



**William Gibbs House, 64 South Battery**

# Gibbes House Eclectic

By **ROBERT P. STOCKTON**

The William Gibbs House at 64 South Battery is one of those houses which has gracefully adjusted to changing fashions in architecture.

This house, considered of national importance architecturally, combines with elan and sophistication the motifs of at least four periods — the Georgian, the Adam, the Regency and post-World War I.

The builder was a wealthy shipowner, merchant, wharf-owner and real estate investor. He probably began construction of the house about 1772.

Gibbes, along with fellow merchants George Kincaid, Robert Mackenzie and Edward Blake, acquired a large tract at the west end of South Bay (now South Battery) and the south end of Legare Street. As "tenants in common" they filled in the "Low Water Land."

The filling was apparently accomplished by Sept. 19, 1772, when the four partners conveyed this tract to Samuel Legare, a fellow merchant.

This conveyance was apparently to provide division of the property without disagreement among the partners, because Legare simultaneously reconveyed the property piecemeal back to them.

Gibbes thus acquired title in his own name to the site of 64 South Battery on Sept. 19, 1772.

In the same conveyance, Gibbes acquired the low water lot to the south, extending from South Bay Street to the Ashley River. On this he built his wharf.

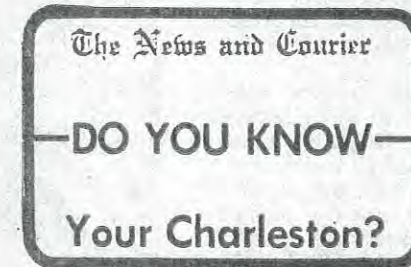
According to the South Carolian Gazette of March 7, 1774, "the Wharf of William Gibbs Esq.," on which he had begun construction two years previously,

"extends eight hundred feet into the River."

The wharf was so far completed that four vessels had loaded there, the Gazette said.

It seems logical that Gibbes, simultaneously with construction of his wharf, began construction of his residence on a site from which he could oversee his extensive shipping business.

The house he constructed shows the influence of the Georgian Palladian great houses of England. It is of two stories of frame on a high masonry basement and is crowned with a large pediment with



supporting brackets and a bull's eye window in the center.

The main entrance also has a classic pediment and frieze. The entrance appears to have been rebuilt in the Adam-Regency period, acquiring sidelights and perhaps a new fanlight.

It was apparently also at that time that the massive stone steps with their central arch and delicate wrought iron railings and lantern stands were added.

From the Georgian period, however, are retained the pedimented window surrounds called "tabernacles," and the modillioned cornice.

The Adam and Regency features of the

house were added by the family of Mrs Sarah Smith, widow of Thomas Smith. She acquired the property from Gibbes' heirs in 1794.

Her son, Peter Smith, appears to have resided for some time in the house. In 1826, it was acquired from her estate by her grandson, Thomas Smith Grimke, an eminent attorney.

To the Adam period of c. 1800 belongs the great ballroom on the second floor.

This room, one of the most beautiful in the city, has a deep coved ceiling, made possible by stealing the extra height from attic space. The ceiling is decorated with delicate floral swags and bows in the Adam style, created in plaster.

The delicacy of the ceiling is complemented by an equally refined narrow cornice in the Adam style.

From Thomas Smith Grimke, the property passed to the Rev. John Grimke Drayton, who adopted his mother's surname in order to inherit the Drayton ancestral seat, Magnolia Plantation, on Ashley River.

Subsequently it was owned by Col. J.B.E. Sloan, a former Confederate officer.

From his estate it was purchased in 1928 by Mrs. Cornelia W. Roebing, widow of George Washington Roebing, builder of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Mrs. Roebing redecorated one room in the Chinese Chippendale style, extended the rear rooms and added a brick stairway to the formal garden which she created.

The house is currently the home of Mrs. Roebing's grandson, John Ashby Farrow, and his family.

1975?



64 South Battery — House was built shortly after 1772.

## Shipowner Built House To 'Receipt'

Builders of the pre-Revolutionary Georgian mansion at 64 South Battery complied explicitly with the Tidewater "receipt" prescribing that a house be placed "facing the water on the north or east side of the river so that the southwesterly summer sea breeze may be enjoyed."

