HOUSE HISTORY

THE SWORDGATE HOUSE

I. Legacy | The Story of 32 Legare Street

The Sword Gate House stands as one of Charleston's most romantic and storied landmarks. Tucked behind high brick walls and an avenue of lush magnolias, this estate at 32 Legare Street represents a centuries-long evolution of architecture and culture in the heart of the Lowcountry.

A FOUNDATION OF THE "GRAND MODELL"

The history of the property is as old as Charleston itself, tracing its origins back to the *Grand Modell of Charles Town* – the 1672 urban plan that defined the peninsula's layout. While the settlement officially began in 1680, the lineage of this specific lot connects the modern estate to the very first vision of the Holy City. This history seeks to separate truth from legend, honoring a property that has been a silent witness to the city's growth since its earliest colonial foundations.

ARCHITECTURAL EVOLUTION & DESIGN

Erected in two distinct stages, the residence is a masterful composition of brick and frame structures. The estate's architectural integrity is highlighted by its transition through various historical periods:

- The Structure: The home features a rambling three-story frame section alongside a robust brick wing. The brick portion maintains exceptional architectural clarity, rising two-and-a-half stories over a high basement with a slate-covered hip roof.
- Refined Interiors: The interior serves as a gallery of Charleston's aesthetic history. It boasts beautiful Adam-style woodwork and molding, particularly within the dining room and ballroom. These elegant details replaced the original Regency-style marble mantels, reflecting the shifting tastes of the 19th century.
- Exterior Elegance: The north facade along Tradd Street is punctuated by pedimented dormers, while the stucco-covered brick walls and nine-over-nine light sash windows exemplify the classic proportions of the era.

A LITERARY AND SOCIAL LANDMARK

Beyond its physical structure, 32 Legare has long been a hub of intellectual and social activity. The house "invites invention," having served various roles from a prestigious educational institution to a residence for creative minds. It was here that notable literary figures found inspiration, contributing to the rich cultural tapestry that defines the South of Broad neighborhood. Today, the home remains a rare example of Regency-style elegance mixed with refined craftsmanship, standing as a testament to the enduring charm of Charleston's historic district.

II. The Iconography of the Sword Gates

The entrance to 32 Legare Street is defined by perhaps the most famous examples of wrought-iron in the United States: The Sword Gates. Installed in 1849 by then-owner George A. Hopley, these gates have become an enduring symbol of Charleston's craftsmanship and martial history, lending their name to the entire estate.

THE ARTISTRY OF CHRISTOPHER WERNER

The gates were designed and manufactured by Christopher Werner, a celebrated Charleston ironworker. Werner's legacy is etched into the very fabric of the city, but the Sword Gates remain his most recognizable masterpiece. Interestingly, the gates were not originally intended for a private residence. They were part of a larger set commissioned in 1838 for the New Guard House (the city's police station and armory). When the city found the set too expensive, Hopley purchased this pair to adorn his high brick wall on Legare Street.

SYMBOLIC COMPOSITION

The gates are a striking blend of delicate artistry and defensive imagery, reflecting the dual nature of Charleston's historic "South of Broad" aesthetic—where beauty meets fortification.

- The Central Cross: Each half of the gate features a central cross formed by the intersection of two vertical spears. These spears meet at the midpoint of a horizontally placed broadsword, creating a powerful geometric focus.
- The Blades: The broadswords, from which the gates draw their name, are meticulously detailed, serving as a reminder of the military purpose for which they were originally designed.
- Ornate Flourishes: Surrounding the central martial iconography is a wealth of elaborate scrolls and leafage. This intricate ironwork softens the presence of the spears and swords, integrating the gates into the lush, botanical landscape of the magnolia-lined avenue beyond.

A LEGACY IN IRON

Over the last 150 years, the Sword Gates have transitioned from a rejected civic commission to a world-renowned architectural treasure. They do more than simply secure the property; they act as a threshold between the modern world and the "Grand Modell" of historic Charles Town.

The iconography of the gates—the cross, the spear, and the sword—continues to fascinate historians and visitors alike, standing as a testament to Christopher Werner's skill and the estate's role as a guardian of Charleston's romantic and martial heritage.

II. CHRONICLE OF OWNERSHIP

The lineage of 32 Legare reflects the broader history of Charleston, passing through the hands of prominent French Huguenots, international merchants, and dedicated preservationists. The following timeline outlines the key stewards of this historic home.

