



Thomas Rose House
No. 59 Church Street
c. 1735

MLS Text

The Thomas Rose House was constructed c. 1735 and is considered one of Charleston's best preserved colonial dwellings. The house has retained many of its original architectural elements, including extensive interior wood paneling, decorative mantelpieces and a unique full-width second-story drawing room unlike any other in the city. The building is associated with Charleston's earliest acts of historic preservation and was one of the first residences to be listed within Charleston's Historic District, America's first historic district, in 1931. The property consists of a double lot, and features an expansive Loutrel Briggs-designed garden and original outbuildings. Rear piazza enclosures and an addition to connect the outbuildings with the main house have allowed for state-of-the-art modern amenities and extra living space without jeopardizing the dwelling's esteemed historic character.



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Property Timeline:

- Mar. 15, 1680: Lot 61 in Grand Modell is granted to Elizabeth Willis.
- July 18, 1699: William Elliott purchases Lot 61 and conveys the northern half to Thomas Elliott.
- Feb. 11, 1730: Will of Thomas Elliott states “the house and lot in Charlestown shown on the Grand Model of the Town as Lot #61, in which Capt. John Hext now lives” is to be given to his daughter, Beuler Elliott.
- Jan. 12, 1733: Beuler marries Thomas Rose, and together they have 7 children.
- Dec. 8, 1734: Thomas Rose writes from Charleston to his brother Richard Rose, in Berkshire, requesting four workmen for brick laying and to send over four such men willing to “sell them selves” for four years. This is most likely for the construction of his new house on Church Street.
- 1735: Architectural and structural elements of the Thomas Rose House point to a 1735-1740 construction.
- 1739: The Thomas Rose House is first depicted on the *Ichnography of Charles Towne at High Water* map.
- 1740: The Thomas Rose House survives the great fire of 1740, which devastates the neighborhood.
- Apr. 3, 1741: Thomas Rose and wife Beuler Elliott sell the house and lot known on Grand Model as Lot #61 to merchant Benjamin Savage.
- 1750: Benjamin Savage dies, and the property passes through the Savage family for the next 90 years.
- 1775: The Thomas Rose House becomes a rare survivor of another great area fire.
- Mar. 16, 1836: Thomas Savage and his descendants sell the property through Master in Equity (perhaps a way to avoid foreclosure), and the Commission of Equity sells the lot and house to the Baptist Church of Charleston.

- Mar. 25, 1847: The Baptist Church sells the property to Jonathan Lucas, grandson of the Jonathan Lucas who established the first steam-powered rice mill in South Carolina.
- Feb. 14, 1849: Jonathan Lucas subdivides the property and sells the northern half, occupied by the Thomas Rose House, to W.S. Dewar. The same day, Jonathan Lucas sold the southern section James L. Bours, who constructs No. 57 Church Street .
- 1886: The structure survives the great earthquake of 1886.
- 1929: The house is purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Frank E. Whitman and restored by noted architect and preservationist Albert Simons. The front entry is officially removed.
- 1931: The Thomas Rose House is one of the first dwellings to be listed within Charleston's Historic District.
- 1942: The Whitman family sold the house to Connecticut architect Henry P. Staats.
- 1954: The Staats purchased the dilapidated No. 57 Church Street next door and demolish it to create an expansive south lawn garden.
- 1961: The Church Street Historic Foundation is founded to help preserve the surrounding area of Church Street. The Thomas Rose House becomes the Foundation's headquarters.
- 1970: The house was listed on the National Register of Historic Places
- 1992-1998: Mrs. Staat's granddaughter, the current owner, restored the garden back to her grandmother's original plan.

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Introduction

The Historic District of Charleston, South Carolina is one of the nation's finest architectural examples of America's colonial and antebellum past. A living city that has incorporated historic construction and tradition into its everyday life, Charleston's streets are lined with traces of the victories and defeats of an over 300-year-old city that millions travel to experience each year. Behind each door lie stories of families, of natural disasters and wars, and of architectural progression and preservation. Many have deemed the historic ambiance of Charleston's historic district unlike any other in world, and the Thomas Rose House, located at No. 59 Church Street, is one of the district's most significant contributors.

