Historic Report of 12 Bull St: The Cameron House

**Name:** Cameron House

**Location:**

12 Bull St., North side of Bull St. between Coming and Pitt Sts.
Charleston, Charleston County, South Carolina.

Located in Harleston Village which is an eastern neighborhood of the Charleston downtown and part of the historic district. The piazza façade faces south toward Bull St. Entry is from the south side from the street. The Nathan Addlestone Library is on the north part of this block. A green space as well as a green house area is located between these structures. Beyond the east wall are four houses owned by the College of Charleston as well from 1907. To the west of the property in the Blacklock House, which serves as the Alumni building.

**Present Owner:** College of Charleston Board of Trustees
61 George St., Charleston, South Carolina

**Present Occupant:** Historic Preservation Department

**Present Use:** Office and Classroom Space

**Significance:** 12 Bull St. is a historic structure built in 1851 by Hugh P. Cameron. It had been a private resident for 121 years before becoming a faculty residence.
and later historic preservation department building for the College of Charleston. Also, the City of Charleston’s Historic Architecture Inventory recorded the structure as “excellent.”

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. **Date of erection:** 1851

   Hugh P. Cameron bought the land in 1851. Prior to this date, a plat was drawn in 1849 by the previous landowner Edward Brickell White, master architect that had completed several buildings nearby for College of Charleston (Fig. 1). He did not build on the land but sold it for $2200 to Cameron. Cameron began construction shortly after purchase Nov. 27, 1851.

2. **Architect:** Not Known

3. **Original and subsequent owners, occupants, uses:** The Blacklock family owned this property and adjacent property to the west whereupon was built the Blacklock residence. The Blacklocks sold this and adjacent property and houses at 18 Bull St to William Clarkson. William Bull Pringle purchased the property from Clarkson’s widow, Mrs. Elizabeth A. Clarkson, which he subdivided. The property was sold for $1800 on November 28, 1849 to Edward Brickell White. However, White sold the property two years later to Hugh P. Cameron on Nov. 27, 1851 for $2200. Cameron proceeded to build the main house.

   In 1855 a year after Cameron’s death, the Court of Equity sold the house for $10,000 to Simons Lucas, George Buist and his infant son who were trustees

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1. University of South Carolina, McKissick Museums, Vertical file 12 Bull, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, SC, 68.
4. Ibid.
of the property.\textsuperscript{5} Henry Buist filed a lawsuit arguing for the ownership of 12 Bull, which he acquired for the sum of $10,000 on October 27, 1860.\textsuperscript{6} Buist’s widow, Mrs. Eliza Rutledge Buist sold the property on Nov. 22, 1892 to a commercial clothing tradesman David Bentschner for $5,810.\textsuperscript{7} The property was then inherited by Mrs. Sarah Bentschner Visanska. Julius M. Visanska, head of the Bentschner and Visanska clothing firm, then took over ownership of the house. Though owner of this house, he occupied a house on East Battery. The house was leased out until July 19, 1930 when it was sold for the sum of $10,000 to Grange S. Coffin.\textsuperscript{8} From 1930s to 1950s, the estate functioned as a boarding house administered by Mrs. Nell M. Mitchell.\textsuperscript{9}

The property remained in the Coffin family until sold along with eleven other lots to the College of Charleston Foundation for $904, 643.75.\textsuperscript{10} The property became the a faculty residence for the Academic Dean.\textsuperscript{11} Then, the house became the center for the Historic Preservation Department.

