

# The Street Numbers of Peninsular Charleston

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The buildings of early Charleston did not have numbered addresses prior to or during the American Revolution. The earliest known street numbers began to appear in the mid-1780s, soon after the incorporation of the city in 1783. City records explaining the method of the early numbering system have not survived, so its logic is unclear. By observing the numbering of various addresses in the local newspapers and the city directories of the 1780s through the early 1800s, however, one can see that the streets were renumbered on multiple occasions.<sup>1</sup> Again, no city records survive to explain these changes.

In September 1848 Charleston's City Council ordered all buildings in the city (i.e. south of modern Calhoun Street) to be numbered immediately in preparation for a city-wide census.<sup>2</sup> Two years later, after the city annexed the "Neck" area in 1850, the addresses between Calhoun Street and Mt. Pleasant Street slowly began to be numbered in accordance with the city's existing system.<sup>3</sup> In the wake of these two mid-century events, the street numbers of urban Charleston evolved to a point at which the addresses in many streets began to resemble modern address numbers.

In 1861 Frederick Ford published a "census" (really a directory) of the city of Charleston in which he arranged the contents alphabetically by street name and then sequentially by house number.<sup>4</sup> Ford's house numbering system was apparently of his own invention, however, for in September of that year City Council approved a plan to renumber the streets in accordance with the system used in Ford's directory. Due to wartime exigencies, however, this work was postponed indefinitely.<sup>5</sup>

Fifteen years after the conclusion of the Civil War, Charleston's City Council renewed the discussion of street renumbering. On 22 June 1880, the city's Committee on Streets recommended that an engineer be hired to survey the entire city in preparation for a complete renumbering of the buildings and vacant lots.<sup>6</sup> More than a year later, on 13 December 1881, the same committee recommended more specifically "that a competent engineer be employed to draw a plat of the city dividing the squares into equal spaces of ---- feet each. The said spaces to be numbered regularly from one upwards, with uniform numbers cast in iron or some other durable material."<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, on 8 August 1882 Council approved a contract with H. S. Lamblé to execute "a complete set of drawings of the City of Charleston by squares, showing the shape and dimensions of each lot and the dimensions and characters of the buildings on the lots, with descriptions of the same."<sup>8</sup> Nearly two years later, on 10 June 1884, the city hired William Brown to

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<sup>1</sup> Evidence of renumbering is found in the Charleston newspapers of the summer of 1786, May–June 1801, and 1824. Additionally, the extant Journal of the Commissioners of Streets and Lamps, 1806–1818, found in the Charleston Archive at the Charleston County Public Library, contains references to street numbering in 1806 and 1811 (see pp. 6–7, 176, 181, and 207).

<sup>2</sup> Proceedings of City Council, 26 September 1848, in *Charleston Courier*, 27 September 1848. The census in question is J. L. Dawson and H. W. DeSaussure, *Census of the City of Charleston, South Carolina, for the Year 1848* (Charleston, S.C.: J. B. Nixon, 1849).

<sup>3</sup> At a City Council meeting on 5 August 1856, Mayor William Porcher Miles complained that streets north of Calhoun Street had not yet been properly numbered. See *Charleston Courier*, 7 August 1856.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick A. Ford, *Census of the City of Charleston, South Carolina, for the Year 1861* (Charleston, S.C.: Evans & Cogswell, 1861).

<sup>5</sup> Proceedings of City Council, 10 September 1861, in *Charleston Courier*, 12 September 1861.

<sup>6</sup> Proceedings of City Council, 22 June 1880, in *Charleston Courier*, 24 June 1880.

<sup>7</sup> Proceedings of City Council, 13 December 1881, in *Charleston Courier*, 15 December 1881.

