

The Grimké Family Home,

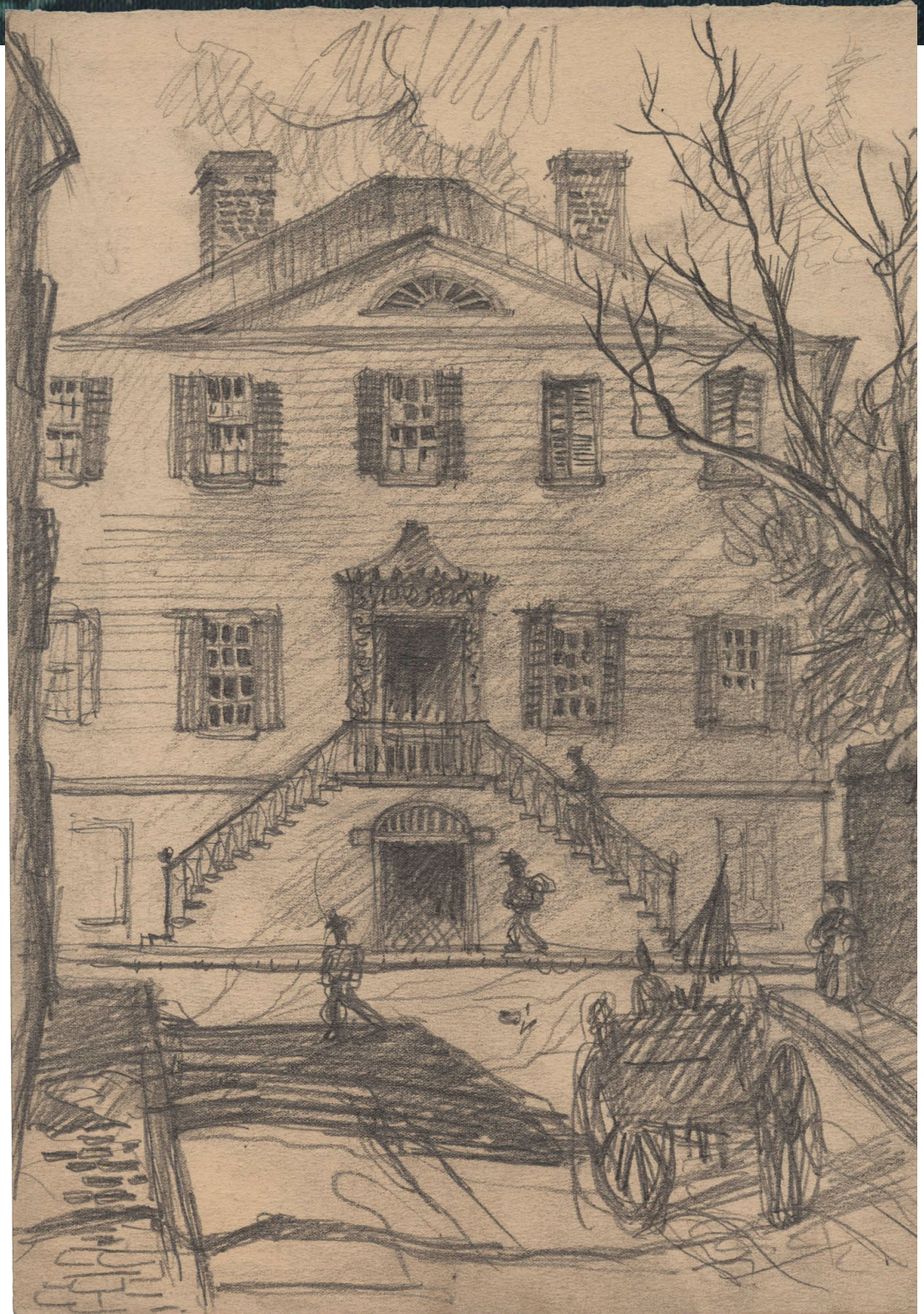
1803-1819

by LOUISE W. KNIGHT

In 1803, the year that the Grimké family moved in, the clapboard house stood tall and boxy—as it still stands today—on what is now called East Bay Street but then was called, in that section, Front Street. The house was classic Georgian, with high ceilings and, on each of two main floors, a wide central hallway and four equal-sized rooms. But this Georgian house was in Charleston, so it also had piazzas wrapped around the southern and western sides.

