A Passion to Preserve

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Published by University of Wisconsin Press

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A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture.
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Robert Barker

Born in 1929, a native of Long Island, New York, Robert Barker first visited Charleston, South Carolina, when he got out of the army in 1953. He fell in love with the place and finally moved to Charleston in 1977. Barker works part-time as senior architectural interpreter at Drayton Hall Plantation. “I have no intentions of quitting until they put the lid down on me,” he says. “Every day I meet new people, they’re excited about the place, and I get such a thrill out of showing them the house. It’s so great, and there’s such great history there.”

MOTHER SAID I BROUGHT HOME my first treasure when I was seven, a Christmas tree somebody had thrown out, and I never stopped after that. I started collecting antique furniture at a very early age, bringing home things people put out for trash pickup. And the people whose lawns I cut would have stuff in their attic or garage they didn’t want, so I lugged it home. Mother never criticized anything I dragged in, except maybe the Christmas tree. With money I earned, I would buy porcelain and other things. A big leaf-shaped majolica dish was one of my earliest purchases.

“You want to get into everybody’s attic,” Mother said, and I did, hoping to find treasures up there. I remember a Victorian tufted chair that I thought was just the greatest thing that ever happened. Mother thought it was awfully rickety, but she went along with me. I had a great love of old trunks, small trunks with humped tops and big iron handles on the ends. The best of the lot I gave to a museum years ago. One was covered with all leather, another with leather studded with brass nail heads. I had a couple of old sea chests too. My hometown of Port Jefferson, Long Island, was a seaport and a shipbuilding town, so these things were around and not too expensive in those days. I might pick up a nice little pine sea chest for ten dollars. I’d refinsh it (today that would be a crime, but in those days it wasn’t), and then I’d live with it for a while, and then I’d find something else I wanted more and I’d sell it. I’ve never stopped collecting. I like eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century furniture, and I’m very partial to blue and white Canton. I don’t have a big collection, but what I have I’m very proud of, and I’m always hunting for another piece. It’s gotten hard to find anything that’s within my reach.

I grew up in a house from about the 1830s that my parents had restored around the time I was born. Mother appreciated lovely old things and had bought some furnishings at the big estate sale when they moved in there. By 1930 we were broke, so there wasn’t much buying after that. When my
father died in 1941, we had to leave that house, and my mother had to go back to work.

I always loved houses. As a child I would draw little plans of houses, some very grand, with ballrooms and the whole works. I started restoring my first house in Port Jefferson when I was eighteen. I had gone to look at an early house that I was interested in, but it wasn’t for sale. On the way home I went through this big old Greek Revival that was standing there with the doors open, and I thought, this is for me! It was in rough shape, desperately in need of restoration, and I just fell in love with it and conned Mother into it. We were renting at the time. I had inherited some money, so I had enough to buy the house, but that was about it. The place had been vacant for a good many years when I got it. I didn’t know any better; I just thought I could do anything.

The great big monster of a house was missing about seventy window-panes, so I soon learned how to putty windows. The last tenant had not drained the water out of the heating system, so I had endless broken radiators and pipes. I dismantled the old radiators, put in new gaskets that I’d made, and put them back together. There was a big sag in the house’s center wing, so I was jacking that up and the plaster was falling off the walls. I had no idea how to do these things, so I just went ahead and did them. That house was my learning house, and I played with it for a long time. Over the years I redid a lot of my original work.

I studied interior designing at Parsons School of Design in New York, but after two years there I went into the army. I should have gone back to Parsons, but instead I worked off and on with a friend who had a design business, and I just got carried away with my houses. Mother and I lived in my first house until 1963, when I sold it and bought another one in Port Jefferson, a huge thing with ten rooms on the first floor. It hadn’t had any care in many years, but it wasn’t in such bad shape as the first. I made a profit on the first one, so I had a little money to work with. I had no thought of turning around and selling that second house right away, but a friend in real estate said she could get me a big price for it. So within a year I got that house together and sold it. My third house in Port Jefferson was one I’d known and loved all my life. When I was in school, a friend of mine lived there. It came on the market, and I decided I had to have it. I did that one over pretty quickly too, sold it, and moved on to the next one, a huge early Victorian thing. Big rooms and high ceilings, it was a great house, and I had a wonderful time doing it. I stayed in it nine years and ran a summer guesthouse there.

After doing four houses in Port Jefferson, I came to Charleston in 1977, did two houses here, then went back up to Long Island for three years, and
did two more up there. The first was a 1720 farmhouse that had been altered several times. I got it back as near as possible to what it had been, replaced the center chimney and three fireplaces, moved the stairway back to where it came from, and took up all the oak floors to get back to the old wide boards. That was a great house. I did one more big Victorian in Long Island purely as a business deal. I had no intention of staying there. I wanted to get back to Charleston.

When I bought my first house in Charleston, 2 Wragg Square, I was just about the only white person in the neighborhood. It was a gorgeous, big Greek Revival house that had been made into six apartments. I converted it back to a single-family house. It's quite a thrill to get a place that's really been altered and get it back to what it was. The architect who designed these houses had something in mind. You can see the changes that have been made, you know what was there, and it's really exciting to get it back to what it was originally, the way it was meant to be.

After about two years in Charleston, I was walking one day with a friend and saw another place that was on the market, on Wall Street, and I thought, God, I've got to have that house! Within one day I sold 2 Wragg Square. The house on Wall Street was marvelous, a vastly different sort of look. It's what we call a single house here, the end of the house facing the street and a piazza leading to the door. Someone had turned the whole downstairs of the main part of the house into one room, eighteen by thirty-eight feet. There was also a wing that had been kind of cut up. By moving walls and raising ceilings I got a twenty-one-foot dining room with a ten-foot ceiling, and a small kitchen, small bedroom, and bath for my mother on the first floor. I had two bedrooms and two baths on the second floor. It's a wonderful house and in a very nice area. I once tried to buy it back, but the price had gone through the roof.

I'd get a house done, and then I'd see another house and think, God, I'd love to do that one! The only way I could afford to do it was to sell one and move into the next. Mother and I would live in them while I was doing them. She always said that by the time I got the sawdust out of the dresser drawers, we sold the house and moved. Which is just about the truth. My second house in Long Island we moved into in the fall, and in December we had one whole side of the building torn off, covered with tarpaulin, with no heat except a fireplace and a wood stove in the kitchen. When I did the 1720 farmhouse, Mother was up in her eighties and had to climb a ladder to get upstairs to bed because I'd torn the staircase out. She was a great sport, and when I needed somebody to hold up the end of a two-by-four, she was there.

I did five more houses in Charleston, plus the one I'm in now. My real-estate agent is a good friend. She's sold me all my houses and sold all my
houses for me, and when something great comes up she calls and says, “I've got a key. Do you want to take a look at it?” Not that she's trying to sell it to me. She just knows I love houses. Of course, sometimes I've succumbed, but every time another one comes up, I have to go see it.

Charleston is a charming old city that just attracts gay men. There's a very large gay community here, and the populace seems to tolerate us. All my gay friends here are very proud of their homes and take good care of them and love to entertain in them. One of them remarked that students move into the city's low-income areas first, for the low rents, and then gays buy the places and restore them and the prices go through the roof. That's about the truth of it. Gay men move in and do the work themselves, even if they've never done it before. Straight couples have to get a contractor to do everything. We gay men find out how to do it ourselves, and we help each other.