

THE MANSION HOUSE

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The very word "mansion" interests me. In its most famous usage Christ said: "*In my Father's house are many mansions.*"¹ Having been born and raised in the coastal Carolina, I had always thought that a "mansion," as Christ used it, was a large, two-storied, columned, white structure built on an eminence. However, when I recently looked up the word in a dictionary and found it to mean "A dwelling place; abode," "A separate lodging, apartment, etc." and only in the third meaning given was "mansion" defined as "Formerly, a manor house; hence any house of some size or pretension."² The word "mansion" meaning a "dwelling place" or "abode" is found in nineteenth century American usage. When researching the genealogy of my wife's family, I found that her great grandfather left to each of his twelve children a tract of land and "a mansion." Originally, I wondered at his opulence only to find that he meant "a house." However, when Colonel William Toney named his newly built hotel the "Mansion House," he intended the Carolinas' meaning (and the third definition) for to him the name implied "great, fine, large, extraordinary," a place of magnificence, excellence, and grandeur.

The building of the Mansion House came when a practical businessman saw economic opportunity in the growing tourist business in the village of Greenville. As James M. Richardson wrote:

From the beginning of permanent settlements in 1784, Greenville County had been recognized as a desirable summer resort, and many residents of Charleston were soon spending a few months of each year here. Some of these purchased plantations, while others became "paying guests" with their friends. But there seems to have been no effort put forward to commercialize the health-giving quality of the climate till 1815, when Edmund Waddell rented the Alston

¹John, 14:2.

²Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary*, tenth edition (Springfield, Mass: G. and C. Merriam Company, 1958), 512. "Mansion" is derived from the Latin *maison*, a dwelling, through the French *masure*, *manum*, to dwell. It is another contribution of the Norman conquerors to the English language.

residence [Prospect Hill] from Vardry McBee,⁷ and opened it into a hotel, or summer resort. Waddell was of the type who make ideal hosts, and this quality, combined with the excellent accommodations which the Alston mansion afforded, soon filled Greenville with the aristocracy of the coast . . .

But it was not until the year 1824 that Greenville began in earnest to entertain these summer visitors, who by this time had become one of the principal sources of income for the village.⁸

In 1822, Colonel William Toney, reputed to be one of the wealthiest men in Greenville District,⁹ determined to build a hotel which would "excel any house in the upper part of the state in appearance and accommodation for the traveling public."¹⁰ He bought lots number seven and eight¹¹ from Samuel Crayton for \$5000¹² and began to build. In 1824 he completed the Mansion House and it graced the northwest corner of the town square (later the corner of West Court and South Main streets) for a century. Colonel Toney operated the hotel for seven years before selling it to Dr. John Crittenden in 1830.¹³ Between its purchase by Dr. Crittenden and the Confederate War additions were made to the Mansion House and it had a succession of owners in its century of existence.

The Mansion House¹⁴ was a three-story, brick building which elbowed around the park,¹⁵ where the historical marker honoring Joel Roberts Poinsett now is, running from Main Street on

⁷McBee bought out Alston's holdings about this time but did not move to Greenville for some twenty years.

⁸James M. Richardson, *History of Greenville County, South Carolina* (Spartanburg: The Reprint Company, 1980 (originally published 1930)), 62-63.

⁹There were no counties in South Carolina between 1799 and 1868. The local political unit was the judicial district.

¹⁰Richardson, *History*, 63, quoting an unnamed source.

¹¹These were so designated on the Alston plat when Lemuel James Alston laid out "Pleasantburg" in 1797. See Mary C. Simms Oliphant, "Genesis of an Up-Country Town," pages 43 to 58, *supra*.

¹²This was a very high price for the time but it included Crayton's dwelling.

¹³Dr. Crittenden owned two lots across Main Street from the Mansion House where he operated the Greenville Hotel (sometimes called "Crittenden's Hotel") and a store. *Greenville Mountaineer*, January 14, 1831.

¹⁴I remember the Mansion House as it was during my tour of duty at Camp Sevier in 1917 and upon my return to Greenville in 1919 after military service in Germany.