4. **Builder, contractor, suppliers:** Hugh P. Cameron was the builder.\textsuperscript{12}

5. **Original plans and construction:** A plat was drawn prior to construction showing the dimensions of width 65 feet and depth of 122.9 feet. White, the surveyor, also included adjacent properties of William Bull Pringle. There are

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\textsuperscript{5} Buist & Buist, *Abstract of Title*, vol. 13, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, SC.
\textsuperscript{7} Eliza Rutledge Buist to David Bentschner, W21-54, Deed Book, R. M. C. Office, 22 November 1892.
\textsuperscript{8} Julius M. Visanska to Grange S. Coffin, U35-266, Deed Book, R. M. C. Office, 19 July 1930.
\textsuperscript{9} Thomas.
\textsuperscript{11} University of South Carolina.
\textsuperscript{12} CVF Buildings, *Scrapbooks of Charleston, SC Architectural Inventory*, 1973, Vertical file 12 Bull, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, SC.
noted original wooden fences on three sides along the property lines not facing
the road.\textsuperscript{13}

Research leads to the inference that construction had not been completed
at the time of Hugh Cameron’s death in 1854. His wife files a complaint
concerning other members of his family coupled with the fact that the amount
posted by the Court of Equity was $10,000.\textsuperscript{14} This was a great sum at the time, so
there could have been debts related to construction that are grounds for legal
action on the part of the Trustees.

6. **Alterations and additions:** Some of the original 1850s interior remains,
however many additional elements date from 1890-1900 when David Bentschner
acquired the estate. David Bentschner intended to update the house to the
Colonial Revival style, which became popular in Charleston at that time. Original
elements can be noted in the east parlor plasterwork. Bentschner introduced neo-
Georgian ceiling medallions and Colonial revival mantels, paneling, parquet
flooring, and tiles. His mark is seen in the gate with his initials on the front
entrance though the wall and posts are antebellum.\textsuperscript{15} Poston mentions the addition
of masonry piers and coping under Bentschner as well as the ironwork on the
south property line. Also, Poston stated that Bentschner added “Colonial Revival
French doors on the front windows, probably replacing Greek Revival triple sash,
and substantial interior changes such as a Minton-style floor in the entry hall.”\textsuperscript{16}

The piazzas on the south side also appear to be added during this period.
The columns and entablature denote this later Colonial Revival style associated
with Bentschner’s alterations. The exposure line under the piazza, in particular,
indicates that the present piazza was not part of the original design. The 1888 fire
insurance map includes a porch along the west side of the addition and also a

\textsuperscript{13} White.
\textsuperscript{14} Deed Book, 1855, P14-141, R. M. C. Office, Charleston, SC.
\textsuperscript{15} Thomas.
\textsuperscript{16} Jonathon H. Poston, The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City’s Architecture,
stable in the northwest corner of the property (Fig. 2). These structures are no longer extisting. In fact, the 1896 map indicates the demolition of the former porch and the addition of two porches (Fig. 3). One of these is on the south side of the main house while the other porch is located on the north side of the main house. The map also includes another outbuilding just to the east of the original stable structure, probably used for the storage of dried goods.

There was also a new addition to the north portion of the house, denoted by the differing brickwork. However, the construction of this structure was completed prior to 1888 and probably the result of work completed under the Trustees after acquisition of the property after Cameron’s death.

The canopy entranceway was also added by Bentschner to reconcile the original east entrance with the east wall.

B. Historical Context:

The chain of ownership of the Cameron house property indicates the evolving aspect of Charleston’s industry. The original owners of the property were wealthy planters. However, the property was eventually acquired by Hugh P. Cameron, a prominent crockery dealer, who built the main house. Fifty years later, the property then went under the ownership of David Bentschner, a clothing merchant and eventually Julius Visanska who was also in the textile industry. Bentschner’s ownership reflects the growth of industrialization in Charleston. By ascribing to the Colonial Revival style, Bentschner adds favorably to the preexisting antebellum construction, especially the excellent brickwork and slate roof tiles. Though the house became a rental property for Visanska and later a boarding house, under the College of Charleston the house has been restored and now accommodates the preservation department.

The Bentschner and Visanska families were influential in the Jewish community in Charleston. David Bentschner immigrated from Germany while his wife Hannah Jacobi Bentschner was from Denmark originally. Their daughter, Sarah Bentschner, who married Julius Thomas.