- **Early 1700s - 1774 | The Legare Era**: Solomon Legare, a French Huguenot, obtained the original land grants. The property was passed through the Legare family for generations, eventually being subdivided among the sons of Solomon Legare Jr.
- **1818 | James Miller Sr.**: A wealthy merchant, Miller purchased the property for $26,100. During his brief ownership, the estate was solidified as a significant residential tract before being sold to the Talvandes.
- **1819 - 1848 | The Talvande Stewardship**: Andre and Ann Marsan Talvande, refugees from Saint-Domingue, acquired the property. Madame Talvande operated a highly prestigious boarding school for young ladies here, making it a cornerstone of Charleston's social history.
- **1849 | George A. Hopley**: Hopley purchased the estate from Madame Talvande and was responsible for the installation of the iconic Christopher Werner "Sword Gates," forever changing the identity of the home.
- **1905 – 1929 | The Allston Family**: During this period, the home became a literary hub. Popular novelist Hervey Allen resided here during the Allstons' ownership, collaborating on works that defined the Lowcountry's cultural identity.
- **1949 | Henry T. Gaud**: The Gaud family purchased the property and began an extensive restoration of the house and gardens. For a time, the estate was open to tourists and partially used as a boutique inn.
- **1999 | Michael and Betsy Dingman**: The Dingmans undertook the most comprehensive reworking of the property in over a century, modernizing the estate while meticulously preserving its historic fabric.
- **2020 – Present | Modern Restoration**: The current owners initiated a massive renovation, updating the main house and carriage house with designer details, a new kitchen, and enhanced gardens, ensuring the estate remains one of the most spectacular properties in America.

III. 32 LEGARE'S SCHOOL HISTORY: THE ERA OF MADAME TALVANDE

During the early 19th century, 32 Legare transitioned from a private merchant's residence into one of the most elite educational institutions in the South. Known popularly as "Madame Talvande's French School," the estate served as a finishing school for the daughters of wealthy planters and merchants, cementing its reputation as a center of social and intellectual refinement.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE TALVANDES

Following the slave revolution in Saint-Dominque, many French refugees sought sanctuary in Charleston. Among them were Andrew (André) and Ann Marsan Talvande. In June 1819, they purchased the property for $17,000. Madame Talvande, described as a woman of "great character and strong will," soon established a boarding school that would become the most prestigious of its kind in the city.

LIFE AT THE BOARDING SCHOOL

The school was more than an educational facility; it was a cultural immersion. Under Madame Talvande's strict but respected supervision, young ladies were instructed in the "finer points" of society:

- **Curriculum**: Instruction was heavily focused on French language, literature, music, and the social graces necessary for the Charleston elite.
- **The Ballroom**: The home's expansive ballroom served as the heart of the school's social life, where students practiced dance and etiquette.
- **High Standards**: Madame Talvande was known for her rigorous standards, ensuring that her pupils were the most polished young women in the Lowcountry.

NOTABLE PUPILS AND SOCIAL IMPACT

The school's influence was far-reaching, educating several generations of women who would go on to lead Charleston's most prominent families. One of the school's most famous pupils was Mary Boykin Chesnut, whose renowned Civil War diaries provide a vivid window into the era. Her time spent within the walls of 32 Legare helped shape the literary voice that would eventually document the fall of the Old South.

A LEGACY OF DISCIPLINE AND ELEGANCE

The Talvande era lasted nearly thirty years, ending with Madame Talvande's death in 1850. Her stewardship left an indelible mark on the property; it was during her tenure that the house was first "subdivided" in a functional sense, with the sprawling rooms adapted to house boarders and classrooms.

Today, the "School History" of 32 Legare remains a vital chapter of its legacy, representing a time when the estate was not just a home, but a transformative space for the young women of Charleston's golden age.

IV. Architectural Significance

The Sword Gates House is a rare and sophisticated example of Charleston's architectural transition from the Federal period into the Regency and Greek Revival styles. Unlike many single houses in the city, 32 Legare is a complex composition of two distinct structures—a brick wing and a rambling three-story frame section—that have been masterfully integrated over two centuries.

A MASTERPIECE OF TWO MEDIUMS

The estate's significance lies in its dual construction. The brick wing, which has retained a high degree of its early 19th-century integrity, rises two-and-a-half stories over a high basement. It is capped by a slate-covered hip roof and features stucco-covered brick walls that exemplify the solid, enduring craftsmanship of the era. This masonry section is perfectly balanced by the frame portion of the house, which adds a sense of organic growth and historic "rambling" charm characteristic of the city's most storied residences.

REGENCY AND ADAM-STYLE INTERIORS

The interior of the home serves as a curated gallery of high-style design. While the home originally featured marble mantels in the Regency style, these were later updated with exquisite Adam-style woodwork and mantels. These fine carvings, particularly evident in the dining room and ballroom, showcase the delicate swags and geometric precision that defined Charleston's "Golden Age" of interior architecture.

- The Ballroom: Large, light-filled, and grand, the ballroom remains the focal point of the home's social history, featuring ceiling medallions that match those in the dining room—a rare instance of unified decorative motifs in a subdivided historic plan.
- Symmetry and Light: The north facade along Tradd Street is punctuated by three pedimented dormers and nine-over-nine light sash windows, ensuring the home is bathed in the soft, coastal light unique to the peninsula.

MODERN EVOLUTION AND PRESERVATION

While the home has weathered over 150 years of shifting tastes, it remains architecturally significant for its adaptability. The recent 21st-century renovations have respected the historic fabric while introducing modern functionality, such as en suite bathrooms and an open-concept designer kitchen. This blend of the 1672 "Grand Modell" foundation with contemporary luxury ensures that 32 Legare remains not just a museum of the past, but a living masterpiece of Charleston's architectural legacy.

V. Present Day

Today, the Sword Gates House remains a National Register of Historic Places landmark. It stands as a "spirit of the city"—a residence that has weathered 150 years of changing tastes to remain, as ever, one of Charleston's most charming and significant homes.