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The Sword Gate House
32 Legare Street, pre-1810
Residence of Mr. and Mrs. Michael Dingman

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Background History

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- Solomon Legare, a French-born Huguenot jeweler and goldsmith who immigrated to Charleston as early as 1700 and became a wealthy landowner and businessman, originally owned the land on the corner of Legare and Tradd. His son, Solomon Legare the Younger, built a house on this property (actually on what is now the front lawn) that is shown on a 1739 map. The property stayed in the Legare family for four generations or nearly 100 years. The last Legare family resident was Solomon Legare the Elder's grandson-in-law, Issac Holmes.
- The oldest part of today's structure is found in its wooden southwest portion, and includes the south parlor, master bedroom and the family entertainment room. This section may have been built as early as 1790.
- By 1802, the property had been subdivided, and Jacob Steinmetz and a Mr. Knipping, whose business partner was Paul Lorent, were renting one of the tenant residences. Though beginning as tenants, Steinmetz and Lorent bought most of the Holmes property in the aftermath of a debtors' lawsuit against Mr. Holmes, and replaced his buildings with the dwelling now know as the Sword Gate House.
- In the 1820s, the property was sold to the Talvande family, refugees from the Santo Domingo slave uprising. After Mr. Talvande's death, the house served as Madame Talvande's girls' school, considered the best school in the city by Charleston's elite in the 1820s and 1830s. High brick walls were added to enclose the property at this time.
- George Hopley, Charleston's British consul, added a large stuccoed brick section to the property prior to its purchase in 1849. Hopley added what is perhaps the best-known feature of the property today: the beautiful wrought-iron gates, which bear an elaborate sword and spear design. Ironworker Christopher Werner made the gates "by mistake" when he was completing a similar pair for the Charleston Guardhouse in 1830.
- The house passed through several owners after that, including the daughter of Robert Todd Lincoln (granddaughter of President Lincoln).
- It was later subdivided, with the brick wing becoming an inn.
- Betsy and Michael Dingman acquired the property in December 1999. Now, after nearly three years, it has been rehabilitated as a single-family residence in a way that preserves the physical history of this landmark building.
- Is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Stairhall – Leigh Handal

- Recent restoration research indicates that an original staircase existed in approximately the same location as this new one now does. Around 1850, George Hopley, Charleston's British consul, replaced the original staircase.
- Perhaps the most dramatic alteration to the Sword Gate house is the new stairhall. Framed by its columned arch, the stairway completes the procession that begins with the front gate on Legare Street.
- The hallway is lit by a large window that takes its design from the entry fanlight.
- The lighting is of 18th and early 19th century origin.

Entry and Hallway (to left of front door)

- To the right is a fine Charleston clock by John Monroe of Charles Town
- The handkerchief table is English, Queen Anne style
- 1790 oval mirror, English, rococo style (back hall)
- The other mirror is 19th century
- In the back section of the entry hall, note the nautical themes of the paintings, one is a "reverse painting" on glass (Chinese in origin). Artists' names are on the paintings.
- The hallway arch had been closed in, and was reopened during this most recent renovation.
- Bust of Washington in back hall

Tradd Street Door and North Hallway – *Lacey Pringle*

- Prior to the recent renovation, this hallway had included a bathroom and a staircase that destroyed the grand first-floor space.
- Grand English breakfront, very high, Chippendale style, storage for dining room
- An eagle symbol from a harbor pilots' pilot house
- Archway you see marks where the house was once separated. This side was used as a Bed and Breakfast, the other as a residence.

