguration as a single-family residence.

Most visibly, however, they have been recreating the mansion's magnificent columns and pediment, missing since 1886. As the scaffolding and protective screens begin to come down, the William Ravenel House will once again boast a robust, balanced facade, among the finest in Charleston.



The William Ravenel House
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