The house had a view. Its east windows looked out, four blocks away, on the Cooper River and Gadsden's Wharf, where ocean-crossing slave ships were docked. From the house, one could see captured Africans being unloaded and, beyond, boats and barges traveling the river, some carrying rice and cotton south to Crafts' Wharves at the end of Tradd Street and some pushing north carrying supplies and newly enslaved Africans to the lowcountry plantations.

William Blake, a massively wealthy British aristocrat and lawyer with deep ties to South Carolina, built the house the Grimkés had purchased. The grandson and son of landgraves, he owned vast acres in the province and in England. Beginning in 1760 and for ten years thereafter, he served in the Commons, the lower house of the South



Drawn by architect Joseph Mordecai Hirschmann in the 1920s, this sketch illustrates the Blake-Grimké House from a vantage point on Vernon Street. Courtesy of Special Collections, College of Charleston Libraries.



Top and middle, photographs taken by Charles N. Bayless for the Historic American Buildings Survey show the front and rear façades of the Blake-Grimké House in 1983. (The wing was added after 1819.) Below, another HABS photo, this one by Frances Johnson, captures the front entrance as it appeared earlier in the twentieth century. From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

Carolina provincial legislature, and that is when he must have lived in the house (some sources have given the date “circa 1789” for when it was built, but this is incorrect). Then, he left Charleston for England, never to return to South Carolina. The house remained his property until he died in 1803, when his son sold it to John Faucheraud Grimké.

Grimké, although not as wealthy as Blake, was wealthy enough. A superbly educated man, he had earned a liberal arts degree from Cambridge University and studied law at London’s Middle Temple just before the American Revolution began. Rising to the rank of colonel during the war, he then went into state politics, serving in the General Assembly from 1782 to 1790 and for a time as speaker. Meanwhile, beginning in 1783, he was also a judge on the South Carolina Court of Common Pleas and Sessions (the state supreme court) and, in time, its chief justice. His wife, Mary Smith Grimké, the descendant of landgraves, was an early member and long-term superintendent of the Ladies’ Benevolent Society of Charleston. She bore fourteen children, eleven of whom survived infancy and early childhood.

Among those eleven children, four were brilliant thinkers, writers, and leaders in their fields; three of the four were also controversial figures in Charleston. Frederick, a prominent judge on the Ohio Supreme Court, was the author of a groundbreaking work of political philosophy, *The Nature and Tendency of Free Institutions* (1848). Thomas, a lawyer, was a nationally known education and peace reformer and a stalwart opponent of the nullification movement in the state. Sarah and Angelina became abolitionists and women’s rights advocates in the North, speaking to large audiences when this was taboo for women. Sarah wrote the trailblazing *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* in 1837, and Angelina, in 1838, became the first American woman to address a legislative body when she spoke before a committee of the Massachusetts legislature on the issue of slavery.

Before moving to Front Street in 1803, the Grimkés had lived on Church Street, in the house now known as the Heyward-Washington House. In 1794, when the family purchased the Church Street home, there were five children, the oldest of which was nine years of age. The house was a small-scale Georgian-style double house with the three floors traditional in Charleston for that period. If the Grimkés used the four rooms on the third floor as bedrooms for the children and their enslaved servants, which is one scenario, then it is easy to suppose that they outgrew the house by 1803, when there were nine children, including three teenagers who would have wanted to want to escape the nursery floor.