¹⁵The four small parks at the crossing of Court and Main streets were created when the streets were opened across the earlier court house square.

its east end to West Court Street on its west end. The Main Street entrance, five steps above the sidewalk, was the principal entrance while two entrances from Court Street opened into a large basement. Across the entire front at the second-story level ran a six-foot-wide iron balcony with an ornamental iron railing and supporting brackets. Adjoining the original building on the north was the annex, a four-story building, also with a second-story balcony. On these balconies the patrons of the hotel would gather in the evening to enjoy any breeze that was wandering up Main Street. Patrons and citizens also filled the balconies when Greenville put on one of its many parades of soldiers, veterans, fire horses, circuses, political figures, or whatever. It was the custom for hotel guests — and, later, store occupants — to bring out what were known as “captain’s chairs” to the sidewalk, and tilt them back against the building, to better view the passers-by, and to swap gossip.

The Mansion House was constructed of brick, evidently manufactured locally. At the ground floor, the walls were twenty-four inches thick, reducing to eighteen-inch walls at the first floor level and twelve inches above that. There was a dormer roof, with windows on the fourth floor. Most rooms had a fireplace in them and there were many chimneys. In the main reception room or parlor, there were two large fireplaces, one at each end. There was a wide, easy circular stair that led to the third floor. The windows were shaded with large, sliding, slatted blinds.¹² An elevator, operated by a rope, ran from the basement to the third floor, primarily for the handling of baggage.¹³

The lobby was floored with twelve-inch marble tiles, the first marble tiling ever brought to Greenville.¹⁴ A large dining room did double duty as a ball room.¹⁵ In the basement was a large bar room and a card room, which opened on a court, in the mid-

¹²I have a pair of the slatted blinds from this hotel which I used to cover a seed bed in my garden.

¹³I have a porcelain plate labeled “Elevator” from this facility.

¹⁴Mrs. Mildred Whitmire has a marble tile floor in her dining room and den which her father-in-law purchased from the owners of the Mansion House before its demolition.

¹⁵Interview with Albion A. Gates by Wayne Freeman, September 11, 1941. Gates managed the Mansion House from about 1886.

dle of which stood a large tree. According to a late nineteenth century manager, the "old Charlestonians" would often play cards all night in the court yard beneath the tree, "shuttling back and forth between the game room and the bar."¹⁶ The first cut-glass chandelier ever imported to Greenville "was erected in the bar . . . People that didn't even drink lager beer used to go there simply to gaze on the crystal marvel."¹⁷

Upon its opening in 1824, the Mansion house became:

popular and was soon famous, not only for its commodious and artistic design and appointments, and the excellent quality of the food and drink served from its tables, but more especially for the aristocracy and wealth of the guests who frequented it. And for 30 years or more the Mansion House was the axis around which revolved the gay, but cultured, society which thronged the streets of this little piedmont village nestling under the shadow of Paris Mountain.¹⁸

Not only was it a resort center, but the Mansion House became a place for statesmen and politicians to stop when in town. John Caldwell Calhoun in his hey-day, made it his headquarters, preferring room number 92.¹⁹ The Record Building, Greenville's second court house, was conveniently near on the eastern edge of the town square. No doubt historic political decisions were made within the Record Building-Mansion House environment.

The popularity and fame of the Mansion House expanded throughout the antebellum period. In August, 1842, William C. Richards, editor of the *Orion*, a monthly literary magazine, visited Greenville and wrote of the Mansion House:

Having established ourselves at the Mansion House, which under the auspices of Col. [John T.] Coleman, comes as near to our *beau ideal* of a perfect village hotel as any we have elsewhere encountered, we felt like staying there longer than our allotted *trois jours*. We did

It seems that when the annex was added, the first floor, or part of it, became part of the ball room. John William De Forest, *A Union Officer in the Reconstruction* (New York: Archon Books, 1968 [originally published, 1948], 45.

¹⁶Interview with A. A. Gates by Wayne Freeman, September 11, 1941.

¹⁷Richardson, *History*, 96, quoting C. E. David. Whether the chandelier was part of the original building or was added later is not clear.

¹⁸Richardson, *History*, 63.