17 Fire Insurance Map, 1888, Sanborn Map Publishing Co., Charleston, SC.
19 Thomas.
Visanska, was a graduate of the Charleston Female Seminary and was president of the Alumnae Association. She also being president of the South Carolina Women’s Federation of Women’s Clubs and involved in numerous association for nursing and health, including coordinating the Women’s Division of the Red Cross in Charlesotn in WWI. Her marriage to Visanska joined the two clothing companies. Bentschner’s original store was located at 252 King St. and included fine quality attire, primarily for men, as seen in the silk tuxedo jacket held in College of Charleston Special Collections which bears the Bentschner & Visanska label. Bentschner added this level of finery to the house through interior alterations as well as improving the street view.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION
A. General Statement:

1. **Architectural character:** The Cameron House is an antebellum house that features several architecturally significant aspects. The house is a Greek-revival style home that features later Colonial Revival remodeling. Defining features are the hipped slate roof, carefully crafted masonry work, and the front double-story piazzas.

2. **Condition of fabric:** Overall the Cameron House is not in a well-maintained state. On the exterior of the house, brick mortar is deteriorating, exterior wood is showing signs of rot, and window shutters and hardware are missing. On the interior of the house, the walls in several rooms have been haphazardly painted in a way that conceals original historic elements. Many windows are inoperable either as a result of missing hardware or having been over-painted. The main stairwell inside the house is showing signs of cracking and feels unstable when walking up or down them. Additionally, water damage is being caused by a roof leak at the junction of the main house roof and the roof of the addition. Window glass is also missing in the attic windows.

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B. Description of Exterior:

1. **Overall dimensions:** The Cameron House is an L-shaped building. The main house is three bays wide and three bays deep. The house is two and half stories high with the attic forming half a story. The addition connected to the northeast end of the house is a two-story portion dropping to a one and half story. There is also a basement that is beneath both sections of the house.

2. **Foundations:** The masonry walls compose the foundation in that they are buried roughly six feet below the ground. The foundation corbels out, increasing near the ground. An additional brick section has been added to reinforce the walls near the coal chute. Masonry piers have been added as well.

3. **Walls:** The exterior walls are main load bearing walls constructed of brick. The main house walls are laid out in Flemish bond. The walls of the addition are laid out in English bond with four courses of stretchers to one course of headers. The bricks for the wall are all relatively regular and a reddish black. Above the windows the brick is corbelled into a flat arch. Between the wall and the roof the brick protrudes out in a three-course cornice.

4. **Structural system, framing:** In terms of framing the exterior walls bear most of the load. The floors are tied into the exteriors walls by timber joist. The roof framing is a little more complex. Being a hipped roof, there is an extensive system of trusses. The main trusses run front to back across the center of the roof. Extending from the roof centerline is joists that also follow the pitch and direction of the roof.

5. **Porches, stoops, balconies, porticoes, bulkheads:** The front piazza is two stories. The flooring of the piazza consists of simple boards constructed without spacing. The roof and second floor piazza is supported by several columns which are supported by brick piers. There is a three foot high balustrade that encloses both levels of the piazza.

   The back porch is two stories. The ground floor is a porch with stone tiles. This level contains the stone pediments for the columns that support the second
level of the balcony and the roof. There is also a cellar door that provides access to the basement. The second level has a board floor and is surrounding by a wooden balustrade. The roof above this level is a continuation of the house roof and is slate shingled.

The main entrance on the east façade is covered by a Colonial-Revival canopy, which faces to the south to function as a street side entrance.

6. Chimneys: There are two chimneys. A chimney is located in each half of the house between two rooms. The chimneys are square and constructed out of brick. They are about three feet long and three feet wide. The chimneys are unique in that they extend past the roofline. There is a chimney in each part of the addition. The chimney in the north portion is overly high.