Charleston began as a piece of uncharted territory, fertile land shaped by winding waterways and a lush coastline. This land soon became the desire of foreign influence, and in 1663, King Charles II of England granted land known as Carolina to eight of his Lords Proprietor, many of whose names can still be seen through the towns and counties in South Carolina today. In 1680, the settlement of Charles Towne was established on the peninsula, welcomed its first colonists and was divided into narrow lots, which were granted to those appointed by the King's Lords Proprietor. These lots, collectively known as the "Grand Modell," defined the urban design of the town's original grid, creating the foundation of Charleston's city plan one sees today.¹ The Thomas Rose House sits on original Lot 61 (Figure 1), granted to Elizabeth Willis on March 15, 1680, one of the few grants given to a woman.² Over 330 years later, the Thomas Rose House property has retained the original dimensions of Lot 61, a rare trait within the Charleston Historic District.



Figure 1: (left) Lot 61 highlighted in overall Plat of Charles Towne in the Province of Carolina, 1698; (right) detail of map

¹ Jonathan H. Poston, *The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City's Architecture*, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 16-17.

² Susan Baldwin Bates and Harriott Cheves Leland, *Abstracts of the Records of the Surveyor General of the Province, Charles Towne 1678-1698*, Vol. 3, (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2007), 134-135.

Wealthy Beginnings: The Charleston Merchant House

Charleston merchant Thomas Rose constructed the dwelling at No. 59 Church Street in c. 1735 on land inherited by his wife, Beuler Elliott. Twelve-year-old Beuler Elliott inherited Lot 61 in 1731 from her father, and Charleston carpenter, Thomas Elliott, who had acquired the property decades prior in 1701. In 1733, Beuler married neighboring Church Street native Thomas Rose, and it was upon their marriage that Rose began construction on a new dwelling.³

Records suggest the couple demolished an earlier dwelling Thomas Elliott constructed on the property to make way for their new home.⁴ This was most likely to upgrade their living quarters to reflect the increasing wealth acquired by Thomas Rose. At the time of No. 59 Church Street's construction, the colony and port of Charleston was booming both culturally and economically, surpassing other major cities such as New York City, Philadelphia and Boston in cultural innovation and collective wealth. For example, in the 1730s Charleston hosted the opening of the first purposely-built theater and the first performed opera in America just a few blocks away from the new Rose family property at the Dock Street Theater.⁵ The city also experienced an economic upsurge from the mass production and exportation of rice, indigo and material goods. For much of the mid 1700s, Charleston was the wealthiest city among the British colonies, and for a merchant with plantation holdings like Thomas Rose, this was a lucrative time.⁶

The peninsula also looked very different. Charleston was the most southern English capital in the colonies and its proximity to Spanish and French settlements was a constant threat. By 1704,



Figure 2: detail of *The Ichnography of Charles Towne at High Water*, 1739

brick and earthen walls and fortifications were constructed to encircle and protect the most intensely developed area of the colony, which at that time was the area bounded by today's Meeting, Water, East Bay and Market Streets.⁷ The Thomas Rose House was constructed just inside the city's southern wall, which most likely bisected much of the garden today (Figure 2). Because of the wall, at the time of Beuler Elliott's inheritance Church Street terminated at Vanderhorst Creek, today known as Water Street, but by the late 1730s, the population of the peninsula had nearly doubled, and expansion was necessary.⁸ By 1740, a bridge was constructed over the creek and for the first time, Church Street continued past the waterway south to Broughton's

Battery on White Point, now occupied by White Point Gardens. By 1788, much of the city's fortifications had been dismantled and

³ "Record of Ownership of the House at 59 Church Street," 59 Church Street Property File, The Margareta Childs Archives, (Historic Charleston Foundation, Charleston, SC).

⁴ Poston, *Buildings of Charleston*, 68.

⁵ George C. Rogers, Jr., *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1980), 110-111.

⁶ Emma Hart, *Building Charleston: Town and Society in the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 3.

⁷ Poston, *Buildings of Charleston*, 17.

⁸ Ibid.

