



HISTORIC CHARLESTON FOUNDATION

Nathaniel Russell House Museum Kitchen House Project

Founded in 1947, Historic Charleston Foundation (HCF) is a preservation and advocacy organization located in Charleston, SC, that champions the historic authenticity, cultural character, and livability of the Charleston region through advocacy, stewardship, and community engagement. One of HCF's most valuable educational assets is its house museums: the Aiken-Rhett House (ARH) built c. 1820 and the Nathaniel Russell House (NRH) built c. 1808.



HCF purchased the Russell House (*Image at left: Historic photo of Nathaniel Russell House*) in 1955 to preserve the property and prevent its redevelopment from a single-family residence into a multi-unit dwelling. When the house was originally constructed for Russell's family – his wife and two daughters – the property contained an enormous three-story Federal-style mansion, garden, carriage house, work yard, and kitchen house. The latter boarded some of the 18 enslaved men and women who lived and labored on the Russell property. After emancipation, the kitchen house served many purposes: dormitory, laundry, storage, rental apartment, and, under HCF's ownership, administrative offices.

Since 1808, the property and its buildings have survived despite war, fire, earthquake, and redevelopment. The main house served as HCF's first headquarters building and was opened to the public as a museum in 1955. Over the past 30 years, the main house has been carefully studied using cutting-edge preservation technology and painstakingly restored to its original 1808 appearance (*Image below: free flying staircase in main house*). It was long thought that the dependency structures had been irreversibly renovated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to be virtually devoid of historic fabric. But recent findings have proven this belief to be dramatically incorrect.

A Project Long Past Its Due

While the main house is a pristinely restored example of the towering wealth of slave owners in the early 19th century, the Russell House outbuildings were frequently used for offices or storage and not considered essential to telling the full history of the property. Thankfully, historic house interpretation has evolved since 1955, and HCF has taken the first steps of an intensive study of the outbuildings to learn more about the people who lived and worked in the kitchen, laundry, and living quarters from 1808-1865.

In March of 2017, HCF's interpretation of the Russell House property took an unexpected but thrilling leap forward when HCF's Director of Museums Lauren Northup noticed a hand-planed door in her office in the kitchen house and wondered if any analysis had been done on outbuildings during restoration of the main house in the early 1990s.





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Curious, she called nationally renowned paint analyst Susan Buck. Buck, who has been intimately involved in restoration of the Russell House since 1989, said no analysis had ever taken place to her knowledge. Shortly after their conversation, an initial test by Buck revealed that not only was the door –presently covered by 22 layers of paint– original to the structure, but so was the all of the trim around the doors and windows. This unprecedented discovery led to the removal of small sections of drywall that had been installed in the early 20th century. As the walls came down, the magnitude of potential for authentic interpretation of the enslaved people who lived and labored in this space began to reveal itself. Perfectly encapsulated behind the drywall, every element of the structure, plaster, paint, woodwork, whitewashed floorboards, window sashes, doors – everything! – was original to the period of enslavement (*Image at right: Original plaster walls in kitchen house*).



As if this discovery was not exciting enough, the team uncovered the remains of several undisturbed rat’s nests filled with debris. To the untrained eye, these nests are less than

appealing. To archaeologists and museum curators, they are a treasure trove. Rats tend to gather items from a 50-foot radius, pack it in the walls to form their nests, and then urinate on top of the material. The urine acts as both an adhesive and a preservative. Little did these creatures know that they were building tiny time capsules and ensuring future generations could learn from what they left behind.



As each nest was uncovered, staff painstakingly removed everything they could from the walls and combed through the debris to remove artifacts hidden inside: buttons, stockings, marbles, a portion of an enslaved butler’s waist coat, a veil from a bonnet, and even a small lidded box containing makeup (*Image at left: Combing through a rat’s nest for artifacts*). The most exciting finds were two paper fragments – a piece of newspaper and a fragment from a reading primer. The newspaper was authenticated as published in November 1833, enabling the team to approximate the age of the nests and their contents. A primer is a book used to learn how to read and write. The discovery of

the primer fragment may indicate that someone living above the kitchen could have been learning to read and write, an activity which was illegal for enslaved people in South Carolina at that time.



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Impact of Investment

With investment, HCF can implement an anticipated three-phased project to appropriately preserve, restore, and interpret the previously untold stories of the enslaved people who lived and labored on the property of one of Charleston's wealthiest families. This immensely symbolic project will offer the Foundation the opportunity to authentically interpret slavery in a city that was one of the largest slave-trading ports, and ensure much-deserved attention for a population of Charlestonians whose stories can only be learned and accurately shared through forensic discovery, archaeology and interpretation.

The first phase of the project involves removing all 20th century building materials from the kitchen house to reveal the original construction fabric while recovering any artifacts concealed within the interstitial spaces. Once these activities are complete, HCF will convene a panel of experts to evaluate the structure, determine what can and should be restored, and create a restoration and interpretation plan to open the building as a new exhibit. The new exhibit will finally enable HCF to share the stories of the enslaved people with integrity in a tangible and meaningful way, educating the local community and its thousands of annual visitors.