The house on Front Street was on a grander scale than the Church Street house because it was wider from side to side and deeper from front to back. The rooms were more generously sized, the windows larger, the ceilings higher. Carpeted stairs linked the nine-foot-wide central hallways on the two main floors. The attic was unfinished, and the raised basement was dedicated to the cooking kitchen (where some cooking was done) and the washing kitchen. Behind the house was a carriage shed, where the horses were also kept. Nearby was the kitchen building, where more cooking was

done, especially in the hot summer months. We know this and much more because at the time of the judge’s death in 1819, a detailed inventory was taken room by room of his property, and it survives as part of his estate records.

This house where the famous Grimké sisters grew up was a city house. The assumption is often made that they grew up on a plantation. In their childhoods, their father, like most professional men of Charleston, owned a number of plantations that generated wealth for his family through the production of rice and cotton. By 1819, the judge had given most of them to his sons and owned just one, the Quarter Plantation, near Unionville. The family never lived there, but in the summer, they made rare afternoon visits while staying at their nearby country estate, Belmont. They also visited relatives on other plantations. Still, the sisters’ main experience of slavery, as they once said themselves, was not of enslaved workers on plantations, but of enslaved house servants.

If the house on Front Street was bigger in some ways, it was clearly still crowded, with only eight rooms, not all of which could be used for bedrooms. Where did the eleven family members (including the parents) sleep in 1803? The inventory helps us make some guesses.

Downstairs, at the back of the house, was the room that served as a library and the judge’s legal office but, most of all, as his retreat. He kept his law books there along with the bulk of the family’s collections on history, biography, literature, and religion. The best writing of the previous centuries—Tacitus, Cicero, Gibbons, Shakespeare, Rousseau, Locke, Racine, and Richardson—was waiting there to be read. Here, too, were textbooks for Latin, Spanish, French, arithmetic, astronomy, and geography. This room is likely where the children were tutored (the girls’ tutoring ended sooner than the boys, since tradition prevented the girls from going to college). It was also the room where the judge kept his harpsichord, probably an import from London. He was an early member of the St. Cecilia Society and may have performed in some of its concerts. On a table, bottles of brandy and Madeira wine stood ready to lubricate conversations with the gentlemen of his circle. Finally, intriguingly, there was a canopied bed, suggesting that this room also served as his bedroom.

Upstairs was Mary Smith Grimké’s bedroom. Much of her furniture—the wardrobe, table, and writing desk—was of mahogany, an imported wood. There was a fully curtained bedstead, a sofa and upholstered chairs, two chests of drawers, a large mirror, and a large Scotch carpet.

The children slept in three more of the large rooms. A best guess is that the three older boys, who were often away at school, likely stayed in the downstairs bedroom, across the hall from the judge’s bedroom and law office. The three smaller boys, the oldest five years old and the youngest one year old, had one of the large bedrooms upstairs, and the three girls, including Sarah, had the other. There was one more bedroom—what the inventory erroneously called the “north chamber”—a small room at the east end of the second floor hallway. It held only a bedstead, two chairs, and a table. Perhaps it was the baby’s room or a guest room, or perhaps an older child used it.

In the years to come, the number of children living in the house ebbed. The last child, Angelina, was born there in 1805;

as she grew up, some of the older children began to move away. By 1819, when the inventory was taken, four children had married and set up their own households in Charleston or nearby, and the unmarried Frederick had moved to Ohio. Seven children were still home: the three youngest sons, now twenty-one, eighteen, and seventeen, sometimes

away at school, and four daughters, including Sarah, now twenty-seven, and Angelina, now fourteen.

The enslaved servants (there were seventeen in 1819, but there may have been more in 1803) slept on the floor in the bedrooms of those they served or in rough beds on the second floor of the kitchen building. We know something about them since they were listed in the inventory as property, sometimes along with their skills and always with their estimated dollar value. The oldest, all in their seventies, were Nancy (“still useful,” \$5), Will (“useless,” \$1), and Rhina (“plain cook, washer, ironer,” \$70). The rest of the adults were in their thirties or younger. There were four male house servants: George, thirty-eight (also a “coachman & shoemaker,” \$600); Sam, twenty-four (also an “excellent coachman,” \$650); John, twenty-one (“good house servant,” \$500); and Prince, fifteen, a house servant in training (\$450). The three ladies’ maids were Bess, who was thirty and had four children ranging in age from three months to eight years (\$1500); Maria, who was twenty-three (\$600); and Margaret, who was fourteen (\$450). The latter two were also seamstresses. Then there was Peggy, thirty-four (\$500), a “plain washer and ironer,” and Dick, thirty-four (\$400), a “plain cook.”