Dining Room – *Carroll Ann Bowers*

- The hand-painted wall mural was inspired by views of Charleston Harbor, notably an early engraving from the 1770s.
- Charleston sideboard, 1790-1810
- The highboy is Southern, chest on frame, perhaps from Virginia, Queen Anne
- Mirror is English
- 10 Chippendale-style English chairs
- Table is a two-part banquet table

Ball Room –*Keven Eberle*

- Steinmetz and Lorent spared no expense to create the grand ballroom with its finely detailed Adamesque plaster and woodwork. An army of craftsmen recently spent months hand-cleaning and repairing the embellishments.
- A major Charleston painting that features the Porcher family, 1840; the mother was the little girl on her father's knee in the Miles family portrait to the right.
- To the right is a family portrait of the Miles family by Cephus Thompson, 1805. This is particularly significant because it is a painting of a Charleston family by a Charleston artist. The wife has died and her remains are supposedly in the urn. The family is wearing funeral clothes. The Miles had four children; the oldest was deceased. The family's infant child is missing in this portrait.
- 12 Queen Anne reproduction English chairs
- Another family painting
- Gaming tables on each side of the room. They are especially in unique in that both pairs in each set are still together.

South Parlor – *Susan Epstein*

- This is the oldest room in the two houses.
- Two highboys from New England, c. 1770
- The table is of Charleston origin
- Paintings and will from Basil Lanneau; his daughter Gracia received this copy. He wrote the will on June 26, 1876, the 100th anniversary of Carolina Day, commemorating the Battle of Fort Moultrie
- There is a lot of maritime art in this room (a particular interest of Mr. Dingman).
 - Note the interesting collection of “Sailors’ Valentines.” Sailors made these intricate, now rare, objects during their lengthy “down time” to bring home to their wives and girlfriends.
 - There is a jug collection from Liverpool.
 - There are whalebone tools and sewing tools made by sailors.
 - Telescope and barometer
- The watch hutches, serve as a resting place for one’s pocket watch
- Painting by William Soutag, 1864, of Harper’s Ferry

Breakfast Room – *Fanio King*

- The bird paintings in the Breakfast Room, artist not known; this is a great collection of so many watercolor paintings. Note the artist notes on the originals.
- English oak side table
- Walnut burle Lowboy

Wyeth Room

- Portrait of Mr. Dingman in his boat is by Wyeth's son Jamie
- The other portraits are by Andrew Wyeth and one by his father, NC Wyeth, known for his murals and children's book illustrations
- There are more nautical-themed things found in this room, including on the mantel and the compass
- Swords on the valences above the curtains reminds one of the Sword Gate
- Pennsylvania chest, c. 1780
- Gaff above mantel relates to one in painting
- Wig stand
- Document relates to the Marquis of Worcester and King Charles II

Upstairs Stairhall – *Mr. Meadows*

- The ceiling above is ornamented by a plaster medallion. Executed in place, with tools and techniques used in colonial Charleston, this ungilded pattern pays homage to the craftsmen of the 18th century.
- Venus de Milo on stairs
- Candleholders are French, bronze
- Empire Regency table with gilding

Upstairs Landing

- Nautical theme carries through here, along with eagles
- View of Charleston from a London magazine
- Ivory ship tools are carved, note the clothes pins, all probably carved by sailors
- Purchased plates in New Hampshire

Cypress Room (upstairs, outside master bedroom)

- The “Evolution of a Painting” paintings are by Stephen Scott Young. Tells the story of the artistic process (start to left above door, final painting over sofa).
- Portrait from rooftops of the house, perhaps attributable to Lucas
- Bust is from 1860
- Painting of “Esther”
- Mantel is 19th century Victorian
- Cypress paneling not original

Master Bedroom –*Sue Morrow*

- Bed is neoclassical
- Mirrors are notable, c. 1810, New York, with reverse painting
- The fireplace end irons are antique and of Charleston origin, with an unusual tool rest
- The bust is of Marie Antoinette, in marble
- English mirror by Marie Antoinette
- French chairs
- Small artwork, Napoleon III and Eugenia, c. 1830, by fireplace
- The second level of the piazza was enclosed when the Dingmans purchased the house in 1999. They have now been restored to their original historic appearance.