¹⁹Interview with A. A. Gates by Wayne Freeman, September 11, 1941.

somewhat exceed those limits, and when we left, breathed an inward sigh that we could not take the "Mansion House," and its excellent host and hostess, along with us. The quiet, the neatness, the taste, the viands, and the courteous treatment which the visitor finds there, will haunt him for days after with a spell."

Greenville's importance as a summer resort for vacationing planters and their families ended with the Confederate War but the Mansion House continued as the town's principal hostelry. Major John Williams De Forest, who stayed at the Mansion House during his fifteen months' tour of duty as the head of the Freedman's Bureau in the Greenville-Pickens-Anderson district in 1866 and 1867, wrote:

In population and wealth Greenville was . . . the third town in South Carolina . . . It boasted an old and a new courthouse . . . and one of the best country hotels there in the South."

He described the reduced status of the Mansion House in those immediate post-war years graphically:

. . . At two o'clock . . . I closed my office . . . Having breakfasted at eight on beefsteak, bacon, eggs, and hominy, I now at two o'clock fortified myself with a still more substantial dinner and looked forward to a sufficiently solid tea. The manner in which my host of the Mansion House kept up his hotel and supplied a praiseworthy table on a clientage of five permanent boarders and from five to ten weekly transients was to me one of the greatest financial phenomena of the age. The same amount of "faculty" exerted in New York City during the last seven or eight years would have made Mr. Swandale¹² a Croesus. In a region of miserable hotels, where the publican seems to consider it a part of his contract to furnish his boarders with dyspepsias, I considered myself amazingly lucky in finding such fare as honored the Mansion House.

It was a large building and had been a flourishing stand of business in the prosperous old times of Greenville, when the merchants of Charleston and the planters of the low country came up every summer to breathe the wholesome air and enjoy the varied scenery of this mountain district. There had been a great ballroom — later an apothecary's shop — and in it there had been gayeties of proud ladies and

¹¹"Editors Department," *Orin: A Monthly Magazine of Literature Science, and Art*, edited by William C. Richards, 2 (1842-1843): 184.

¹²De Forest, *A Union Officer in the Reconstruction*, xxix. Before the war De Forest was a professional writer and observer.

¹³Simon Swandale was the manager at the time.

"high-toned gentlemen" — later paupers. Occasionally a representative of this impoverished gentility, a transitory Rutledge, Pinckney, Grimke, Hayward or Ravenal, passed a night under the roof, finding cause, doubtless, for sad meditations in the contrast of the present with the past. The Trenholms, a comparative parvenu race, but famous since the days of secession, were there repeatedly, on their way to and from their country seats in Western North Carolina.²³

By the 1880's, the Mansion House was property of the Swandale estate which employed Albion A. Gates as manager. In 1886, Gates remodeled the hotel, without the annex, into a hostelry with eighty-six rooms, and the first water system in Greenville. He later added the first steam heating plant, electric lights, and electric call bells and a fire alarm in every room. He advertised the hotel as "Handsomely Refitted, Furnished Second to No Hotel in the South."²⁴

Under Gates's management, the refurbished Mansion House operated with modest prosperity during the remainder of the century. General Wade Hampton stayed at the Mansion House when in Greenville as did Governor (and later United States Senator) Benjamin Ryan Tillman and Mrs. Tillman who visited Greenville frequently. This was the hey day of traveling salesmen, or "drummers," traveling by the railroads. These men made the Mansion House temporary headquarters traveling out from Greenville to outlying customers and returning to the hospitality of the Mansion House.²⁵ It must have been a rather relaxed atmosphere for when E. Alston Wilkes returned to Greenville in 1909 after being away for thirty years, he found the Mansion House "familiar and unchanged." He remembered fondly Sunday afternoons of his youth when "generally gentlemen gathered about the old hostelry to smoke, to chat, and to drink their drams."²⁶

²³De Forest, *Union Officer*, 44-45. This chapter, "A Bureau Major's Business and Pleasures," appeared as an article in *Harper's New Monthly* magazine, 37, (November 1888): 766-775.

