

**CHARLESTON CONTRADICTIONS: A CASE STUDY
OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION
THEORIES AND POLICIES**

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In Partial Fulfillment
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L. MENDEL RIVERS FEDERAL BUILDING, 334 MEETING STREET

The land that is currently occupied by the L. Mendel Rivers Federal Building—the west edge of the block bordered by Meeting, Henrietta, Charlotte and Elizabeth streets—has the address of 334 Meeting Street, but this parcel was originally 3 parcels—332, 334, and 340 Meeting Street. This land was originally granted to Richard Cole, the carpenter on the *Carolina*, the ship that brought the initial settlers to the Charleston area in 1670. After Cole's death, the Wragg family acquired the property by 1715 and sold part of it in 1819 to Joseph Weyman, who built a house at 340 Meeting Street in 1822. Nicknamed by the owner himself as “Weyman's Folly”, the house was reputedly designed by noted architect William Jay. Weyman lost the house relatively quickly due to financial difficulties and it subsequently passed through a series of owners (*News and Courier* 1948).

By 1849, the land on which the house stood was included within the boundaries of the city of Charleston. In 1919, the building was purchased by the Salvation Army and used as the Argonne Hotel during World War I. It was also used as the Soldiers and Sailors Club, the Twildo Inn, Osceola Hotel, and Charlotte Hotel before the Salvation Army sold it in 1938 (*News and Courier* 1948). After private owners held it again briefly, the property was condemned and purchased by the U.S. Government in February of 1941, along with the rest of the land fronting on Meeting between Henrietta and Charlotte streets (Kollar 2007, 4). The government's intention was to demolish the building, but this was delayed by the outbreak of World War II.

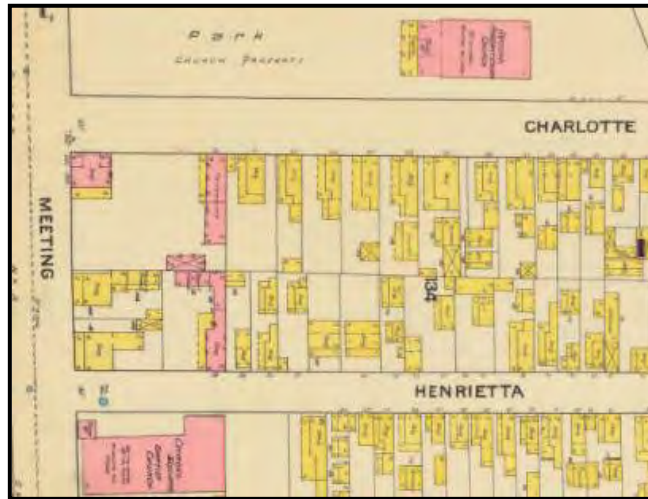


Figure 19: 1888 Sanborn map showing structures at 332, 334 and 340 Meeting Street (Weyman's Folly) Note the dense residential character of the block where the Federal Building would eventually be located. (Source: University of South Carolina digital collections)

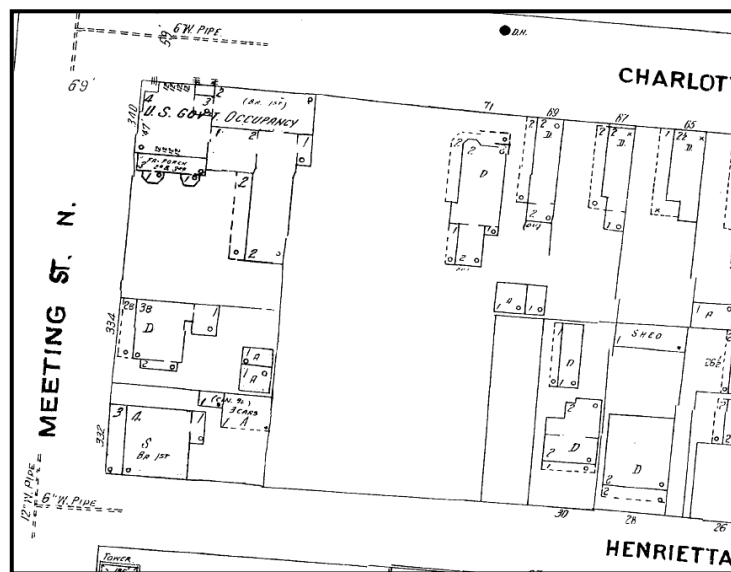


Figure 20: 1944 Sanborn map showing the U.S. Government occupancy of 340 Meeting Street. Besides a few outbuildings, there is very little change on the future site of the Federal Building between the 1888 and 1944 maps. (Source: Charleston County Public Library digital collections)