Vanderhorst Creek was filled in to make Water Street.⁹

Life as a colonial merchant in North America's prime port city was a fruitful career, and the abundant original architectural evidence surviving at the Thomas Rose House confirms the dwelling's construction was both of high quality and high fashion. According to Citadel history professor David Shields:

The striking expression of the cosmopolitanism of the city's mercantilist-imperial heyday...the high style of the ornament and detail in the house does express a more than provincial artistic skill; it is the best "English work."¹⁰

Built of brick and oyster shell plaster, the Thomas Rose House was constructed in the Georgian architectural style and merchant house plan, which was popular in American and English port cities during the mid 1700s. Further confirming Rose's desire to emulate fashionable English architecture is a 1734 letter from Rose to his brother in England, requested four English bricklayers to be sent to Charleston, most likely for the construction of his new dwelling.¹¹ The asymmetrical floor plan, yellow pine floors and simple yet robust paneling of cypress and walnut, the preferred material for finer Charleston woodwork prior to 1740, appear much as it when Rose constructed the dwelling.¹² This is especially true in the larger first-floor front room, which retains an original mantel and wall paneling. One of the most striking interior features, however, is the second floor drawing or dining room, which stretches the entire length of the house and is the earliest surviving example of this plan in Charleston.



Figure 3: The Thomas Rose House, 1929 (photo courtesy of Historic Charleston Foundation)

Although the Thomas Rose House is considered one of the best-preserved colonial residences in Charleston on the interior, the house looked significantly different on the exterior when Thomas Rose and new wife Beuler took residency in the 1730s. Serving as both a residence and office, the dwelling originally featured a front entry, which led from the street into the smaller front room, most likely used as a counting room.¹³ This can be best seen in a c. 1929

photograph of the dwelling before it was removed (Figure 3). The piazzas now present were added the 1800s, and the house most likely originally featured a two-tiered porch, as indicated by

⁹ *Ichnography of Charleston*, 1788 (Map Collection of Charleston County Public Library, South Carolina Room, Charleston, SC).

¹⁰ Letter to Cathy Forrester from David Shields, February 14, 1989, 59 Church Street Property File, The Margaretta Childs Archives, (Historic Charleston Foundation, Charleston, SC).

¹¹ Letter to Richard Rose from Thomas Rose, December 8, 1734, 59 Church Street Property File, The Margaretta Childs Archives, (Historic Charleston Foundation, Charleston, SC).

¹² Carter L. Hudgins, *Vernacular Architecture of Charleston and the Lowcountry* (Charleston: Historic Charleston Foundation, 1994) 38.

¹³ *Ibid.*

the inconsistency in the upstairs center window of the drawing room, which most likely once functioned as a door. The Thomas Rose House may have looked quite similar to the Eveleigh House at 39 Church Street, which was constructed six years later in a similar manner (Figure 4).



Figure 4: The Eveleigh House, 1979 (photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Shortly after the building's construction, Thomas Rose and wife Beuler Elliott sold No. 59 Church Street in 1741 to Benjamin Savage, whose family retained ownership of the property for the next ninety years. Martha Savage, who resided at No. 59 Church Street from 1750 to her death in 1760, kept twelve slaves on the property.¹⁴ Her personal inventory at the time of her death gives a unique look into what the house contained, including over a dozen Mahogany tables, over four dozen pieces of China and five paintings in gilt frames in

the upstairs drawing room. The extensive list of garden equipment, including 11 birdcages, also allows for an excellent curiosity of what the garden or yard may have looked like.¹⁵ It was under the Savage family ownership that the piazzas were added, as well as the mantels in the upstairs drawing room and master bedroom, which most likely replaced larger mantels paneled in Dutch blue tiling.¹⁶

Preservation Pioneers

Not only is the Thomas Rose House a colonial architectural landmark in the city, but it also played a major role in Charleston's pioneering historic preservation movement in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1929, under the ownership of Mr. and Mrs. Frank E. Whitman, the residence went through an extensive restoration by Charleston architect Albert Simons. Albert Simons was locally and nationally acclaimed for his architectural design and preservation efforts, which included the restoration of other iconic Charleston buildings such as Rainbow Row and the Dock Street Theater. Two years after his work on the Thomas Rose House, he helped create Charleston's Historic District and the Board of Architectural Review in 1931, both the first of their kind in the nation. The recently restored Thomas Rose House became one of the first residences to be listed within the historic district, and in turn has served as a principal property within America's oldest and best-preserved historic district for the past 80 years.