Enslaved people of color were essential to the running of the household. Peggy, Rhina, and Dick probably spent most of their



Some of the earliest surviving architectural elements found within the Blake-Grimké House include a newel post of the rear staircase (left) and a wooden prong hammered into the rafters to help hold beams in place (above). Photographs by Louise W. Knight.



With its elegant period furnishings, the drawing room of the Heyward-Washington House gives an indication of how the Grimké family's drawing room may have looked at the turn of the nineteenth century. The Grimkés actually lived in the Heyward-Washington House for eight years before moving to their Front Street home. Courtesy of the Charleston Museum, Charleston, South Carolina.

time in the washing or cooking kitchens or in the kitchen building. It is not clear what Nancy and Will did. Perhaps they helped with Bess's younger children. The rest spent their days as personal servants, applying their particular talents—making or repairing shoes, sewing or repairing clothes, or taking the family on journeys in either the heavy carriage, for long trips, or the lighter carriage, for shorter ones.

If work defined their roles in the house, slavery defined the conditions under which they worked. The Grimké sisters would later document their mother's cruelty as an enslaver, writing how she often beat one servant or another for no reason, sometimes every day. She sent the most disobedient ones to the city-run slave punishment house, either called the Sugar House, after the building's original function, or the workhouse, since one of the punishments was to force the enslaved to work to exhaustion on a treadmill grinding corn. At the Sugar House, slaves received the worst punishments, those that enslavers believed were necessary to teach obedience but did not want to administer themselves. The enslaved had a horror of the place. The walls of a certain room there had specially constructed hollow cavities filled with sand, so that passersby would not hear the cries of pain.

In Charleston in the early nineteenth century, entertaining family and friends was a wealthy family's main occupation. The remaining three of the eight main rooms of the Grimkés' Front

Street house were for socializing. As one entered the house, the drawing room was on the right. Because the family and visitors used this room the most, the floor was covered with a long-wearing cut-pile Wilton carpet, imported from England. There were two sofas, some card tables and games (including chess and backgammon), and an assortment of liquor, including cordials. Some four hundred pieces of glassware and a 165-piece Wedgwood china set were also kept there. A massive mahogany bookcase, filled with more books of history, biography, and literature, dominated the room. And on the walls were two pictures of George Washington, the nation's first and only recently deceased president. Judge Grimké, the Revolutionary War veteran, met Washington when he visited Charleston in 1791. President Washington rented a house on Church Street for his stay, the same house that the judge, perhaps with a certain patriotic pride, purchased three years later, and that he still owned when he died in 1819.

Across the hall was the breakfast room, with its breakfast table, two card tables, and two massive sideboards. The tea china and most of the dinner china were stored there. But where was the dining room? Three dining room tables were kept in the central hall. Perhaps for the large gatherings, the tables were set there. For smaller gatherings, a table or two could be moved to one of the two front rooms.

The third public room was upstairs, at the front of the house.

This was the music or card room. A Brussels carpet covered the floor. There were two sofas, two dozen chairs, a tea table, several card tables, and a music box table, likely imported from Italy, that played a jingly melody every time someone opened the lid. (Evidently, the judge did not wish to share his harpsichord.)