<sup>8</sup> Proceedings of City Council, 8 August 1882, in *Charleston Courier*, 9 August 1882.

consult Lamblé's recently-completed drawings and then to "number all of the houses and lots in the City of Charleston with zinc plates made of the best material and the numbers thereon hand painted."<sup>9</sup>

In January 1886 the city assessor reported that "the work of renumbering the city and putting up new street signs . . . has practically been finished. The entire city has been laid off, an average frontage of lots being allowed for each number and the description of property with new numbers assigned, and names of owners recorded in twelve separate ward books. The numbers in some portions of the suburbs of the city, and some courts and alleys, have not yet been put up, but the contractor is now giving his attention to the same, and in a short time the entire work will be completed."<sup>10</sup> This numbering system, based on an average street frontage of thirty feet, was completed before the earthquake of 31 August 1886 and forms the basis of the Charleston's present street numbers.<sup>11</sup> Some localized renumbering has taken place over the years as various streets were lengthened, merged, or otherwise altered, but most of the city's addresses have not changed since 1886.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the city of Charleston tentatively initiated a new numbering system that resulted in many years of confusion. On 30 December 1901 City Council ratified an ordinance adopting a "centigrade plan" diverging from a central point located at the corner of King and Calhoun Streets. This law directed "that hereafter all streets below Calhoun Street running north and south, shall have the word 'south' affixed to their present name, and all streets north of Calhoun Street running north and south, shall have the word 'north' affixed to their present name, and all streets east of King Street running east and west, shall have the word 'east' affixed to their present names, and all streets west of King Street running east and west, shall have the word 'west' affixed to their present names."<sup>12</sup>

Despite being authorized by law, the 1901 "centigrade plan" was never fully implemented. Between 1904 and 1915 the city assessor complained repeatedly that the mix of old and new street numbering systems amounted to a "burlesque," and urged the city to "either go back to the old method of marking the streets or endeavor to carry out the plan suggested by the street-signs as they now exist."<sup>13</sup> In 1919 the local Civic Club petitioned City Council to adopt the "Washington Plan" street numbering system, a variation of the "centigrade plan." In response, the city acknowledged that it already had such a "block plan" on hand, but stopped short of advocating its implementation.<sup>14</sup> Despite the fact that the 1901 "centigrade plan" ordinance remained in the city code of laws through 1960, it appears that this ambitious plan to renumber the streets was effectively abandoned shortly after its adoption.<sup>15</sup>

In 1960 the city of Charleston began annexing land beyond its traditional peninsular boundaries. The rationale for the numbering of city streets in the various neighborhoods west of the Ashley River and east of the Cooper River, however, lies beyond the scope of this essay.

The most recent updating of street addresses in the city of Charleston occurred in preparation for the implementation of the 9-1-1 emergency telephone system in August 1983. A number of irregularities were corrected at that time, but the vast majority of the city's street numbers remained unchanged.

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<sup>9</sup> Memorandum of Agreement, 10 June 1884, Clerk of Council Records, Charleston Archive, Charleston County Public Library.

<sup>10</sup> Assessor's annual report for 1885, dated 1 January 1886, in Charleston Year Book, 1885, 25-26.

<sup>11</sup> "Do You Know Where You Live?" Charleston News and Courier, 3 September 1950.

<sup>12</sup> "An Ordinance Authorizing the Ways and Means Committee to Renumber the Houses, and Affix the Words North, South, East and West to the Present Names of the Streets of the City," in Charleston Year Book, 1901, pp. 273-74.

<sup>13</sup> Charleston Year Book, 1904, pp. 34-35. See also Year Book, 1905, p. 32; Year Book, p. 35; Year Book, 1908 p. 39; Year Book, 1909, p. 47; Year Book, 1910, pp. 49-50; Year Book, 1915, p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> City Council of Charleston, Journal of the City Council of Charleston, 1915-1919 (s.l., s.d.), 809, 889.

<sup>15</sup> The 1901 "centigrade plan" appears in the 1952 code of laws under section 41-40, but the 1964 edition of the city code of laws, p. 647, indicates that this section was excluded from the revised code of laws adopted by City Council in December 1960.

## Strategies For Translating A “Historic” Street Number Into A “Modern” Address on the Charleston Peninsula

The fact that the streets of peninsular Charleston have been renumbered several times over the past three centuries can cause confusion for anyone attempting to match a “historic” street number (one taken from a historic source) to a modern address. Depending on the vintage of the number in question, this process might be quite simple, but in other cases the historic number might be wildly different from the modern number. Anyone attempting to locate the modern location of a historic address should therefore proceed with caution, for there is no simple rule for making this translation. The solution will depend on a number of variables, including the date of the historic reference in question and the size of the lot in question.

Whether you are attempting to locate the residence of a distant ancestor or tracing the history of a specific building, you must bear in mind one important rule: the key to tracing the history of a particular piece of property in Charleston is understanding its succession of ownership, or “chain of title.” Since most of the available records you will consult are organized by surname, you will need to acquire the names of the individuals through whose ownership the property passed.