Figure 21: Undated image of Weyman's Folly, 340 Meeting Street. The house was built in 1822 and demolished by 1951. (Source: Margareta Childs Archive, Historic Charleston Foundation)

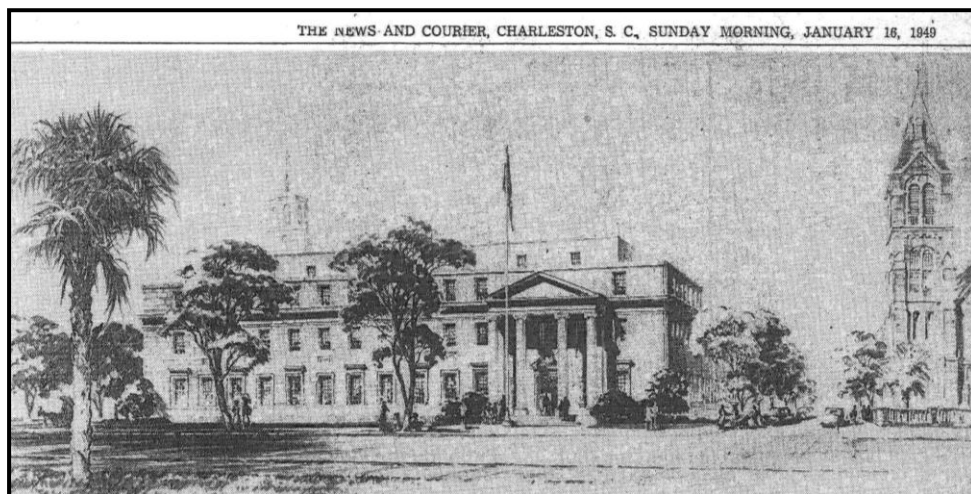


Figure 22: Rendering of the proposed post office on the site of the future Federal Building. Note that the design fronts Meeting Street directly and is much more in keeping with the traditional design of historic Charleston. (Source: Margareta Childs Archive, Historic Charleston Foundation)

On November 8th, 1948, the federal government announced plans to finally demolish Weyman's Folly and the rest of the buildings on the Meeting Street edge of the block in order to build a new post office on the site (*News and Courier* 1948). By 1955, the existing buildings had been demolished, but no progress had been made in building a new building and the site was being used as a parking lot. One of South Carolina's Congressional members, Representative L. Mendel Rivers (who the building that eventually occupied the site would be named after) tried to get Washington to commit to building a new structure in Charleston. Citizens were concerned that without a new building, federal operations would be moved to Columbia due to lack of space (Nielsen 1955).

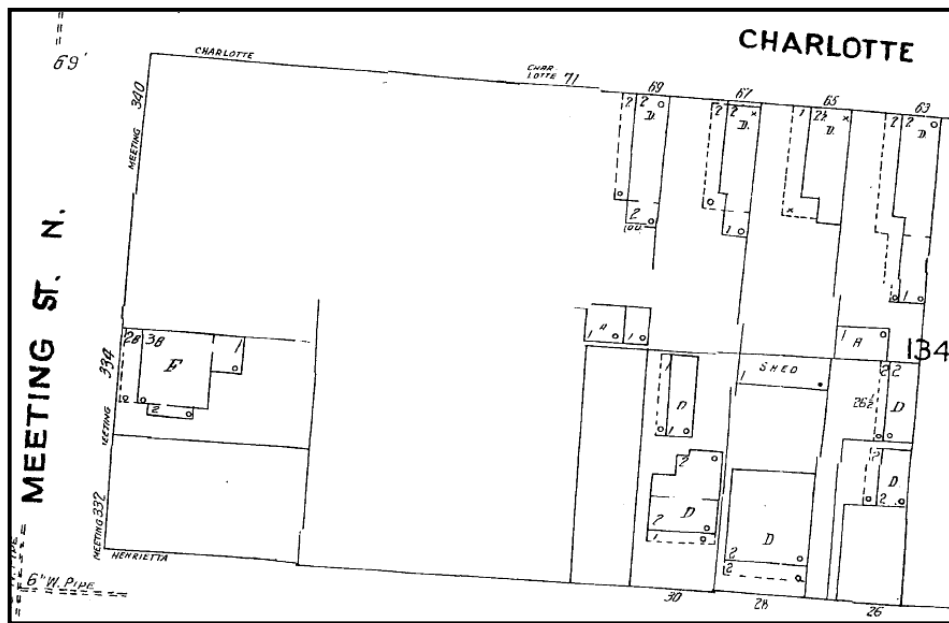


Figure 23: 1951 Sanborn map showing 332 and 340 Meeting Street demolished, leaving only 334 Meeting Street on the future site of the Federal Building.
(Source: Charleston County Public Library digital collections)

