

A Short History of 16 Tradd Street

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September 16, 2000

This house, now 16 Tradd, stands on part of Lot #7 in the Grand Model. Lot #7, on the north side of Tradd Street from East Bay Street to Bedon's Alley, was granted on August 24, 1688, by the Lords Proprietors, to Richard Tradd. At first this was on "the little lane behind Tradd's house" on East Bay facing the wharves, then "beside Tradd's house," but after the birth of his son Robert Tradd, first birth in this colony, it was named Tradd Street. This property has been "occupied" ever since.

Later in 1688, Tradd conveyed the western part of his lot to the Scottish merchants William Dunlop and John Alexander. This was a business location, but we do not know about the structure they built. In 1697, Dunlop sold his half-interest to John Alexander, whose wife Ann Axtell, the daughter of Carolina's Landgrave Daniel Axtell (and granddaughter of the Daniel Axtell accused in England of being a "regicide"). By will dated 1699, Alexander left a half-interest in this lot to his wife and a half interest to his daughter. By then Tradd and Bedon's had been widened and his lot had shrunk to 59½ feet wide by 94¾ feet deep. (Note: Map 1704 shows this site occupied)

In 1735, Ann Axtell Alexander, widow, married Joseph Boone, who purchased her daughter's half-interest, willed it to her, and died in 1735. As Anne Boone lived on Axtell or Boone Plantation, this remained commercial property from 1735 until her death in 1751. Her will ordered her executor, Henry Smith, to sell her estate. That is when the history of this house as residential property begins.

There had arrived in Charleston about 1738, a man from western England named Humphrey Sommers, born about 1711, called a "brick-layer." But his was no ordinary workman; Jonathan Poston calls him "Charleston's most noted eighteenth-century builder-contractor."

Before 1751, Sommers began collecting tracts in St. Paul's Parish on the Stono and in St. George's Parish called the "Cypress" to farm his two 1,500 acre plantations, stocking them with horses, cattle, and swine, with the needed farm equipment, and settling on them slaves imported by himself. His first wife, Susannah, may have

lived on the Stono plantation. In 1762, he represented St. Paul's Parish in the Assembly.

However, by 1751, he seems to have gotten the job of brick-contractor for the new church of St. Michael's, to be built at the corner of Meeting and Broad Streets and probably realized that he needed a "townhouse" in the city. So, on July 13th and 14th, 1752, by "lease and release," Anne Boon's executor sold to Humphrey Sommers, bricklayer, for 2142 pounds, the north side of Tradd, on which now stands No. 14, No. 16, and No. 18 Tradd (now called 2 Bedon's Alley).

If frame buildings were on this property, they were probably washed away by the tidal surge during the Hurricane of 1752. George Williams, in his History of St. Michael's Church (1751-1763), tells us that this hurricane swirled water at least waist high around the walls of the church, knocking down the fences, carrying off much timber, ". . . the sea walls needed rebuilding" and that this disaster resulted in very little construction at the church during 1754 to 1757. So, during these years, Humphrey Sommers was free to help shore-up the seawalls, but also to build his "townhouse" at the corner of Tradd and Bedon's Alley with two adjoining rental units, now called 14 and 16 Tradd Street. He paid off his mortgage in 1757, probably long after he had occupied the corner house.

During the 1750's and early 1760's, Sommers held various appointments as commissioner for rural roads in the St. Paul's and St. George Parishes. Buildings along Bay, Tradd, and Meeting Streets were being erected by men like Sommers, described by Walter J. Fraser, Jr., in Patriots, Pistols, and Petticoats as "architect-like housewrights, with kitchens always placed in a separate building." By 1762 St. Michael's had been completed. Sommers had acquired wealth in many ways; in 1749, he had a King's grant for marshland through which he was to build a road 10 feet wide from Meeting House Street to King Street, land he and Susannah later sold to Hopkins Price. In 1762, he bought property from Benjamin de la Conseilliere on the west side of the city; in 1764, he and Susannah sold the lot on the south side of Tradd but in 1765 built their new townhouse on the north side on a bluff overlooking "Conseilliere Creek." This may have been too late for Susannah to enjoy, as she died on January 11, 1765. Their children were probably being reared on the plantation in St. Paul's Parish. It is not known when he married Mercy, but the three daughters mentioned in his will were all born after 1772.

By the late 1770's, Charleston was in political turmoil and proclaimed the "Declaration of Independence" on August 5, 1776, by which time many Charlestonians had fled with their families to rural plantations. The many empty houses of Loyalists were occupied by officers of the Carolina Army gathering in Charles Town. Sommers was no Loyalist but was a major financial supporter of the Revolution. However, if he had young children, he probably also moved to the country.

On the night of January 15, 1778, a fire swept through part of the city, which, Fraser says "added to the plight of some artisans" already threatened by conscription. However, no articles in the Gazette during 1778, nor letters by contemporaries suggest that any houses on Tradd Street burned. The fire spread to several houses between Queen and Broad, along East Bay, and hopped down Church Street as far as Stoll's Alley, damaging out-houses and store-houses; but the Gazette itself, after the shop of its printer had burned, suggested that subscribers pick up issues at the Gazette's office on Tradd Street. However, the threat of British occupation discouraged further building during the late 1770's. Savannah fell in December of 1778; in April of 1780, Tarleton, leading British and Loyalist troops, took all territory east of the Cooper River; and in May of 1780, the city of Charleston fell. Fraser says most Continentals and Regular troops here became prisoners of War. Many prominent Charlestonians suddenly pledged loyalty to the King, but the name of Humphrey Sommers is not among them. It is likely that some of his town property was taken as housing for British troops. On November 9, 1780, we read (in the Gazette) at 18 Tradd Street (Sommers's first townhouse at the corner of Bedon's Alley) that "a Negro fellow stole shirts and clothes from him on November 6, 1780." – This was during the British occupation.

