

Mulberry



Mulberry Castle by Anna Heyward Taylor, Courtesy of the Gibbes Art Museum/Carolina Art Association

1714

Impressions of Mulberry

The words magical and unique are often used and almost as often misused. When it comes to Mulberry Plantation on the west bank of the Cooper River above Charleston, both apply. It is a magical property to which nothing compares.

The plantation began in 1679. It was a part of the lands allotted to Sir John Colleton, one of the original Lords Proprietor of the Colony of Carolina. His grandson, Sir John, third baronet, sold 4,423 acres to Thomas Broughton in 1708. Thomas was the son-in-law of Nicholas Johnson who served as Governor from 1703 to 1709.

Thomas Broughton was a man of many facets but appears to have spent his life at the center of colonial affairs. He is said to have made his fortune trading with the native Americans, especially by selling many of them into slavery in Barbados. Two years after purchasing Mulberry, Broughton himself would have been elected governor but for his opponent's bribery of one of the electors. Not to be outdone, Broughton led a group of supporters to Charles Town intending to take the office by force if necessary. Calmer heads prevailed and he had to wait until 1735 to claim the governorship as his own. In the interim, his brother-in-law, Robert Johnson, served as the last governor under the Lords Proprietor from 1717 and again from 1730 until his death in 1735.

To add a further layer of connection, Broughton's sister, Constantia was married to Sir John Ashby, second cacique under the original organization of the colony. To say the least, Thomas was in the very center of colonial Carolina government and society in the first third of the 18th century. He clearly intended his home to reflect his position and act as the centerpiece of his extensive holdings.

The name and the plan of the home he built between 1711 and 1714 are both sources of curiosity today. Although there is at least one very old mulberry tree on the place, there must have been plans for more. Broughton's father-in-law

was interested in bringing silk culture to Carolina and named his nearby plantation Silk Hope. Thomas must have intended to be part of the development by providing the mulberry trees on which silk worms were dependent.

The plan of the house is equally baffling but this is the third oldest surviving plantation house in South Carolina. Middleburg and Medway preceded it but neither made any serious attempt at architectural distinction. Drayton Hall was not built until some forty years later and it was another forty before most of the houses now so revered in Charleston were built. Broughton not only sought distinction, he achieved it at a very early date.



View of Mulberry Plantation by Thomas Coram, Courtesy of the Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association

The central block of the house is nearly square and one enters a hall which encompasses the right three bays of the house. The dining room to the left occupies the remaining two, behind which a two bay room now serves as the kitchen. The central two bays on the rear house a stairhall and the remaining bay is now a charming sitting room which most likely served as an office in its first life, the adjoining pavilion having had a separate entrance. Two massive interior chimneys serve the fireplaces which heated the rooms on the main floor and the four chambers above.

Built atop a full basement which at one time contained a kitchen, the exterior of the house is laid in English bond brickwork above a two course molded water table. All openings are spanned by superbly gauged brick jack arches.

The window sash on the main floor are twelve-over-sixteen and those in the end walls of the second floor are twelve-over-twelve while those in the dormers are nine-over-nine or nine-over-six.

The main roof is a gambrel topped by a hip. The end walls of the second floor are brick with a heavy stringcourse between the floors. Clad in wooden shingles, the roof is supported by a modillion cornice at first floor level.

If this were it, Mulberry would be a very fine, very old house, but its air of mystery and caprice is provided by the pavilions at each corner. There is really nothing quite like them anywhere else. Measuring fourteen feet wide and seventeen feet deep, they are attached to the end walls by the width of a door and have windows on all four sides. They are covered by hip roofs which break at raised panels and then ascend in the shape of bells to remarkable iron finials with pennants bearing the date 1714 which culminate in three-dimensional crowns. Looking at them up close, one cannot believe that they are there and looking at the perfectly symmetrical south front of the house, one cannot understand why they have not oft been repeated.