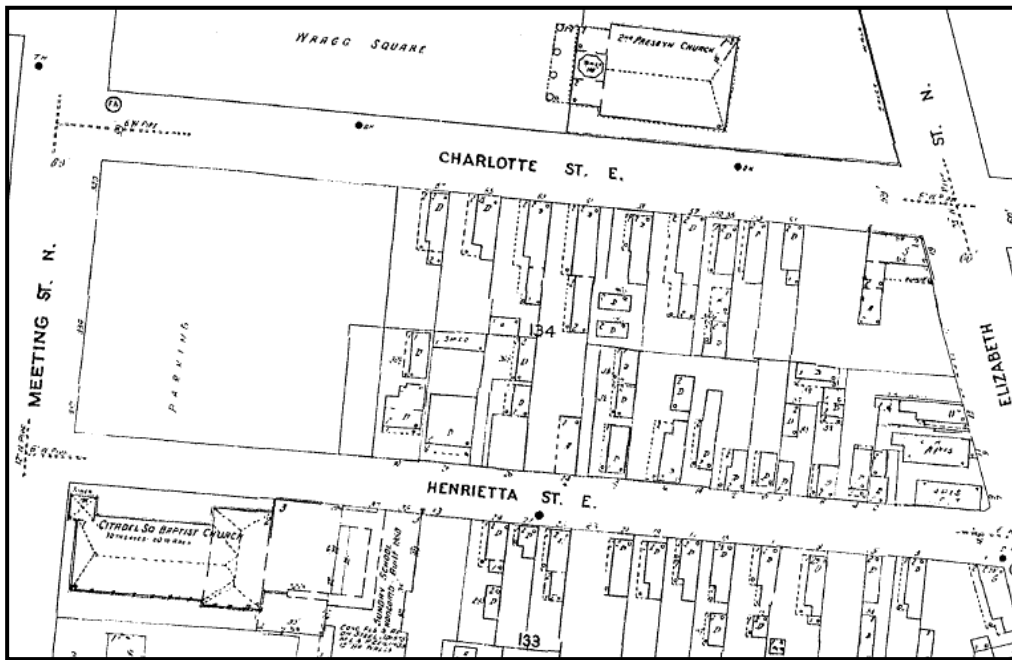


Figure 24: 1955 Sanborn map showing the entire site of the future Federal Building clear of structures. Note that construction does not actually begin on the new building until 1964.
(Source: Charleston County Public Library digital collections)

By 1960, the focus had shifted from a new post office building to a new office building in order to consolidate federal office space in Charleston. It was decided that the existing post office, at the corner of Broad and Meeting streets, would continue to function as the post office for the city. The General Services Administration asked for \$3,798,000 for the new building. Interestingly, the new plan to consolidate office space called for the demolition of the historic Custom House, a grand Greek Revival structure located on East Bay Street, but this was halted after local resistance. An article in the newspaper that was published on June 29th, 1960 referenced the recent library controversy when it opined: “We hope that if the proposed project is approved by Congress the government will not follow the example which was set locally in building the new country library, rather, that it will respect Charleston’s architectural heritage. It

can demonstrate the requirements of efficiency can be met without sacrificing beauty and distinction” (*Evening Post* 1960b).

When the contract for the new building was awarded in December of 1960, the total cost for the building had been reduced to \$2.8M and the total square footage had been reduced from the initial estimate of 144,000 down to 120,000. The architects for the project, given a \$106,000 contract, were the Columbia, South Carolina firm of Lyles, Bisett, Carlisle and Wolff, with assistance from the local Charleston firm of Cummings and McCrady—the same architects who had designed the new County library building that had opened only one month before. They were charged with completing architectural drawings for the new building by November of 1961 (*News and Courier* 1960).

The construction bidding for the new building began in January of 1964 and by that time, the budget had been further reduced to \$2.1M with a construction schedule of 540 days. To make up the \$800,000 difference from the larger budget, the architects cut out minor architectural details. The new building was designed to have office space for all of the federal agencies in Charleston, except for the Customs Bureau and Post Office. Holder Construction of Atlanta was chosen as the general contractor. Interestingly, an article at the time construction was beginning noted other construction activity in the vicinity, including the demolition of part of the east wing of the Old Citadel building (Hamilton 1964).