When built, shortly after 1772, it was the most westerly house on South Bay (now South Battery) and it faced the Ashley River with James Island across the way.

William Gibbs, a wealthy shipowner and merchant, built the house immediately behind his "bridge" (wharf), which ran several hundred feet to the Ashley's channel.

Gibbes took part in the Revolution and returned with pleasure to his house and the "genteel entertainment" Charlestonians enjoyed on the end of his wharf during hot weather. After his death, Mrs. Sarah Moore Smith obtained the property and it remained in

her family for the next four generations.

In the 1930s the house was bought by Mrs. Washington A. Roebeling, widow of the builder of the Brooklyn Bridge, and was somewhat altered and completely renovated. The main floor's southeast room was remodeled in Chinese Chippendale style to house her Oriental collections. The rear rooms were lengthened and brick stairs were placed to the rear leading to the formal gardens.

The original Georgian house had undergone some change in 1800 when Mrs. Smith installed fashionable Adam decorations throughout. She also added the grand marble front stairways, placed a high cove in the drawing room ceiling, installed wider mantel shelves and dressed up the handsome but simple Georgian woodwork with hard putty ornaments.

Mrs. Smith's grandson, Thomas Smith Grimke, was one of Charleston's most brilliant lawyers. His son, the Rev. John Grimke

Drayton (he took his mother's surname to inherit Magnolia Plantation) was the founder of Magnolia Gardens after "clergyman's throat" forced him to abandon an active ministry in the Episcopal Church.

While 64 South Battery possessed a garden during its early years, the present formal gardens were not created until Mrs. Roebeling acquired the property.

The house still looks southward to the sea but population increases have placed houses between it and the water. The building of Murray Boulevard, and subsequent creation of "high land" behind it, blocked the Ashley's waters from their twice daily sweep to the great house's front yard.

Still, the great house sits serenely before its handsome gardens, effectively giving them privacy, a grand example of the Georgian mansion in Charleston's "double house" style. It is the home of Mrs. Roebeling's grandson, John Ashby Farrow, and Mrs. Farrow.

## House Boasts

Whether by chance or design, house at 39 South Battery incorporates an anti-earthquake feature that F. Wright used successfully for many years.

For this charming antebellum house on a crib of palmetto logs sunk in the water that allowed it to sway with the tides, it literally wrecked most of Charleston. It was one of the few houses to survive the earthquake almost intact and, to the owners' credit, it sways slightly in hurricane winds.

But it doesn't crack. Wright's genius found itself the object of disbelief when he announced he would build Tokyo Hotel on a floating foundation and would survive the earthquakes of Japan.

The hotel lived up to his prediction, standing undamaged in the Sept. 1, 1923 earthquake that knocked down 54 per cent of brick buildings and killed more than 100,000 persons in Japan.

The house at 39 South Battery sits atop a crisscrossed foundation of palmetto logs that rests on sand and pluff. There are two tales concerning the foundation. The house was constructed by the Magwood family and some descendants believe the builder deliberately constructed a supporting mudsill arrangement.

The other story is that the site on which a fort had been built in the 17th century. This redoubt reportedly was fashioned in the lines of the original palmetto on Sullivan's Island that became known as Moultrie after it successfully repulsed the British fleet in 1776.

While most of the fortifications of the original city were farther eastward along the Cooper River front, the house's location indicates that some fortified spots existed in the Ashley marshes. This could have been the case.

At any rate, the house sits on a foundation that allows enough sway to prevent breakage when earthquakes occur. Known as the Moreland house for a daughter of its builder having Moreland and inherited the dwelling when built, it was the only house on the south side of South Bay of King Street. South Battery's name was given when the first section was opened as far west as the Ashley's channel.

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The house very narrowly escaped destruction on two occasions. During the Civil War, Mayor W. P. Miles announced a plan to purchase a large park at White Point Garden about a third of its present size. The plan was to fill the adjoining marsh to create a 15-acre park along the river to the west.