As whimsical as they appear, the pavilions likely had a very utilitarian purpose. Each still retains a narrow gun slot in the foundations of their short sides and the long sides have two for good measure. Like the bastions of Renaissance fortresses, they allowed cross fire against anyone approaching the main walls of the building. Given that the Yemasee War in which over 400 colonists were killed broke out the year after the house was completed, such a purpose would hardly have been ill-advised.

Thomas Broughton left Mulberry to his son, Nathaniel at his death in 1737. Without resort to land office records, it appears that it passed to his son Thomas who, according to one source died in 1797 although there is a will in the Broughton papers at the South Carolina Historical Society of a Thomas of Mulberry Plantation dated 1808. That document left the portion of the estate which became South Mulberry to his

son Philip whose daughter and son-in-law built the latter house. There may have been yet another Thomas or a very long administration of his estate as Thomas Milliken is recorded as having bought what was by then known as North Mulberry from the estate of Thomas Broughton in 1835. Milliken's plantation journal for the years 1853-1858 is in the collection of the Society.

It would be nice to know how many Thomases there were for one of them likely made the most significant changes which have occurred to the house. Around 1800, the by then quite old-fashioned woodwork in the reception hall and dining room was removed and replaced in the Adamesque style. Sunburst mantels were installed below paneled overmantels and a paneled dado circled the rooms. Cornices and chair rails with gougework decorations added another mystery. The cornice in the reception room features a swag motif which is repeated in the dining room chair rail while the triglyph motif in the dining room cornice matches the chair rail in the reception room. Did the carpenters purposely play mix and match or did someone make a slight mistake?

The woodwork on the second floor remains intact. The doors have unusually heavy moldings and the northeast bedroom features a bolection mold around the firebox to which a shelf has been added. The other bedroom mantels match that remaining in the downstairs sitting room causing one to wonder if they might have been moved up when the downstairs was redone.

Outside, covered entries to the basement on the east and west sides of the house have been added and two windows on the north front have been converted to doors, one in the northwest pavilion and one in the bay of the main house nearest it. One cannot help wondering if the porches over the front and rear entries are also later additions. Although they have the same modillion cornice, their scale and proportions and the fact that they encroach on the dormers above suggest that they may have come later although the south porch appears in Thomas Coram's painting of 1800.

North Mulberry passed from Thomas Mil

liken to his nephew, Maj. Thomas Gaillard Barker. A Confederate veteran and noted lawyer, he is said to have reunited the plantation. Shortly before his death in 1917, the property was sold to Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Chapman of New York. He was a Wall Street broker with the firm Chapman, Carson, and Company until he retired in 1936.

Rice was last raised on the plantation in 1902 and the property was showing signs of neglect. To assist them in righting things, the Chapmans retained architect Charles Brendon. He is referred to as an Englishman in several sources and, English or not, he was likely the principal of Charles Brendon & Co., a New York firm responsible for a number of Beaux-Arts buildings there including the exuberant home of Hamilton Fish at 55 East 77th Street. While the Chapmans made as few changes as possible, baths on the second floor were fitted between the chambers beside the massive chimneys. The extra windows on the east and west fronts are a result of these insertions.

In 1930, the Chapmans called upon another New Yorker, Loutrel Briggs, to assist with the grounds. A Cornell trained landscape architect, Briggs first came to South Carolina in 1927 and opened a winter office in Charleston in 1929. Thereafter, he practiced in New York in the summer and Charleston in the winter. In his 1951 book, *Charleston Gardens*, he presented his research on historic Charleston gardens and his own work, including that at Mulberry. By the time of his death in 1977, a Briggs garden was synonymous with a Charleston Garden.

Briggs was given a difficult site. Rather than being placed facing the river, Mulberry is aligned on a strict north-south axis. Because of various changes in the ownership of the plantation, it is approached by a two mile drive through the pinelands which delivers guests to the rear of the house. On the other hand, live oaks that can only be described as magnificent, screen the west side of the house and the ascent up the bluff. There was no evidence of a previous garden and



the eight brick slave buildings in the Coram painting had flanked the south lawn, rather than extending from the north or rear of the house.