Figure 25: Federal Building under construction. (*Source:* the Charleston Museum)

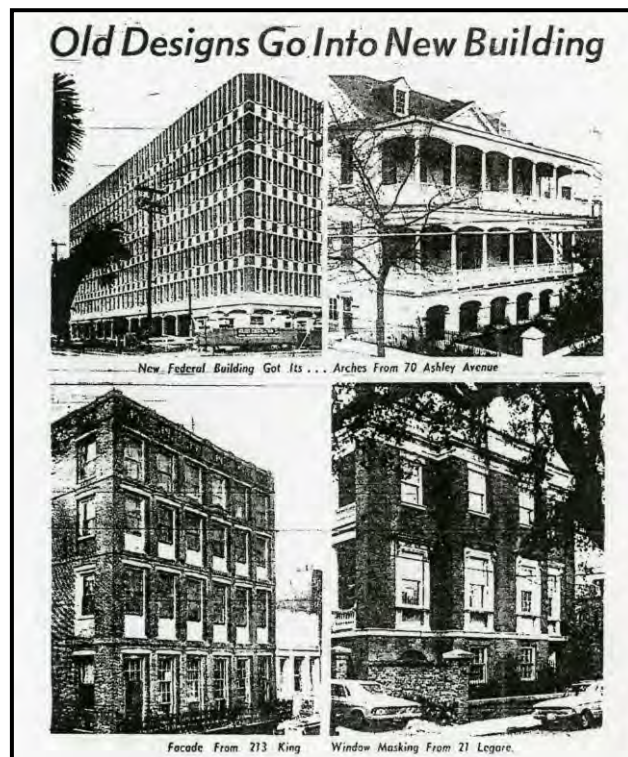


Figure 26: Charleston architectural influences used in the Federal Building by architect John Califf. (*Source:* *News and Courier*, March 3rd, 1965)

As compared to the controversy that surrounded the design of the new County library building just a few years earlier, there is virtually no mention of any issues with the design of the new Federal Building. There was no opposition to the demolition of the old houses on the site although, as previously mentioned, that occurred many years before the building was actually built. One of the vocal critics of the library building, *News and Courier* columnist Ashley Cooper, supported the new Federal Building, commenting that "... the new Federal building on the east side of Marion Square blends splendidly with our local architecture." Architect John Califf, perhaps noting the recent library design controversy, was "... anxious to create a contemporary building which would blend in to the Charleston background." To achieve this, he incorporated elements from traditional Charleston buildings, including the arches from 70 Ashley Avenue, the façade from (the now-demolished) 213 King Street, and window masking from 21 Legare Street (Cooper 1965).

By the time the building opened for use in 1965, it was hailed by the GSA as the "most modern in Charleston." The GSA also felt that: "The seven-story structure is of an architectural style 'which is in harmony with the most attractive structures in Charleston, presenting a spacious but functional appearance'." The building on its 1.25 acre site housed 344 employees, albeit with limited parking, and actually opened before the target date. The floor plan was the same on each floor, but could be customized by the federal agency on each floor for their particular needs (Hobbess 1965). The final construction cost was \$2.9M and the new Federal Building was dedicated in November of 1965 (Waring 1965). By April of 1970, however, the building had already reached capacity (*News and*

Courier 1970). Also in 1970, a retrospective of architecture in South Carolina celebrating the 300th anniversary of the founding of the colony featured the new Federal Building (Harlan and Hodges 1970, 146).



Figure 27: Undated image of the completed Federal Building. (Source: Charleston Museum)

Barely 30 years after the building was completed, *Post and Courier* columnist Robert Behre asked: “Might the L. Mendel Rivers Federal Building have a date with the wrecking ball? No date has been scheduled so far, but don’t count on the six-story office building lasting as long as other Charleston federal landmarks, such as the U.S. Custom House.” Commenting on the GSA statement from the dedication that the building was “a structure that reflects pride in the past and great hope for the future,” Behre noted “...even in a city that treasures historic buildings, that view has not lasted very long.”

The building was full of asbestos, which made its reuse and renovation more difficult, and this was one of the reasons that the GSA was considering razing the building and starting over. A prominent preservationist—Jonathan Poston of the Historic Charleston Foundation—commented on its preservation status, saying “At the time, it was well-intended, and its materials are of very high quality. But it’s not a building—even of its period—that is of the utmost important to preserve. It’s always been extraordinarily tall for that area of Charleston” (Behre 1996). Interestingly, when Poston’s landmark book *The Buildings of Charleston* was published one year later, the Federal Building was not included in the exhaustive survey, although both the old Charleston County Library and the Gaillard Auditorium were included.