The British sailed away in 1781, but Sommers had lost his only son, William, in 1779, and his wife Mercy in 1780, and was left with five daughters. His elder daughter, Henrietta Sommers Dart, was a widow by 1781 with three small children, but seems to have pre-deceased her father. In 1779, Henrietta Sommers, in her will, mentioned Ann, Susanna, Mary, and Elizabeth Sommers as daughters of Humphrey Sommers, but Elizabeth disappears before December 1788, when her father wrote his will.

In spite of his troubles, Sommers bought the lot east of his "double tenement" in 1784 from Edward Lockwood, now No. 12 Tradd Street, a lot clearly vacant in 1788, when he wrote his will. By 1785, James Gregorie was operating a grocery in

Sommer's early "townhouse" at the corner of Bedon's Alley, a corner that remained a "neighborhood grocery" under several operators for more than 100 years.

Sommers wrote his will on December 18th, 1788 and died on the 20th. In his will, he left his daughter, Ann Olney Sommers, still under 16, "the corner tenement . . . now in occupation of James Gregorie, on condition that the passage-way at the back of the store which is now left opened, be continued open and free for the use of the other two tenements adjoining thereto." He left to his daughter Susanna, still under 16, "the two tenements . . . adjoining the aforesaid corner tenement." He left to a third daughter, Mary, the lot and building on the west end of Tradd (now No. 128 Tradd). And he instructed his executors to build a substantial brick building on the vacant lot (now No. 12 Tradd) and to divide the rents between his three daughters. (Note: His will was proved December 30, 1788.)

So, these three "tenements" built by Humphrey Sommers between 1752, when he bought this property and 1757, when he paid off his mortgage, escaped the Fire of 1778 and survived for decades as rental property of many owners.

Susanna Sommers, heiress to 14 and 16 Tradd, married Dr. Philip Tidyman, Jr., and may have lived on his plantation at Santee until she died in 1842. In 1847, her only child, Susan Tidyman, conveyed these two "tenements" to J.F. Alderson, a carpenter.

On October 30, 1850, for \$2,750, Alderson conveyed this "lot with the double tenement" to Daniel M. Furst, a free black man, who sold it on January 17, 1851, for \$3,350 to Samuel Chapman, a white marina, who, by 1852 opened a grist mill here. But, in February 1854, Chapman sold this property to Barney Geraty for \$5,200. The two tenements, No. 14 and No. 16 Tradd, were still considered to be "one brick dwelling on the north side of Tradd, measuring 36.11 feet on the street and 95 feet in depth, including the right-of-way through the open archway from Bedon's Alley." Geraty had been operating a grocery at 5 South Bay. On April 9, 1872, for \$2,500, Geraty conveyed this double tenement and lot to John L. Ahrens (shown as a grocer at 53 East Bay Street in 1855, 1881, and 1885). Money was scarce after the war.

Ahrens had made a will in 1871, not proved until 1887, by which this property passed to his widow, Catherine E. Ahrens. In 1889, she conveyed this lot and double house for \$1,140 to Cord M. Otten, who, in 1892, for \$4,000 re-conveyed this double house to Mrs. Catherine Ahrens, who then owned the adjoining

building on the Bedon's Alley corner. Cord Otten and Hendrick Otten, however, are shown as early as 1855 as operators of the grocery at the corner of Tradd and Bedon's Alley. By 1885, there was a saloon as well as a grocery at 18 Tradd and Bedon's Alley.

On March 29, 1892, Mrs. Ahrens conveyed both the corner lot (No.18) and the adjoining lot (No's 14 and 16) to Henry Martschink for \$5,500, "including the right-of-way through the open archway from Bedon's Alley." But city directories during the 1890's show Mrs. Ahrens still at 18 Tradd, along with Henry and Marie Martschink and their growing family. By then they were one of the few white families left on Tradd Street, as the freed black people rented or owned living quarters at numbers 5,6,7,8,9, 10, 11, 12, and 13 Tradd Street, plied their trades, and reared their families here.

On March 10, 1925, Henry Martschink conveyed to Georgia Sewell the corner of Tradd and Bedon's, along with 40 feet off the rear of the lot behind numbers 14 and 16 Tradd – for only \$10 "and other valuable considerations." Perhaps this was a trade to a relative, because Martschink continued to live there or perhaps it indicates early fear of the tax assessor. But 1925 is the year when numbers 14 and 16 Tradd lost their rear "right-of-way to Bedon's Alley."

Later in 1925, Henry Martschink conveyed to Rachal Doyle Chenning the smaller of the double tenements with the notation, "The west wall on the yard of No. 16 Tradd is entirely on the property of Mrs. Georgia Sewell; the east and west boundaries of the house on No. 16 is the middle line of the party wall on its east and west" thereby leaving No. 16 as full owner of neither of its side walls.

In 1928, Georgia Sewell conveyed to James Conner the property at the corner of Tradd and Bedon's with the 40-foot lot behind No. 14 and N. 16. In 1941, the Estate of Henry Martschink sold to Alma Barrett for \$6,000 the property known as 14 Tradd.

During the 1920's, many white people bought, restored, and moved into these 18th century houses and found ways to add kitchens, baths, air-conditioning, television, and now computers. Humphrey Sommers would be proud of his houses.

Charleston's legendary historian, Samuel Gaillard Stoney always said, when visiting in this area, "This (Bedon's to East Bay Street) is the last block in Charleston where all the houses on both sides of the street are eighteenth century." He thought it should be kept this way. Remember this as "developers" threaten us.