During the 1929 restoration, Victorian details on the piazza and piazza door were removed and replaced with those of traditional Charleston colonial style elements. The smaller first floor front room was converted into a library though the addition of shelving, and the original entrance of the 1735 dwelling located in this room was converted into a window (Figure 5).¹⁷ It is also during this time that missing mantels were replaced throughout the home, and a bathroom and kitchen were added by enclosing part of the piazza in the rear. Room dividers in the upstairs drawing room were removed, as well as paint from the stair hall to expose original walnut paneling, and

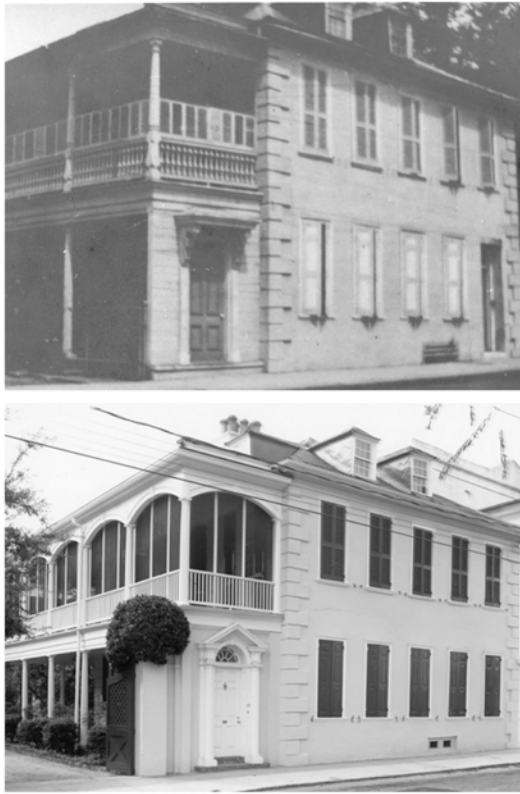
¹⁴ Poston, *Buildings of Charleston*, 69

¹⁵ "Inventory and Appraisement of the Estate of Ms. Martha Savage, 1760; Inventory, Charleston (1758-1761)," 59 Church Street Property File, The Margareta Childs Archives, (Historic Charleston Foundation, Charleston, SC).

¹⁶ Robert P. Stockton, "Thomas Rose House One of the most unspoiled," *The Post and Courier*, undated, 59 Church Street Property File, The Margareta Childs Archives, (Historic Charleston Foundation, Charleston, SC).

¹⁷ Letter from Frank Whitman, 1945, 59 Church Street Property File, The Margareta Childs Archives, (Historic Charleston Foundation, Charleston, SC).

the original kitchen house was connected to the main house by an addition.¹⁸ According to owner Frank Whitman:



Briggs, who is credited with designing over 100 gardens within the Historic District, many on Church Street.²¹ In order to create mature sections of the garden, topsoil from John's Island was delivered, as well as elements such as longleaf holly from the upstate of South Carolina and sweet bays from surrounding Lowcountry marshes. The high garden wall and entrance gate one sees today were also added at this time. With this southern property addition, the original dimensions of Lot 61 were retained for the first time since the early 1700s. The Thomas Rose House and property remain relatively unchanged today, and are listed on the National Register for Historic Places (Figure 6).

Deemed as “one of the most unspoiled,” “a classic example of a merchant house” and “Charleston's best specimen of colonial architecture,” the Thomas Rose House significantly represents a time period both when Charleston was considered the wealthiest colonial city in the nation, and a leader in preservation.²² Narrowly escaping the great fires of 1740 and 1775, which destroyed nearly all neighboring dwellings, surviving military occupation and bombardment throughout the American Revolution and Civil War and enduring the age modernization and development in the twentieth century, the Thomas Rose House has withstood the test of time, and will continue to be one of the most valuable historic dwellings in America's best preserved city.

²¹ Louisa Pringle Cameron, *The Private Gardens of Charleston* (Charleston: Wyrick & Company, 1992), 22.

²² Robert P. Stockton, “Do You Know Your Charleston?” February 2, 1975; “The Thomas Rose House,” National Register for Historic Places Nomination Form (Columbia: South Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1970).