The potential preservation of the Federal Building suffered another blow in November of 1998 when architectural critic Paul Goldberger appeared at an architectural forum sponsored by the Historic Charleston Foundation. At that event, he stated that he feels, in many cases, that people preserve existing buildings mainly because they are afraid of replacement buildings. In condemning examples in Charleston that do not match with the city, including the Federal Building, Goldberger commented: “I think that should be the goal when you build a new building in this city—to create a passionate interlude” (Behre 1997). Only a few months later, in April of 1998, the Federal Building was scheduled to be closed and all tenants were required to move out by the end of 2000.

When the building was scheduled to close, it was to be removed from the GSA inventory of federal buildings and other office space leased for the agencies that used it. The asbestos issue was mentioned again and the site was mentioned as a possibility for a

new hotel, since it had a “limited future.” Consultants working for the city of Charleston recommended that the city’s accommodations zone be extended above Calhoun Street to include the site. Robert Behre summarized the feelings of preservationists at this point by saying: “Despite the use of marble and brick in its construction, preservationists have said the building is too boxy and too tall, and not worth saving” (Behre 1998a). When future South Carolina governor Mark Sanford moved his office from the Federal Building to North Charleston in 1999, the building was “supposed to be demolished” sometime in the next few years, although no firm demolition date had been set (Kropf 1999).

In September of 1999, the Federal Building was heavily damaged when Hurricane Floyd passed through Charleston. The most important issue was the dangerous asbestos that was released by water damage from the storm. Immediately after the hurricane, spokeswoman Judy Brent of the GSA said: “This building will not reopen. And there will not be another federal building constructed.” She also mentioned the possibility that the building would be demolished and the site redeveloped, but did not give further details (Menchaca 1999). The last tenants in the Federal Building moved out in December of 1999 and, at that point, the federal government was “no longer interested in the property” and the fate of the building and site was unclear. While reuse or demolition were each possible at this point, the city of Charleston’s downtown plan mentioned the site as ideal for a public building, such as a symphony hall, or a hotel with retail on the ground floor (Behre 1999b).

With the fate of the site unclear, a developer quickly stepped forward with a proposal for the site. In May of 2000, Columbia developer Tom Moore proposed to

demolish the existing Federal Building and build a new one nearby, at the corner of Elizabeth and Calhoun streets. Despite the GSA's comments about not building a new building, by law, federal agencies must remain in the central business district of a city, if possible. Moore's proposal for the site of the Federal Building included 3 separate condominium buildings fronting Meeting Street, including a potential art gallery on the ground floor, and 4 single family houses on the site of the former parking lot. The deal would require a complex land swap between the developer, city and federal government and, due to the zoning requirements of the site, Moore was considering applying for a Planned Unit Development (PUD) (Menchaca 2000).

This proposal did not come to fruition and within a year, the city of Charleston began to make plans for the "...empty, asbestos-riddled building some have lamented as a modernist horror ...". The proposal was similar to Moore's, with the demolished building being replaced by an office building fronting Meeting Street and housing behind on the former parking lot. Mayor Joseph Riley was interested in helping Marion Square by building a better building closer to the street. He said: "We have a chance to create something that is infinitely more handsome than what we have." The asbestos issue with the building was mentioned as a major reason why renovation was not feasible (Hardin 2001).

The same project to improve Marion Square that proposed to replace the old Charleston County Library building had the same idea for the Federal Building and both existing buildings were characterized as "disliked by many." The proposal to renovate the Square was partly based on the fact that it was "bordered by some of the city's least

popular buildings” and the importance of getting residents’ input before the project started was noted (Hardin 2003). At this time, Cynthia Jenkins, executive director of the Preservation Society of Charleston, commented about the Federal Building: “Its not one of my favorite buildings, so it’s hard to get passionate about it. On the other hand, it is there. Is there a way to use it? One hundred years from now, will people go, ‘I can’t believe they didn’t save one of the few examples from that period?’,” indicating that the preservation of the Federal Building was not yet an important topic (Behre 2003). An editorial from early 2004 written by Edward Gilbreth referred to the buildings as an “uninspiring hodgepodge” and commented: “The former county library, the old federal building and several other structures surrounding Marion Square were born ugly and should be razed the same way regardless of what certain BAR members have to say about them Let’s not blow it—unless its with a fuse” (Gilbreth 2004). Interestingly, Gilbreth is the son of columnist Ashley Cooper, who had nothing but positive things to say about the Federal Building when it opened in 1965.

