

48 South Battery: Text of Historic Preservation Certification Application, Part One

The James Macbeth House is a mid-19th century masonry townhouse, two and one-half stories in height above a full raised basement, with a piazza at the west and rear elevations. The brick construction is laid in common bond, and stuccoed at the south façade and west elevation. The building is extended at the east elevation by a three-story rear wing, one bay wide, with an interior end chimney. Window and door openings at the principal south elevation and east side have marble sills and pedimented lintels, and there are flat jack arches at the rear elevation. The principal entry opening has sidelights, a transom, and a paneled door with etched-glass upper panel; secondary entries have simple transoms. Supported by an arcaded foundation, the one-story piazza has a paneled wood flat parapet, a dentilled cornice, and fluted Tuscan columns and turned balusters at its principal level. Window openings at all elevations have 6/6 wood sash. The south façade was heavily damaged by the 1886 earthquake, but the extent of any alterations made during repairs has not been learned.

The interior of 48 South Battery has a side-hall plan, with the stair hall along the east side and twin parlors connected by paneled pocket doors at the main first floor. There are simple plaster cornices, and the rear parlor (dining room) retains an ornate plaster ceiling medallion. Window and door surrounds have fine acanthus-leaf corner blocks.

The building was rehabilitated in 1985, with the original plan and much of the historic fabric retained. Service functions are confined to the rear wing and upper levels of the residence.

Statement of significance

The James Macbeth House at 48 South Battery is an excellent example of a mid-19th century masonry townhouse. In setting, size, scale, mass and material, it contributes to the streetscape and to the Charleston Historic District. This is Charleston (1944) cited 48 South Battery as "Valuable. Excellent Greek Revival in the Charleston tradition." The 1973 Feiss-Wright Inventory includes it in Category 2: Excellent. "High style regional architecture – fine "Charleston Style" – well designed and proportioned – good detail – spirited, dignified, frequently innovative, rare, and always attractive and interesting. Of irreplaceable importance, to be preserved *in situ* at all costs."

Historical background

In 1818 George W. Rivers sold this lot, with a house, to Winborn Lawton Jr. for \$5500. By 1830 Lawton's son William Mathews Lawton (ca. 1805-1880) was living here, and in 1836 planter Winborn Lawton of James Island, gave his son William M. Lawton, factor of Charleston, the lot "with a two-story dwelling house and outbuildings."

In March, 1847, William M. Lawton sold this lot, its dimensions unchanged since 1818, to James Macbeth for \$5500. The deed cites a two-story dwelling house and outbuildings. A few weeks later, in order to "settle and secure the property to his wife and family," Macbeth conveyed ownership to his brother Charles Macbeth as trustee.

Not long after his 1847 purchase of the two-story residence, James Macbeth replaced it with the masonry town house at today's 48 South Battery. No records have been found that indicate whether there had been a fire or other destruction, or whether any elements of the Rivers-Lawton house were reused in the Macbeth House. The city directory and tax assessor's ward book make clear that by 1852 the Macbeth family lived in the 3½ story brick house at 30 South Bay Street. They had retained the early brick kitchen house, which is today a separate property, 48½ South Battery.

A month before his death, in October 1872 James Macbeth and his wife sold their South Battery home to Robert Q. Pinckney for \$5000. He gave them a mortgage, and when he and his brother B. Gaillard Pinckney were forced to sell real estate to pay their creditors, 48 South Battery was sold at auction to Robert N. Gourdin.

In 1886 Robert N. Gourdin sold the property for \$8500 to Harriott C. Barnwell, the wife of attorney Joseph Walker Barnwell. The Charleston earthquake struck later that year, damaging the Macbeth House heavily. Much of the south façade and the entire north wall had to be rebuilt. Cracks in the east and west side walls were repaired, and the walls anchored securely. The Barnwell family then kept it as their home until J. W. Barnwell's death in 1930.

In 1983, the Macbeth House lot was subdivided. Property lines were redrawn to make a separate parcel for the kitchen house. The main house was deeded as two condominium units: ground floor (Unit A) and upper levels (Unit B). The residences were rehabilitated separately during 1985. In 1991 the condominium regime was extinguished, and the Macbeth House restored to a single ownership. It is presently an owner-occupied residence.