A Find of National Significance

The removal of just small portions of 20th century building material in the Nathaniel Russell House Museum Kitchen House has already brought to light significant discoveries that will tell us more than ever before about the daily lives of the enslaved in Charleston. As very little about this population survives in written records, it is often only through forensic evidence and archaeology that historians are able to piece together what life was like for them and bring to light their incredible contributions to and impact on our communities. Even microscopic traces of paint can tell us volumes about a room from 200 years ago. With the discovery of the original fabric of the kitchen house and artifact caches, historians will now have credible insight into details about the inhabitants. We will know what their clothes looked like, their beds, what they were eating, what they ate with, what they were reading, and what tools they used to manage their everyday tasks.

For more about the Nathaniel Russell House Museum, please visit www.historiccharleston.org/house-museums/nathaniel-russell-house/.



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Honor What Makes Us

The past is everywhere you look in Charleston—triumphs and tragedies, beauty and brutality—infused in its art and architecture, etched in its cobblestones, held in the collective memory of its communities and lovingly shared with those who visit to be embraced by its charm.

The history of Charleston is still being written.

The city’s exceptionally well-preserved character combined with growing enthusiasm and appreciation for its distinctive cultural resources have made this city an internationally desirable place to visit and live. As a result, the challenges and opportunities our communities face today are becoming more pronounced, requiring thoughtful, pragmatic and proactive attention.



Historic Charleston Foundation plays a leading role in addressing and helping to manage the most important issues confronting Charleston's past and future. Since its inception in 1947, the organization has earned respect regionally and nationally as a future-oriented, solution-driven entity safeguarding the integrity of the Lowcountry’s historic character.

The trends and challenges impacting Charleston today include:

- An estimated population increase from 750,000 to 1.2 million by the year 2030;
- A forecasted 25,000 new peninsula residents in the next 15 years, many of whom will likely face a housing affordability crisis;
- Rising property values on the peninsula limiting a family's capacity to live, work, and play downtown;
- Unprecedented visitor numbers, resulting in increasing congestion and concerns regarding land use and quality of life;
- An 18th-century city with an outdated 20th-century transportation system operating in the 21st century; and
- Political uncertainty over court hearings on the future role of the Board of Architectural Review (BAR) and other related developments.

The above represent a fraction of the most obvious of carefully watched trends. They do not account for changes due to major weather incidents, flood insurance regulation, major economic downturns, or the many smaller nuances that influence the daily lives of our citizenry.





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Historic Charleston Foundation's mission is to champion the historic authenticity, cultural character, and livability of the Charleston region through advocacy, stewardship, and community engagement.

10 HCF Accomplishments Everyone Should Know

With a holistic approach to preserving the historic and social landscapes of the greater Charleston area, Historic Charleston Foundation is fulfilling its mission through high-impact initiatives.

- ✓ **The Edmunds Revolving Fund:** The nation's first Revolving Fund for Preservation, this endowment has saved more than 140 properties and been emulated across the nation.
- ✓ **Protective Easements & Covenants:** 400+ protective easements and covenants have been put into place to safeguard the historic integrity of local structures.
- ✓ **Belmond Charleston Place Hotel:** The Foundation was instrumental in shaping this massive building project that launched the rejuvenation of the King Street district.
- ✓ **Charleston County Courthouse:** The Foundation led the effort to restore the historic Charleston County Courthouse—one of only six surviving colonial statehouses—to its 1792 grandeur, keeping Charleston's legal community centered at the traditional Four Corners of Law.
- ✓ **National Historic Register Designations for the Ashley and Cooper River Districts:** This achievement involved primary research, surveys and extensive work spanning more than a decade.
- ✓ **Old Powder Magazine:** The Foundation returned stewardship of the Old Powder Magazine (c. 1712) on Cumberland Street to the Colonial Dames after completing a major restoration of the building and operating it as a museum.
- ✓ **Nathaniel Russell and Aiken-Rhett House Museums:** The Foundation purchased and saved these historically and architecturally significant houses, creating opportunities for the public to experience and appreciate Charleston's history, identity, and the important role preservation plays.
- ✓ **Ansonborough Neighborhood:** The Foundation envisioned the preservation of this historically and architecturally significant neighborhood through its purchase and rehabilitation of more than 50 properties, paving the way for a complete revitalization of the area and elevating the Foundation's prominence to a national level.
- ✓ **Festival of Houses & Gardens:** Through this highly anticipated and nationally celebrated annual treasure, HCF staff and more than 600 volunteers have been actively educating thousands of residents and visitors on the benefits of historic preservation for more than 70 years.
- ✓ **Community Engagement:** The Foundation employs and deploys expert staff for regulatory meetings (BAR, BZA) and co/sponsors community programs including the Peninsula Advisory Commission (established by HCF) and Forums such as Mobility, Tourism Management and Flood Mitigation.