In February of 2004, the city of Charleston announced plans for a land swap, where the city would trade buildings on Broad Street for the Federal Building. Having the rights to the property on Broad Street would allow the federal government to locate offices there and keep a presence in downtown Charleston. In return, the city would obtain the redevelopment rights to 334 Meeting Street, where the initial plan was to put housing on the east side of the site and office, retail, and possibly a small inn on the west side. This redevelopment plan likely meant that the existing Federal Building would be demolished (Mcdermott 2004).

Later that year, Michael Maher of the Charleston Civic Design Center stepped forward and proposed that the Federal Building was worth preserving. He claimed that Modernism had been singled out as the most unpopular architectural style and that Charleston only had a few examples, including the old Charleston County Library building and the Federal Building. He was very critical of the preservation climate in Charleston and its apparent bias against certain periods, noting that: “In fact, in a community that prides itself on its activist historic preservation ethic, these two prominent public buildings have nobody clamoring for their preservation—the day they fall to the wrecking ball will likely be trumpeted as a day of progress in this historic city.” Maher claimed that the Federal Building was made of quality materials and that activating the ground floor and putting a rooftop addition on the building would revitalize it. Echoing the familiar bias against traditional architecture, he further advocated for preservation of the Federal Building by saying: “Or, will Charlestonians a generation from now wistfully lament the loss of a fine example of 20th century architecture as they gaze on a chunky early-twenty-first century quasi-traditional beige stucco block that stands in its place?” (Maher 2004).

Columnist Robert Behre of the *Post and Courier* thought that the potential preservation of the Federal Building was going to be a contentious debate. Taking the pulse of the city at the end of 2004, he commented that: “Many would like to see this boxy office building torn down and replaced with something that blends better with the surrounding historic neighborhood.” On the other hand, he notes that there were a growing number of preservationists who were interested in saving the building, since the

design was inspired by the existing historic architecture, it was constructed from quality materials, and it stepped back from the street to allow the view of the Citadel Baptist Church. While Behre noted that Charleston lamented past landmarks that had been torn down, like the Charleston Hotel and the Orphan's House, he also thought it was a sad commentary on the state of architecture that the Federal Building could not be replaced with something better. Perhaps he summed up the situation best by saying: "Sometimes I find a subversive relationship between architecture and preservation: The less faith we have in our ability to build quality new buildings, the more passionate we get about saving the old ones" (Behre 2004).

Behre voiced similar concerns as Maher in a later column, where he acknowledged how tastes can change over 40 years. While the Federal Building was featured in a 1965 AIA publication that reviewed new architecture projects, it, along with other examples of Modern architecture, were now amongst Charleston's least popular buildings. He stated that popular opinion of architecture, like many other things, goes through cycles and while many buildings are disliked in their "middle age," they are rediscovered once they reach a greater age. He reminded readers that the minimum age for the National Register of Historic Places is 50 years and once a building in Charleston reaches 75 years (recently changed to 50 years), its demolition must be approved by the Board of Architectural Review (Behre 2007b).

While preservationists were beginning to get interested in the fate of the Federal Building, the federal government was preparing to dispose of it. Even though the building was a non-contributing building in the Charleston Old and Historic District, the GSA

proposed to place a covenant on the property to make sure that future changes on the site would conform to the Secretary of the Interior Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties. The South Carolina State Historic Preservation Office wanted to ensure that the surrounding historic district was not adversely affected by the GSA disposing of the building (Dobrasko 2007).

In April of 2007, a group of architects gathered to propose a new vision for Marion Square. While the renderings show a new building on the site of the Federal Building, architect Richard Sammons acknowledged that the existing steel skeleton of the building could possibly be reused. Commenting on the architectural merit of the Federal Building, Sammons noted: “We’ve become a culture where we’re actually not allowed to judge the quality of everything. We can judge the quality of things, and that’s off the shelf federal GSA stuff from the 1960s. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen that building, the same one over and over and over again. The same detailing, the same cast concrete panels. It’s not unique.” He also echoed Behre’s comments about preservation, saying that the movement did not begin to save every building and that it was now primarily motivated by the fear of what would replace a demolished building (Behre 2007c).

After determining that the federal government did not need the site on Broad Street for office space, the GSA backed out of the real estate swap with the city of Charleston that would have given control of the Federal Building to the city. Instead, the GSA decided to sell the building on the open market, in an online auction that was scheduled to begin in the summer of 2007. This meant that the city would have less

control over the redevelopment of the site and the plan was to rezone it so that the city would have more say in the future plans (Slade 2007d). To counter this issue, the city decided to try and buy the building before it was auctioned off—a move that would require approval of the City Council. Mayor Riley thought that the site could be utilized for city offices, but was determined to get the best possible design approved, then sell the site to a private developer. While not explicitly stated, the city's plan appeared to be to demolish the building (Slade 2007e).