The striking elegance of the Grimké home reflected both the sophistication of the city they lived in and the family's fabulous prosperity. Charleston in the early years of the nineteenth century was one of the new nation's great metropolises. In 1810, with a population of roughly 24,711, it was the fourth largest city in the United States and possessed enormous wealth. The white community numbered 11,568. Charleston was a majority black city, with 13,143 Africans and people of African descent. In 1810, 89 percent of the black population—11,570 people—was enslaved, toiling in the households or the family stables or hiring out to work in the trades. Their unpaid labor across the city—combined with the unpaid labor of those working on plantations across the state—created Charleston's wealth. The remaining 11 percent of the black population—some 1,430 African Americans—formed the free black community, whose skills in the trades and at the docks kept the city functioning.

Charleston's high society was dominated by a small number of the richest families, who maintained their financial and political power by intermarrying. When John Faucheraud Grimké married Mary Smith, the couple merged the wealth of several successful French Huguenot immigrant families with that of one of the oldest and most politically powerful landgrave families in the state. John's father was a silversmith by trade, a planter through his wife's inheritance, and an investor in the city's real estate. Mary's father was a banker and planter; her mother, a descendant of landgrave Thomas Smith I, inherited tremendous assets.

And the couple's political ties through family were strong. John's first cousin Elizabeth Grimké, the daughter of his father's brother, married John Rutledge, the influential delegate to the Constitutional Convention and a governor of South Carolina. Mary's brother Roger married John Rutledge's sister Mary. Mary's brother Benjamin was an aide to George Washington and a governor of North Carolina.

This history helps us to imagine the kinds of conversations that took place in the house, whether at the dining room table, in the drawing room, card room, or the law library and whether over tea or wine. There was gossip about who might marry whom; frank assessments about the characters of famous neighbors, relatives, and friends; and debates among the men about politics. Since the judge was a passionate Federalist, no doubt there were words of praise for George Washington and words of condemnation for Thomas Jefferson. Surely, the question of whether

Congress should pass a law that would end the international slave trade in 1808 was also debated. Some white southerners favored the law as a way to increase the value of their slaves and their slaves' descendants. The pros and cons were weighed, even as slave ships lay anchored just blocks from the house, and even as the enslaved servants listened silently as they refilled the men's glasses with Madeira.

When Judge Grimké died in 1819, he indicated that Mary could live there as long as she wished, although he passed ownership of the house to their son Henry. After Mary's death in 1839, the house was sold. For the next 116 years, it had seven owners. During this time, a wing was added, the fine old rooms were divided into rentable apartments, and in 1967, the piazzas were removed and attached to the newly relocated Mary Smith House on Anson Street. By 1955, the Blake-Grimké House (if it may be called that) was in a seriously neglected condition. For ten years, an insurance company owned it. Then, in 1965, it was given to the Historic Charleston Foundation. The foundation sold the house to Citizens and Southern National Bank in the 1970s. In 1998, Ken Evans purchased it and, happily, restored it to its present condition; since 2000, it has served as home to the law firm of Pierce, Hens, Sloan, and Wilson. Its strong architectural bones are still easy to admire as one drives or walks down East Bay Street. ♦

Louise (Lucy) W. Knight is a historian and author. She is writing a book about the Grimké sisters that will be published by Flatiron Books, a new imprint of Macmillan, in 2018. Her first two books were about progressive social activist Jane Addams. In addition to her scholarly publications, she has published book reviews in the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the Women's Review of Books and appeared often on C-SPAN Book TV. A frequent lecturer on the Grimkés and on Addams, she lives in Evanston, Illinois. For more information on her work, visit www.louisewknight.com.

Unveiling of the Grimké Historical Marker Tuesday, May 5 at 10:00 A.M. 321 East Bay Street, Charleston

The Friends of the Library at the College of Charleston is sponsoring the erection of a historical marker at the historic home of Sarah and Angelina Grimké. As important figures of early feminist and abolitionist movements, the Grimké sisters spoke out against slavery, even condemning their own father's slaveholding. By risking their reputations and personal safety for their beliefs, Angelina and Sarah Grimké's social activism remains an inspiration to us all. Join local dignitaries and the public for a short dedication ceremony to take place outside of the Grimké homestead.

For more on a series of exciting events celebrating Sarah and Angelina Grimké Day on May 5, visit friends.library.cofc.edu.