Remember that your ancestor, or the occupants of the old building you are studying, may have rented the property in question. People from all walks of life, from planters to paupers, executed short- and long-term property leases in historic Charleston, but very few records of these transactions survive. In such cases, you still need to establish the property’s chain of title and then use sources such as city directories to connect temporary occupants to it.

The following suggestions are intended to direct researchers to the most pertinent resources:

1. Track your target names(s) through the various Charleston city directories, which are available from 1782 to the present (though not necessarily published every year). Your subject’s street number may change over the years, especially in the directories of the late 1700s and early 1800s, but keep in mind that such changes do not necessarily mean he/she relocated. Whenever possible, try to identify the name(s) of the occupant(s) who resided at your target address, as well as the names of his or her neighbors, over a period of years. The more names you can tie to a specific location, the easier it will be to confirm the fixed location of an address even if the street number changed several times.
2. The Charleston city directory of 1840 includes a “reverse directory”: an alphabetical listing of streets that identifies each street address and its occupant. Similar “reverse directories” are also found in the city directory from 1890 onward. These later directories post-date the renumbering project of 1884–1886, however, so the information they contain might only serve to confirm what you already know.
3. Find your subject in the earliest extant property tax record: the City of Charleston Tax Assessor’s Ward Books, 1852–1856. These records are divided into separate volumes for each ward, and the street names are indexed at the beginning of each volume. Under each street heading is a list of names representing the property owners and an incomplete listing of street numbers. These names are listed in geographic order; that is, they appear in the same as if you were walking in the street. Thus if your subject’s name is located near a recognizable landmark such as a church or the intersection of two streets, you may be able to match that location to a modern street number without further work (unless the lots have since been subdivided or merged). Similarly, Charleston County tax assessment records from the 1870s onward are also available on microfilm in the South Carolina Room at the Charleston County Public Library (CCPL).

4. Consult Ford's 1861 Census of the City of Charleston, in which the contents are arranged alphabetically by street name and then sequentially by house number. If you know the street number and/or the name of the occupant, you can count the number of doors between your target address and the nearest landmark such as a church or intersection. Always keep in mind, however, that these lots might have been subdivided or merged before or after the date of this 1861 survey. Also bear in mind that the city never officially adopted Ford's numbering system (see the historical narrative above).
5. The Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of Charleston of 1884 and 1888 both include street numbers, and thus offer a snapshot of the addresses as they existed before and after the renumbering of 1884–1886. Note, however, that these maps do not encompass every building standing in the city at that time.
6. Consult the Report of Committee on Condition of Buildings after the Earthquake, with a List of Buildings that Should Come Down, published shortly after the earthquake that struck Charleston on 31 August 1886. This report, which is available on microfilm in the South Carolina Room at CCPL, includes the street number and owner's name of every building in the city.
7. Milby Burton's unpublished two-volume typescript "Streets of Charleston," a copy of which can be found in the South Carolina Room at CCPL, contains a brief historical survey of all peninsular streets and includes dated references to street modifications such as widening, lengthening, renaming, etc.
8. The most definitive strategy, and also the most laborious, is to perform a "chain of title" search. In order to do this, you must visit the Charleston County Register of Mesne Conveyance Office (RMC), which contains records of nearly all property conveyances within Charleston County from 1719 to the present (a small percentage were never recorded). Here you find indices that will direct you to specific volumes containing real estate transactions relating to your target property. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century deeds are indexed by surname, while the twentieth- and twenty-first-century deeds are indexed by geographic location. Once you find the deeds relating to your subject, read the description of the property for clues to its precise location. If the early descriptions of your target property are too vague to determine its precise location, you might have to perform similar title searches on the neighboring properties in order to establish a larger contextual framework. Note that published abstracts of all deeds from 1719 through 1788 are available in the South Carolina Room at CCPL.
9. In the course of your "chain of title" research, you might encounter difficulty determining how a certain piece of property came into the possession of a specific individual. In such cases, remember that the property could have been conveyed by means of marriage or inheritance rather than by deed. Transcriptions of all extant South Carolina wills, 1671–1868, as well as copious records of early Charleston marriages, are available in the South Carolina History Room at CCPL.