7. Openings:
   a. Doorways and doors: There are three entrances into the house. The main entrance is a side entry door located on the east side of the building. The second entrance is located at the rear of the house and leads to the porch. Both the main and back door are trimmed with Greek-Revival pilasters and tenons. A third door provides entrance to the addition and has a window in half of the door.
   b. Windows and shutters: The most prominent windows are the four front facing windows. These windows are unique to the historic fabric of the home because they are triple hung floor to ceiling windows that are also usable as access to the piazza on both levels. They are fifteen over fifteen over fifteen construction. The remainder of the windows of the windows in the house are double hung six over six windows.

   All windows have pilasters engaged to the wall around them and lentils above them. The sash, jambs, and sills are Greek-revival in design and are painted white. The windows feature double shutters that extend the height of the window. The shutters are black in color and are held back with cast iron shutter dogs. One issue involving the shutters is that most are either missing or showing signs of deterioration.

   The addition also includes a bay window on the west side.

8. Roof:
a. **Shape, covering:** The roof of the main house is hipped and covered by slate tiles. The roof of the addition is a gable roof. Slate tiles also cover the first part of the addition while a turned copper roof covers the northernmost portion. The ridgelines of the slate roofs are capped with ceramic tiles, improperly mortared.

b. **Cornice, eaves:** A brick cornice juts out at the main house roofline. The gable end is a brick parapet. The eaves of the roof have gutters that drain the water away from the roof.

c. **Dormers, cupolas, towers:** At the east and west ends of the main house are dormers. Both dormers extended from the roof’s side and tie into the centerline of the hipped roof. Each dormer has a small window.

C. **Description of Interior:**

1. **Floor plans:** Similar to a single house floor plan with a large side hall with main entrance and stair, which opens to the two parlor rooms along the south portion. A smaller chamber is situated beyond the hall on the north side. This plan is practically repeated on the second floor, except a closet and attic stair separating south rooms.

   The addition is also accessed from the hall, opening up to an office room. The hall to the west of the room contains a stair and descends to a small kitchen and then a small office space. There is another room on the second floor.

2. **Stairways:** The stairs in the main stair hall are cantilevered around the corner of the wall until the second floor is reached. The stairs feature a wooden balustrade. There is another small stair in the addition beyond the first room.

3. **Flooring:** The floor of the entrance hall is half encaustic tile, made in the medieval method, and the other half is a hard wood. In the parlor, the floor is a hard wood floor that is varnished and laid out in a diamond pattern. The rest of the flooring is wood in regular planks.

4. **Wall and ceiling finish:** In the hall, the walls are painted yellow with the crowning being painted red. One significant feature of the hall is the ceiling
medallion located above the lamp fixture. In the parlor, the crowning, fireplace mantels, and ceiling medallions are heavily ornamented with floral designs. Painted over on the walls is gold colored cording. The walls have been painted over with a tan color that probably is not the original color.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The building is entered through a side entry door that has two tall panels above two short. This door also has a mail slot. Entry into the addition is provided by a doorway where the door has a nine pane window on the top half. The rear porch is accessed by a door at the rear of the house by the stairs. Each parlor is accessed through to tall and wide doors. The parlors can also be partitioned by two recessed sliding doors. All rooms and offices have doorway accesses that are narrower than the other doors in the house. These doors are also two paneled doors. The upper rear porch is accessed through a doorway by the stairs on the second floor.

b. Windows: Each parlor has a triple hung window that is 15 over 15 over 15. These windows provide access to the front porch. In the exterior wall each parlor are two windows that six over six. Above the main entry and the rear porch door are rectangular windows. The first and second floor halls have a window that faces the outside. Both windows are 6 over 6. The windows in the two studios are the same as in the two parlors below. The office on the first floor at the northwest corner has two exterior facing windows one being on the north wall and the other on the west wall. The office on the floor above has only the west facing window. The north facing window is located in the bathroom. The second office on the east of the second floor has two exterior windows one facing south and the other facing east.

