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
Nearby was the kitchen building, where more cooking was done (and the washing kitchen). Behind the basement was dedicated to the cooking kitchen (where some 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, only one of which could be used for bedrooms. Where did the eleven family members (excluding the parents) sleep in 1830? The inventory helps us make some guesses.

Downstairs, at the back of the house, was the room that served as the judge’s private office, a large, oak-paneled room 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, it is easy to suppose that they outgrew the house by 1803, when there were nine children, including three teenagers who 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 were deeper from frequent conversations with the gentlemen of his circle. Finally, intriguingly, there was a canopy bed, suggesting that this room also served as his bedroom.

Upstairs was Mary Smith Grimké’s bedroom. Much of her furniture was decorated, a table, and writing desk. There were four chairs (where some 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, is 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.

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; she grew up, some of the older children’s marriages 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 Fredrick had moved to Ohio. Seven children remained at 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 bedroom 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 Beaty, 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 plantation. In their childhoods, their father, like most professional men, was the author of 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 ardent 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 in the South during the time of the Civil War.

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 window was added after 1819. (Below) another HABS photo, this one by Francis Johnson, captures the front entrance as it appeared earlier in the twentieth century. From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.
time in the washing or cooking kitchens or in the kitchen build-
ing. 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 to the children, making or repairing shoes, sewing or repairing clothes, or taking the family on jour-
neys in either the heavy carriage, for long trips, or the lighter car-
riage, for shorter ones.

If work defined their roles in the house, slavery defined the con-
ditions 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 labor house. As one entered the house, the kinds of conversations that took place in the house, whether at the dining room table, in the drawing room, in the card room, or in the large gatherings, the tables were set. 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.