Figure 28: Rendering of proposed Federal Building replacement by architects Fairfax and Sammons, based on the old Charleston Hotel that was located further south on Meeting Street and demolished in the mid-twentieth century. (Source: Fairfaxandsammons.com)

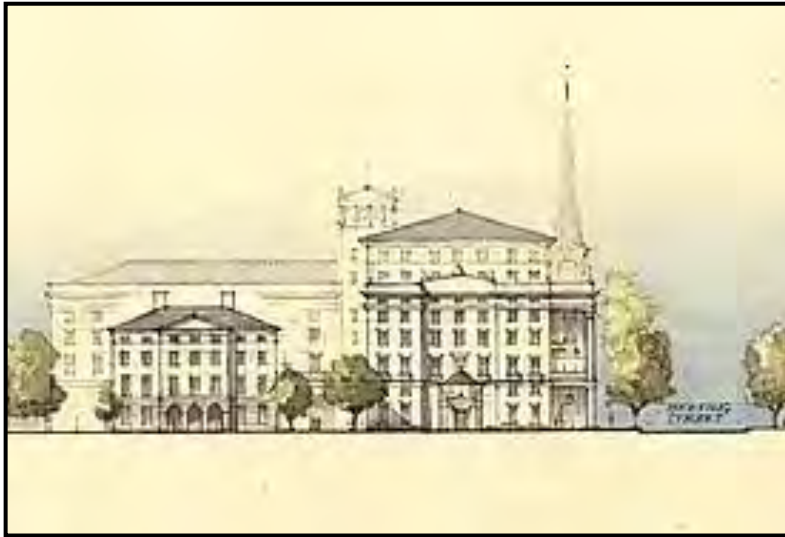


Figure 29: Additional rendering of proposed Federal Building replacement by architects Fairfax and Sammons. Note that the open portico preserves the view of the Citadel Baptist Church, one of the critical factors, according to preservationists, that makes the Federal Building worth preserving.
(Source: Fairfaxandsammons.com)

This plan was dealt a blow when the proposed rezoning was not passed due to neighborhood opposition and concern about the traffic that could result from increased density (Slade 2007e). The city decided to offer the GSA \$11.5M for the site, under the terms of a law that allowed local governments to purchase property that will be used for a public purpose before it is auctioned off. While the GSA wanted to get \$15M for the site, the city of Charleston felt the lower bid was justified based on their appraisal and the fact that asbestos remediation and demolition of the building was expected to cost upwards of \$2M. The GSA rejected the city's offer and set the opening of the online auction for August 17th, 2007, with a minimum bid of \$12M (Slade 2007f).

Only 3 qualified bids were submitted and the Dewberry Capital Corporation from Atlanta won the auction with a bid of \$15M. The principal of the company, John Dewberry was a part-time resident of Charleston, which may have piqued his interest in

the project (Slade 2007i). While no plans for the building or site were announced immediately, the thought was that “Whatever is proposed, it almost certainly will stir up controversy.” While some residents of the city continued to argue that the aesthetics of the building and asbestos situation merited demolition, others countered that it needed to be preserved and reused as one of the city’s only examples of Modern architecture (Mcdermott 2008).

On January 16th, 2008, the Federal Building was officially conveyed with the preservation covenant attached from the GSA to Dewberry Capital (Entorf 2008). Like the city originally planned, Dewberry wanted the building included in the accommodations district to allow a hotel use for the site. At this point, Dewberry was still weighing the options and it was not clear if they intended to reuse or demolish the Federal Building (Stech 2009). Although the plans were not clear, preservationists were beginning to take more interest in the building, as a November, 2009 article in the *Charleston City Paper* noted: “Initially, many observers expected the building would be destroyed to advance broader development plans for the entire site, but the nonprofit Historic Charleston Foundation and other preservationists suggested potential developers and the city take a second look at its significance” (Hambrick 2009).

Shortly thereafter, HCF released a position statement written by Winslow Hastie, the organization’s Director of Preservation and Museums. Hastie stated that HCF is in favor of reusing the building rather than demolishing it. The asbestos issue, which many advocates of demolition cited, would be an issue no matter which option is chosen for the building, Hastie argued. Some of the reasons that the building is significant, according to

the statement, are that it was the first major federal office building built in South Carolina after World War II, it is sensitive to the local historic context, and it is a product of President Johnson's "Great Society" and the 1962 Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture, which called for the best in contemporary architecture to be combined with the local architectural traditions. He also cited the building's position, stepped back from Meeting Street to allow views of the Citadel Baptist Church, but this point seems to violate basic urban design principles. The Federal Building should not be demolished at this point, because in order to properly evaluate buildings, Hastie argued that they must first be allowed to reach the 50 year mark (Hastie 2010).

