

# HISTORIC SCHOOLS OF LEGARE STREET

By Sarah Fick

Today's preservation issues regarding historic schools tend to focus on purpose-built structures of the twentieth century designed by professional architects and erected by commercial building contractors. Their architectural variety marks changing attitudes about efficient design and visual attractiveness. The educational character of earlier schools in Charleston, however, is not always so clear. By contrast, their private, residential character often obscures their historic use.

Until the Friend Street School (forerunner of the Crafts School) was organized as a free school for white children in 1859, city government limited its role in education to the College of Charleston. Churches and beneficial organizations supported a number of others. Parents who could afford higher tuition sent their children to distant boarding schools, or to private schools housed in dwellings all over the city. Legare Street hosted some of the most prestigious. Location and climate contributed to this status.

In terms of its location, Legare Street, which runs between South Battery and Queen Street, is unique in having been purely residential—no shops, no tanneries, no warehouses.

This resulted from its location at the western edge of the planned city, relatively protected from the marshy inlet that regularly overwhelmed other streets. By the time lower Legare Street was reliably passable from South Battery to Tradd, other routes—King, Meeting, and Tradd—were permanently established as Charleston's primary commercial and shopping arteries.

Climate and type of use also played a part. Legare Street's clean air was refreshed twice daily by tidal breezes, and, opposite Gibbes Street, the "back garden" of the Miles Brewton House on King Street provided a broad green space into the late 1850s. Moreover, parcels remained undivided through several generations. Nevertheless, a

surprising number of Legare Street houses were converted to rental: as residuary property in estates, they served as reliable income properties. The combination of a healthy setting, large houses with ample outbuildings, and rental-readiness made Legare Street houses obvious candidates for boarding and day schools.

Between 1819 and 1934, at least five schools operated on Legare. The first of these was Madame Talvande's Select School for Young Ladies, followed by Miss Julia Datty's School and Madame Petit's School for Young Ladies. After the Civil War came the Misses Murden School for Children and Gaud School. Of these, only two earned lasting reputations, one because of a mythical elopement and one as a forerunner of Porter-Gaud School. Miss Datty's heritage remains in the Catholic diocese's school system; Madame Petit is forgotten except by music historians; and the Misses Murden School—later the Misses Sass School—survives in the recollections of middle-aged Charlestonians who recall where their grandparents learned to read and write.



Iron Gate of the Sass Residence:  
23 Legare Street (Once the Home  
of Colonel Arthur P. Hayne), ca.  
1914. By Alice Ravenel Huger Smith  
(American, 1876 – 1958)  
Conte crayon and pencil on  
paperboard. © Image courtesy  
of the Gibbes Museum of Art

Asked to name an earlier girls' school than present-day Ashley Hall, many Charlestonians reply, "the Sword Gate House," home to Madame Talvande. The reason is not the quality of Madame Talvande's school, which was high, or her longevity on Legare Street, which was considerable, but the power of fable. The legend of a young boarder escaping her schoolmistress to be secretly married has been repeated endlessly, but never officially documented. Alice R.H. Smith (*The Dwelling Houses of Charleston*, 1917), recounted the yarn told by "an old lady who was a pupil at that school some eighty years ago," adding the second component of the romance: Madame Talvande built the high wall around the grounds to prevent further getaways. The fact that the wall was in place before Talvande bought the property cannot stand

in the way of a good story. Neither can it be killed by the implausibility of a school's reputation surviving such a scandal in that era. The myth lives on, however, in the stories of many tour guides, but overshadows the story of one of Charleston's immigrant communities.

Andre and Ann Marsan Talvande were refugees from revolutionary upheaval in Santo Domingo (Haiti). Beginning in 1793, hundreds of white Santo Domingans reached Charleston and needed to earn a living. Raised in a world of cultivated privilege, they suddenly found

her furnished house (31 Legare), across from Madame Talvande's, should be rented to benefit her heirs. Miss Julia Datty immediately leased the property, moving her books, desks, slaves, and boarders into the Heyward home. This tenancy was brief. In 1831, Miss Datty closed her school, joined the convent of the Sisters of Mercy, and organized its School for Young Ladies.