²⁴*Greenville City Directory*, Spring, 1888 (Greenville: J. R. Shannon, 1888), 69; interview of A. A. Gates by Wayne Freeman, September 11, 1941. C. J. Holloway and Sons operated a barber shop with hot and cold baths in the building.

The first electricity to the Mansion House came from the Huguenot Mill. *Greenville News*, July 7, 1887.

²⁵Interview of A. A. Gates by Wayne Freeman, September 11, 1941.

²⁶E. Alston Wilkes, *Echoes and Echoings* (Columbia, 1910), 119.

During the Spanish-American War, the War Department established Camp Wetherill, a large training camp, in Greenville.²⁷ The Mansion House became Division Headquarters and the colonels and generals lived there during from 1897 to 1899, when the camp was closed. Proprietor A. A. Gates had a huge American flag, thirty feet long, made to order and flew it at the hotel. This was the largest American flag ever hung in Greenville up to that time.

After the Spanish-American War, the Mansion House seems to have never recovered its earlier cliental. Although Gates stayed on as proprietor, he ceased to advertise in the *City Directory* and rented space on the ground floor and basement to other businesses. The office of the Greenville Transfer Company and the Mansion House Cigar and News Stand (W. T. Asbury, proprietor) faced Main Street while the Mansion House Billiard Hall (A. A. Scahde, proprietor) and the Mansion House Barber Shop (G. A. Poetz, proprietor) faced Court Street.²⁸ This utilization of the property continued through 1909.²⁹ In the 1909 *City Directory*, James S. Swandale was listed as proprietor. Evidently, the owners gave up operations as a hotel about that date for the 1910 directory and later ones list "Mansion House Building" at 218-220 South Main Street. The barber shop and billiard hall also disappeared.³⁰

In April, 1924, Morris-McKoy Company³¹ were awarded a contract to build a new boiler room for the Mansion House building. Evidently there was an almost immediate change of plans, for in May of the same year we were awarded the contract to demolish the entire structure for \$2,000. All salvage belonged

²⁷For detail see Henry Bacon McKoy, "The Spanish-American War and Greenville," this journal, 3 (1965-1968): 89-111.

²⁸Walsh's *Directory of the City and County of Greenville for 1903-1904* (Charleston: W. H. Walsh Directory Co., 1903), 130, 205. Carpenter Brothers Drug Store and Dr. G. T. Swandale's office were in the old annex.

²⁹*Ibid.*, for 1907, 131, 118; Greenville, S. C., *City Directory, 1909* (Asheville: Piedmont Directory Co., 1909), 265-457.

³⁰Greenville, S. C., *City Directory, 1910* (Asheville: Piedmont Directory Co., 1910), 275, 493.

³¹The author was the "McKoy."

to the contractor and we were able to use or to sell much of the framing. We also cleaned many of the brick, which we sold or used in the construction of other buildings. We found the tin roof useable after a hundred years and sold the tin to farmers for use on barns and out-buildings.

Many details of this contract are still vivid in my mind. When Tom Henderson, representing the new hotel company,¹² and I met to do some trading, we met on Main Street. I also remember dust! There was also the day two Negroes hid behind a wall to avoid work, and the wall was pushed over them just at that time. There was little cement in the mortar and the bricks separated as they fell, outlining the shape of those men in the fallen masonry. Did it hurt them? NO! They went back to work, jolted but wiser. Today they would quit for life and we would be sued.

The Poinsett Hotel replaced the Mansion House on the historic site that elbows around the north western corner of what was the old court house square. The "new" Poinsett Hotel has been in existence now for over fifty years. Under the proprietorship of Mason Alexander it set a wonderful record for excellence, and became known all over the country as a fine hotel. Several years ago, the local company sold it to the Jack Tar Hotel Company, which went bankrupt. Again a group formed a local company and bought the Poinsett as a community project. The local effort to rejuvenate the Poinsett as a downtown hotel proved unrealistic, the property was sold, and it is now operated as a residence hotel, particularly for older persons. We wish it as great a success as the locally-owned Poinsett came to mean to my generation, and all that the Mansion House meant to our forefathers.

¹²Local business men had formed a company to erect a new hotel on the site as a community project.