Briggs took up the challenge and routed the entry to a square forecourt on the south front. While his plans called this area a motor court, it is now grassed and blends perfectly with the south lawn as it extends to the distance. To connect the house to the water, Briggs located a formal garden adjacent to the east front. Terraces at either corner capture the view which was cleared to the edge of the canal. A path leads from the southeast terrace to the lower garden which is a flat circle of lawn surrounded by azaleas backed by cedars, live oaks, and other indigenous plants. Entry is gained at three points of the compass and a small secret garden was located to the south. Over the years this scheme has been augmented by various owners but it remains the backbone and glory of the setting.

The Chapmans sold Mulberry in 1947 and subsequent owners included Mrs. Marion Brawley and Francis Atkins. Threatened with development in 1987, the property was purchased by the Historic Charleston Foundation and in turn sold in 1988 with preservation easements in place. Again, Wall Street provided the purchasers for this quintessentially Southern property, Mr. and Mrs. S. Parker Gilbert, he having been a chairman of Morgan Stanley. The Gilberts have truly acted

as wise stewards of Mulberry. They have maintained what they found to the highest standards and what they have added has met those same standards. Their most significant addition has been a guest house designed by Jaquelin T. Robertson, the Yale trained partner in Cooper, Robertson & Partners, who along the way served as dean of the University of Virginia School of Architecture.

His three bedroom brick structure sits into the bluff past the south exit from the lower garden. A single story with hip roof and tall chimneys facing the south lawn, its entry is reminiscent of the gable above the stairs on the rear of the main house. The house is two stories on the rear where it faces the water past a terrace and manicured lawn. The center of the building is a grand, two story hall with three sets of French doors which open to the terrace and have three sets or tripartite, triple hung windows above. Clad in pine paneling and trimmed in the same dark blue-green used on the exterior, the room could go anywhere but is perfectly at home in its place.



The Gilberts connected the guest house to the lower garden with an elegantly simple garden featuring a reflecting pool with four jets and sago palms at the corners, all beneath the overarching branches of yet more live oaks. For this addition, they consulted Charleston landscape designer Sheila Wertimer. They have also added a delightful kitchen garden behind the motor court which is now located on the north front of the main house.



In 1992, the Gilberts had and took the opportunity to acquire what had been known as South Mulberry. Only on a property with a house of the quality of the original would the house at South Mulberry be mentioned as an afterthought. Whereas the original Mulberry can only be described as aberrant, South Mulberry is a classic two story frame building on brick piers with a wraparound porch, a type of which many, such as Silver Hill near Georgetown, survive and many more were once built. Its primary diversion from type is the use of two primary entry doors allowing for the front two rooms to be joined as one if needed, a feature found at Harrietta on the Santee and Loch Dhu near Eutawville.

The house was built for Dr. Sanford William Barker and his wife Chistiana Constantia Broughton in 1835. Besides being a medical doctor, Barker was a noted botanist and laid out the garden to the east of the house. The Barkers had no chil-

dren but Major Barker was a nephew of theirs as well and the plantation was united for a time after Dr. Barker's death in 1891. Later separated again, South Mulberry had been reduced to housing goats by the time the Gilberts acquired it.

The house and the garden have been beautifully restored. A delightful mahogany greenhouse now extends the axis of the ell and is supplemented by two more utilitarian partners behind the high hedge. Within the ancient walls of Dr. Sanford's garden, the brick edging for his beds was uncovered and they have now been replanted with Japanese yew edging and star magnolias centering the four quadrants. There is also a Victorian stable to the west of the house and if the bass lakes, dove fields, and duck ponds don't provide enough diversion, there is also a tennis court.



The sum of all these parts is far greater than simple addition would render. Mulberry is a property of pristine beauty maintained to the highest possible standards. It embodies the earliest colonial history of Carolina as no other building in the state can. The prosperous era before the War Between the States is well represented. Northern investors taken with the beauty of the country, the history of the property, and the bounty of its game and fowl have twice been instrumental in its survival. The spirit of preservation thrives here as at few other places. Mulberry truly is unique and anyone who has had the privilege of even the shortest visit knows it is a magical place.



This report was commissioned by Chip Hall,
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