During her tenure, Julia Datty educated Jane Amelia Postell. Later, as Mrs. James L. Petigru, Jane sent her own daughter, Susan, to Madame Talvande's in the



themselves with no land and only the few domestic slaves they had brought with them. Turning their education and accomplishments to profit, many became school teachers, music and dancing teachers, and even fencing instructors.

One of the first of these was Marc Datty, who taught French in his Hasell Street home. Aided by his daughter Julia, Mr. Datty expanded his operation into a boarding academy. In time, Julia Datty took over the school, employing several part-time teachers. Under Miss Datty's careful eye, teenagers became charming companions in the drawing room and at the dining table, as familiar as their future husbands with art, literature, and foreign travel. Despite moving every few years, the small school flourished, and Datty's wealthy clients endorsed it as the best of its type. As evidence of this devotion, Hannah Shubrick (Mrs. William) Heyward in 1829 bequeathed five hundred dollars to "my much esteemed friend Julia Datty." She further directed that for five years

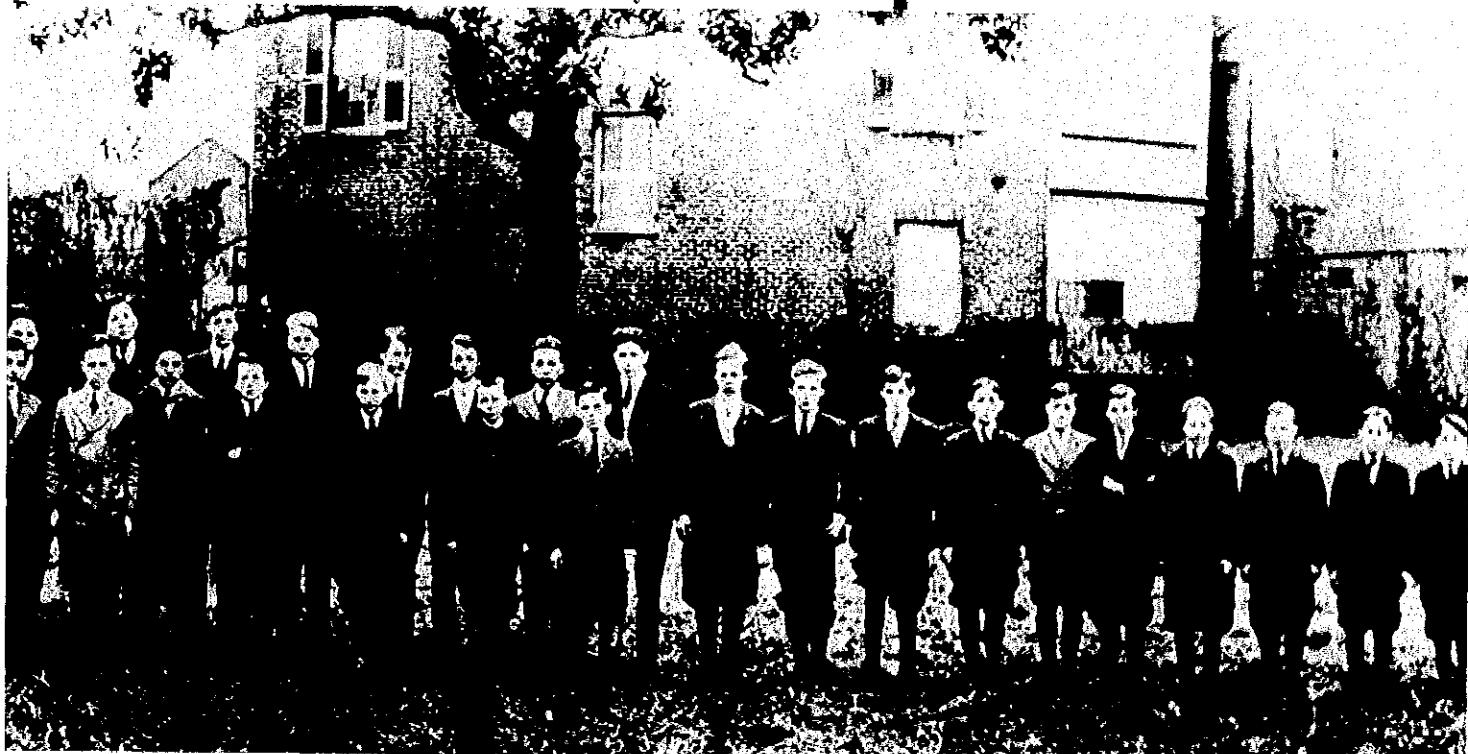
mid-1830s. Susan Petigru complained angrily about the high academic expectations, while her classmate, Mary Boykin Miller, was an enthusiastic pupil. Nevertheless, both were served as adults well by their education. Susan King's novels and short stories made her a minor celebrity in the literary and social worlds of New York City and Washington, D.C. Mary Boykin Chesnut's Civil War diary continues to be required reading for any student of South Carolina history.

