

32 Legare St. returned to splendor

The Sword Gates at 32 Legare St. remain as impressive as ever, but the mansion standing behind them has undergone a dramatic renovation that has created a stunning new entrance hall and has reassembled almost all of the original compound once owned by the family that gave the street its name.

The new owners agreed to extensive historical research that served as a blueprint for returning the house and grounds to their original splendor. The research will serve as an important record of the changes at a time when many of the city's grand homes are being altered faster than preservationists can keep up with.

The work:

- Recombined three properties that once made up the original house, including the house, a part that recently served as an inn and a former kitchen house along



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Tradd Street that later was divided into several apartments.

- Reopened a formerly enclosed second-floor piazza visible from Legare Street.

- Rebuilt the link between the 1790 southwestern section and the early 19th-century brick section in a period style with craftsmanship that appears equal to the best of what was being done in the 18th century.

- Opened a passageway through to Tradd Street, giving pedestrians a chance to look in.

- Added a garage where a greenhouse once stood, an addition that stores cars and masks the home's air conditioning units.

- Imported a greenhouse from England and assembled it off Tradd Street, near the property's eastern boundary line.

- Extensively documented the work, including photographs taken twice a week during construction. Some of those photographs and other research served as the basis for a 36-page, lavishly illustrated paperback book penned by local historian Sarah Fick. While not for sale, the book is available at local libraries and traces the property's history from 1700 to today.

By 1704, Solomon Legare, a Huguenot, owned the property and

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Sword Gates' mansion renovated

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hundreds more acres in and around Charleston. His family remained there for about a century and by 1779, the north-south street where they lived was referred to in legal documents as "Legare Street."

While the Legare's family history is deep, none of their buildings remain. In 1803, Jacob Steinmetz and Paul Lorent, two bachelor merchants, real-estate investors and builders, bought two Tradd Street houses at auction. They kept a section dating to 1790 but removed most of the house and its garden.

By 1819, the use changed dramatically from a bachelors' entertainment showplace to a girls' private school when Andrew Talvande bought the property and moved his family business there.

Their new mansion had a façade oriented to Legare and a side wing mostly hidden from Tradd by a long two-story service building with a central carriageway — a carriageway that was reopened during the recent work.

"The plan of the house is curious enough, but it is even more so when we consider that three separate residence complexes were lost to make way for it," Fick writes. "(Still) the result of Steinmetz and Lorent's construction was a Legare Street mansion as fine as any of its neighbors."

Contractor Richard Marks, whose crews did much of the plaster and woodwork, says the extensive documentation done on this job might be the owners' greatest gift to the city.

"What we're trying to do is pre-

serve these houses for future generations, and we want to document what we saw, so in the future someone can go behind us and say 'OK, this is what was done,'" Marks says.

"The houses are turning over so fast now. Sometimes, kitchens are being ripped out every two or three years. It's hard to keep up with the change," he adds.

"We are seeing so much change in Charleston now — it's happening so fast that the preservation community can't keep up with it. The new homeowners don't know, and they need to be told that this is a good thing to do or something that needs to be done. The more we know, the better off we are."

Entering the Sword Gates house from Legare Street is a big change. This section of the house, known as the hyphen, has been reworked extensively over the years. Where the main door once opened into a wall that shielded the entryway from a kitchen, the door now opens into a grand stair hall with a Palladian window with details that echo the main door.

"We had the opportunity to recreate a significant missing piece of the puzzle, the stair hall, one that had been lost," says architect Glenn Keyes. "While we didn't know what it looked like, we had the chance to recreate something of that period and equal to the quality of the house — to the high style architecture of the house."

"It's not something we often do because we're generally restoring intact elements," he adds.

The extensive work included a plaster medallion on the ceiling patterned after one at Drayton Hall.

"We actually had our hands on all the plaster work in the house. All the cornices — it was an enormous amount of ornamental plaster work for us," Marks says. "We got to do some of the nicest stuff in the house, and it was a whole lot of fun."

The other dramatic change, one that anyone can notice, is along Tradd Street, where the kitchen house has been recombined with the property and its carriageway reopened. Also, the gates along Tradd were rebuilt in a much more decorative fashion based on a 1907 painting of one of the gates.

The new owner, Betsy Dingman, says when she first looked at the Sword Gates house, she felt an unusual attraction toward it. Her husband Michael persuaded her to look at other Charleston area houses, but she never found the same feeling.

As it turns out, she wasn't the first in her family to feel that way.

Her grandfather, architect and artist Harold Tatum, did a dry point on paper image of its Tradd Street gate after he moved to the Lowcountry in 1934. She didn't know about the picture until Marks discovered it at the Gibbes Museum of Art as the work was drawing to a close.