Red Bedroom –*Mrs. Meadows*

- This room had been divided into two smaller rooms, but was restored during the Dingmans' renovation.
- Toile pattern carried throughout the room
- Bed is new
- Note how the vents have been painted to blend in with the wall paper
- English linen press
- Harper's Ferry by W.C. Sonntag (1822-1906)
- Nantucket baskets
- Certificate of membership to SC Society for Capt. Joseph W. Clark

Green Bedroom –*Phyllis Fullmer*

- Oriental paper, reproduction of the original
- Towels in the bath match
- Desktop table, tilt top
- The bed is new

Loft Bedrooms –*Christopher Morgan*

- The attic of the brick wing has now been transformed into the children's bedrooms.
- Seaman's chest (blue bedroom)
- Pair of shieldback chairs (blue bedroom)
- Note decorative oar when you look up toward ceiling in green bedroom .
- In the hallway between the two bedrooms, not the half-map (done in four parts), is missing North Carolina. Shows Beaufort and Charleston.
- McKinney and Hall Indian prints in hall; the originals are in the Smithsonian, known for their series of Indian prints.
- Currier and Ives print of ship "Three Brothers"; largest sailing ship of the late 19th century

Family /Entertainment Room – *Mr. Fullmer*

- Prior to the Dingmans' renovation, this room had been partitioned into two rooms. The wall was removed to restore the space to its 1790s dimensions.
- Regency table
- Chinese chest
- Most of the furnishings in this room are new
- More Liverpool porcelain

Landing Room

- As going down stairs there is a print of the sinking of the Merrimac in Santiago Bay during the Spanish American War
- This area was open until the recent renovation (not an enclosed room) Mary Chestnut writes that, when she attended the Talvande School, the girls would go out onto this roof area to study the stars.

Kitchen House/Dependency –*Valerie Perry*

- When the Dingmans purchased the property in 1999, the kitchen house had lost its chimneys and the arched central carriageway, two of its most important architectural characteristics. These have now been restored.
- Dark, modern paneling was removed to reveal the historic brickwork of this space.
- With so many people on the property to be fed, the kitchen house features a double fireplace.
- Wrought iron cranes in oven
- Chinese export painting, c. 1867
- Rebecca at the Well
- Philadelphia stew pot
- More Liverpool pieces (like those in South Parlor and Family Room)
- Nautical themes and collections carried over from house (sewing pieces and whales carves out of whale bone, probably by sailors; ships paintings, one a reverse painting)
- Note nailing boards over fireplace. They are scored for stucco.
- As in house, vents are painted to match wallpaper.
- Coffee table is actually a “dough box.” Box was rocked back and forth to knead dough.
- 20th century writing chest (upstairs)

Gardens – *David Singleton*

- These dependences housed the kitchen and washroom, horse stalls and carriage room, and slave quarters.
- A large greenhouse once occupied the area where the garage stands today.
- Consolidation of the kitchen-house tract with the main parcel allowed a unified landscaping plan, and the grounds were completely redesigned.
- The brick wall that separated the kitchen house from the main house was taken down and the gates and piers on Tradd Street were reconstructed.
- Brick-paved walkways, intimate garden areas, fountains and reflecting pools now connect the historic buildings, the modern garage and the new greenhouse.
- The formal garden to the south of the house, was itself in the form of a flower, a “great daisy,” according to landscape architect Loutrell Briggs.

Kitchen/Exercise Room – *Lauren Oswalt*

- Although there were wells on the property, the present house was also equipped with a cistern. Rainwater, even stored in a brick vat, was fresher for drinking and bathing water than water drawn from an urban well. The cistern arches are now hidden behind the walls of the exercise room.
 - “Saint” seems to be associated with hearth and home because of utensils he is holding
 - Once had a very low ceiling, not used as a work or living space early on, even by servants. Ceiling has since been raised so room can be used as the house's kitchen and exercise room.
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