While the initial thoughts seemed to suggest that the Federal Building was going to be demolished, Dewberry decided to renovate the building. The decision was also made to leave the exterior largely as-is in order to speed up the approvals process. On February 4th, 2010, the building received zoning approval to be included in the accommodations zone and the plan was for the hotel to open in early 2012 (Slade 2010b). Although the developer seemed sure of the plans for the building, the city was still debating its merits. As of March, 2010, "there's a sharp division over whether the building's current state is worth saving, whether its architecture contributes to the city." Dewberry hired a local architectural firm, Gibson Thompson Guess Architects, to begin working on the project. Their design concept was to keep the middle floors intact, potentially change the window tinting, reimagine the first floor, and fill in the top floor, where the mechanical systems were kept. The relatively few changes were thought to be

more economically and environmentally friendly and there was even talk of applying for preservation Reinvestment Tax Credits (Behre 2010a).

Dewberry applied to the BAR for conceptual approval of the project and it was reviewed by the board on January 26th, 2011. The board approved the demolition of a one-story mechanical room and an attached loading dock, the addition of a glass penthouse on the roof, as well as the majority of the conceptual scheme for the building. Board member Robert DeMarco was the lone dissenting vote, commenting that “If a building is bad architecture, I don’t care when it was built I don’t think we should keep it” (Kreitman 2011). The Preservation Society of Charleston and the Historic Charleston Foundation objected to the painting of the building and this was the lone point of the scheme that was rejected by the BAR (Slade 2011).

After the project had won conceptual approval with the initial 120-room count, Dewberry decided that it wanted to increase the number of rooms to 161. The neighbors were initially included in the plans, but were concerned how the increase in rooms was going to affect traffic, parking, and noise. An editorial in the *Post and Courier* called for more neighborhood input on future plans (*Post and Courier* 2011). Despite the potential objections of the neighborhood, the Board of Zoning Appeals approved the increased number of rooms and the next step was preliminary approval by the BAR (Byrd 2011). Residents were still concerned about the change, however, as Mayor Riley had promised a “boutique” hotel, not one with 161 rooms. As a compromise, public spaces were moved to the front of building, away from neighborhood residents, deliveries to the hotel were

limited to business hours, and a proposed roof pool and spa were to close at 10 pm (Hambrick 2011).

The issue of painting the building reappeared on the BAR agenda again when the reuse project was considered for preliminary approval on November 9th, 2011. The project received preliminary approval, but the issue of painting the building was deferred for further study. In order to show the BAR what the proposed painting would look like, sample panels were painted on the building in late 2011. Before it returned to the BAR, Robert Behre wrote an article questioning whether or not it was appropriate to paint the building. His conclusion was that, since the paint is easily reversible, that the owner should be allowed to do it, especially since Dewberry had committed to preserving the building in the first place instead of demolishing it. Behre opined that preservationists often thought too narrowly about how strict preservation needs to be and said: “Charleston’s buildings should be allowed to evolve as they change from offices or warehouses to hotels to apartments to restaurants. And as long as their changes don’t remove historic fabric or aren’t deemed too jarring then shouldn’t aesthetic ties be broken by the building’s owners?” (Behre 2012a).

The painting of the building was approved by the BAR at their February 22nd, 2012 meeting, with the stipulation that owner provide further details to staff. As of the summer of 2012, the project was scheduled to be completed in January, 2013 at a total cost of \$21.5M and contain 155 hotel rooms. The architects are McMillan, Padzen, Smith of Charleston in association with Gibson Guess Architects and the engineer is Promus Inc. from Atlanta. Additions to the roof of the building include a spa, meeting room,

fitness area and pool. The plaza in front of the building and ground floor will be activated by the additions of a hotel “living room”, signature restaurant, bar, café, and a 1,500 square foot function space that includes some outdoor space. As of the fall of 2012, the project has completed the three levels of BAR approval and is moving forward. The architects have outfitted 3 rooms with sample furnishings and fixtures and the project was scheduled to go out to bid soon (Wingfield interview 2012).



Figure 30: Sample painting of the Federal Building done by the owner to show the BAR what the building would look like painted. (*Source:* photo by the author)



Figure 31: Rendering of the proposed entrance to the Hotel Dewberry.
(Source: Charlestonbusiness.com)