Moving to the addition the window arrangement is not as uniform as it is in the main house. In the office between the main house and the addition the east wall features the six over six windows found through the rest of the house. The west wall of this room has a bay window that has windows on the sides of the bay while the front of the bay is wood. The first floor office in the addition has three outwardly facing windows. One window overlooks the lawn on the west side. The
other two windows face toward the north. The two offices above this office have the same window arrangement. The only east facing window in the addition is in the hallway of the second floor. All windows in the addition are six over six windows.

6. **Decorative features and trim:** The decorative features of the interior are mostly subdued. The feature found most is the fluted door moldings with rosette corner blocks found around all of the doorways. The entablature in the main hall is a red band that wraps around three quarters of the hall. In the main parlor the entablature is a floral rosary that wraps around the room. In the second parlor the entablature is a fluted design like that found around the doors. The fireplaces in the parlor feature pilasters with a dentil pattern along the top with an oval pattern in the center.

7. **Hardware:** The door and window hardware around the house is a mix of old, new, and something in between. Most of the locks and deadbolts do not appear original; however, there are still key holes remaining in the parlor doors that could be original. The hardware of opening the triple hung windows appears to still be original to the structure. On the rest of the windows of the locking mechanisms are modern and appear not to be original to the structure.

8. **Mechanical Equipment:**
   a. **Heating, air conditioning, ventilation:** The building is climate controlled by six HVAC units. There is on unit in the basement that has ductwork that extends underneath the main house with vents in the floor. In the attic are two units that each supplies one half of the second floor ventilation. The ducting for these units is in the attic with vents in the ceiling. The addition is climate controlled by a separate unit. The radiators for all four units are located in the back lawn in a fenced in enclosure. The first floor office in the addition is cooled by a window unit air conditioner.
   b. **Lighting:** The halls and parlor of the house are lit by chandlers that are not original. The studios are lit by overhead strip lights. The other rooms are lit by individual lamps and light fixtures. The windows provide a majority of the houses during the day.
D. Site:

1. **Historic landscape design:** The house lot is surrounded by a masonry wall. Along the front of the wall is an iron fence with iron gates at each end of the wall. The iron-gate appears not to be original to the structure, but added by a later owner as indicated by initials of a later owner on the gate. The wall is also deteriorating at is becoming off plumb in areas. Additionally, stucco is coming off in areas exposing the brick mortar.

A brick path runs along the front of the house. This path is lined by palms and various shrubs. A stone path leads from the street to a wooden walkway on the east side of the house. This walkway leads to the main entrance. On the west side a gravel brick lined driveway that leads to a back lawn. The back lawn is separated from the front by a wooden fence that is closed by a cannon ball on a chain. The lawn is square and line by bricks. Along the perimeter is a bench on a brick porch. The outer perimeter of the lawn is a straw area with palms, shrubs, and oak trees.

2. **Outbuildings:** The site has one outbuilding. The outbuilding is located at the northwest corner of the property and is engaged to the wall. Currently the building is used as storage.

**PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

A. **Architecture drawings** Figures 1-3:

White, Edward B. *Survey of Lot*. 1849. R. M. C., Charleston, SC.


B. **Bibliography:**


Eliza Rutledge Buist to David Bentschner. W21-54. R. M. C. Charleston, SC. 1892.
Julius M. Visanska to Grange S. Coffin. U35-266. R. M. C. Charleston, SC. 1930.

University of South Carolina. McKissick Museums. Vertical file 12 Bull. South Carolina

PART IV: PROJECT INFORMATION

The Historical Society and the RMC office were instrumental in assisting us in the collection of our primary and secondary sources concerning the property of 12 Bull St. on Monday, October 20, 2008. Erin Smith and Thomas Wingard were involved in the research and evaluation of physical history and source information. Michael Jowers was involved primarily in the architectural information of the report. Professor Ward provided oversight in the creation of this report as well as assisting in the documentation of other structural changes inferred from observation.
Fig. 1 Plat of 12 Bull property including adjacent lots by Edward Brickell White.
Fig. 2 1888 Sanborn map with closer view of 12 Bull property
Fig. 3 1896 Sanborn Map