

Murray Boulevard, an unbelievable vision

By Dan T. Henderson, Jr.

I still remember attending my grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary party at the Fort Sumter Hotel at One King Street, White Point Garden and Murray Boulevard. The hotel is also etched in my mind because of a story that my father told me when I was a child about the time he met famed *New Yorker* magazine cartoonist Charles Addams at the hotel in 1954. Their brief encounter turned into a joint ghost hunting expedition at the Sword Gate House that became the subject of a great story my father published in the *News and Courier*.

The formally grand hotel is now The Fort Sumter House Condominiums following its conversion in the 1980s. The monumental structure was originally built in 1923 as a luxury hotel when few hotels existed on the peninsula. The Fort



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Sumter Hotel hosted many famous guests, most notably a young U.S. Naval officer named John Kennedy and was the location of his rendezvous with Ingra Arvard that was well documented by the FBI.

This structure was built on land with an interesting history. In 1735, the colonial legislature conveyed waterfront land that was located between what is now Council Street and Lockwood Boulevard and was held in trust for Charleston residents to enjoy. In 1857, Charleston City Council purchased the land along the Ashley River to expand what became known as White Point Garden. The "Ashley River Embankment Project" in the late 1870's connected Bay Street to Rutledge Avenue, and this was the first step toward the creation of a the boulevard along the waterfront.

Before it was named White Point Garden, the southern tip of the peninsula was originally known as Oyster Point, which came from the piles of sun bleached oyster shells that were located there. The garden is also

home to several military memorials and relics, my favorite being the Sergeant Jasper Memorial.

More than 100 years ago, the developer C. Bissell Jenkins, who was also my great grandfather, was the originator of the reclamation project that completed Murray Boulevard, other streets in the area and the sea wall. This project filled the mud flats, which at the time was an eye sore at low tide, and extended the seawall along the waterfront over a linear mile. The complicated project was accomplished in four phases.

The first phase reclaimed the land area along the Ashley River, and this phase lasted from 1909 to 1911. During this phase, 47 acres were filled by pumping nearly 700,000 cubic yards of silt and sand from the Ashley River. The land was raised from an elevation at its lowest point around six feet below mean sea level to over eight feet above mean sea level.

The actual building of the 3,885 foot sea wall connecting the Boulevard to East Battery was completed between 1917 and 1920, the second phase. The sea wall was a necessary component of the project because the 667,000 cubic yards of material that was pumped in to fill the land had to be contained. The bottom of the wall is surrounded by cobblestones and oyster

shells that hold the wall in place. The third phase was completed in 1922 and entailed building the roadway that passes in front of White Point Garden. The final phase was permanent paving, drainage, site and sewer work.

The entire project was not without funding woes. These financial challenges were dealt with by three different mayoral administrations: R. Goodwyn Rhett, John P. Grace and another great grandfather of mine, Tristram T. Hyde. The project was ambitious for the era, and each mayoral administration struggled to obtain loans.

By 1911, an initial 10 lots were offered at auction for \$25,700. In 1913, Charleston City Council agreed to sell 85 lots at \$250,000, but no interested parties came forward. Council lowered the offering price to \$230,000, and still, there were no buyers. So by January 1914, 45 lots were sold at auction for a sum total of \$94,000. The following year another five lots sold for about \$14,000 so the city continued to struggle financially with the project.

In 1916, philanthropist Andrew B. Murray came to the city's rescue offering to donate \$35,000 to \$40,000 initially, if the city would build the seawall at White Point Garden and connect the Boulevard with East

Battery. Murray's contribution paid for half of the actual cost of this phase, so in 1922 the Boulevard was named in his honor.

It was not until the late 1930s that the city sold the last of the Boulevard lots. In the end, the gross sales amount was almost \$40,000 less than the original cost of the land. The total project cost is undetermined because the project was continually burdened with excessive creative financing costs and varying accounting methods by different administrations and city councils throughout the life of the project.

During the past decade less than 15 homes have sold on Murray Boulevard, according to the Charleston Trident Association of Realtors Multiple Listing Service. From 2004 to 2007, the average sales price was \$2,368,181, with the average price per square foot nearly \$700. From 2008 to 2011, only three homes sold, with the price per square foot remaining the same.

In 2012, in addition to great-grandfather Jenkins' 52 Murray Boulevard selling, another three homes sold from \$970,000 to the before mentioned \$5,975,000. The price per square foot remained near \$700. There are currently three homes listed for sale of which two are under contract. Number 32

Murray Boulevard was built in 1929, features more than 5,000 square feet and has an asking price of \$3,950,000.

Very few Fort Sumter House Condominiums have sold according to the Charleston Trident Association of Realtors Multiple Listing Service. Two units sold in 2004; the average sales price was \$510,000. No units have been reported sold on the Multiple Listing Service since. Currently, there is one unit for sale on the top seventh floor with an asking price of \$1,299,000. This two-bedroom unit is marketed as having incredible views of the Cooper and Ashley Rivers.

On an early morning walk on Murray Boulevard a few weeks ago, I thought of the struggles our city leaders encountered in the early 1900s as they tried to realize a dream. In

retrospect, considering the project began only 46 years after the War Between the States had ended, it is wonderful and amazing to see our past leadership invest in positive growth for our city.

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