One more house on Legare Street, the two-story residence at today's 17 Legare Street, is also known to have housed an antebellum school. During the ownership of Dr. Amory Coffin between 1855 and 1857, the property was leased to Madame Victor Petit and her daughter, Hermina, for their School for Young Ladies. By 1855, control of Charleston's private education had passed from Santo Domingans to other enterprising immigrants. The Belgian-born Petit family arrived in 1853 with significant advantages as female school proprietors: French was their

mother tongue, Victor Petit was a published composer, and Miss Hermina Petit had sung for European royalty. As teachers, they were immediately successful. Mrs. Petit and her daughter retrenched after Mr. Petit's sudden death in 1856, renting 17 Legare Street and resuming the voice lessons he had started. Soon they opened a school that offered "all the branches . . . for a finished education. French will be exclusively spoken." Upon the sale of their rented building on Legare Street, the Petits moved to other quarters. They were put out of business only by

the Sass daughters, Mary and Jane, worked in the new Misses Murden School for Children at 23 Legare, while his son, G. Herbert Sass, returned to class at the College of Charleston. When G. Herbert Sass began practicing law, his elderly aunts finally retired. A decade later, the academy was revived as the Misses Sass School, where Mary and Jane Sass worked into their sixties.

The Misses Sass School was in its heyday in 1908 when William S. Gaud, former headmaster of Lawrence Academy in Massachusetts, opened a new school next



Gaud School Boys ca. 1914. 29 Legare Street. Courtesy of Porter-Gaud School

the Civil War, an event that temporarily halted the notion of teaching children on the lower peninsula. Too close to cannon fire, this area was effectively abandoned.

Eliza Crawley Murden, the wife of a ship's broker and herself a published poet, had begun Mrs. Eliza Murden's Seminary in the 1820s. Her three daughters joined her as teachers; one of her daughters, Octavia, remained involved even after marrying Jacob K. Sass. During Sass's rise to the presidency of the Bank of Charleston, his wife and her sisters continued Misses Murden's Female Seminary on Society Street, boarding a half-dozen girls each year, until war forced them to close.

Octavia Murden Sass died late in 1862 and a few months later, Jacob Sass bought today's 23 Legare Street. Despite the Union siege, he, his children and their aunts, Malvina and Victoria Murden, moved into the new home. By the time the Civil War ended, Jacob Sass had died. When full-time residents returned to the lower peninsula after the Civil War, Malvina and Victoria Murden and

door. Gaud had married Isabel Williams of Charleston, and began the Gaud School for boys in a building behind their home at 29 Legare Street. Well-established by 1912 when the Gauds sold the property, Gaud School remained a respected college preparatory school. In 1964, the Gaud School merged with Porter Military Academy and the Watt School to become Porter-Gaud School.

No active schools remain on Legare Street today. The school founded by Julia Datty has become part of the Charleston Catholic School. The Crafts School was converted into condominiums in the mid-1980s. On lower Legare Street, the classroom outbuildings have mostly been demolished, and the houses and gardens no longer ring with the clamor of dozens of pupils. They serve as visible reminders, though, of the young scholars who once roamed the neighborhood on the way to their lessons.