

TALBIRD HOUSE (RUINS), OUTBUILDING
Corner of Hancock and Hamilton Streets
Beaufort
Beaufort County
South Carolina

HABS No. SC-138-A

HABS
SC-138-A

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20240

ADDENDUM TO:
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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Location: Near the northeast corner of Hancock and Hamilton streets, behind the house at 313 Hancock Street, in Beaufort, Beaufort County, South Carolina.

Present Owner: Talbird Reeve Sams.

Significance: Tabby-built, urban outbuilding of an architectural type not otherwise documented in Beaufort County.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of Erection: Probably early nineteenth century, but the exact date is uncertain.
2. Original Use: Long-held family tradition holds that the building under discussion is a privy built in association with the now-demolished, main Talbird House. The lack of any indication for a chimney plus unusual features preserved below the building's original floor level (including a series of ventilation slits in external walls and four deep subterranean chambers defined by tabby cross partitions) support the traditional interpretation. Assuming the building was a privy then it is likely that it contained two spaces entered from the exterior by separate doorways, one space presumably designed for male, the other for female family members.

B. Historical Context

The dependencies of the old Talbird house are located near the northwest extremity of an area formerly called Black's Point (now the Point). When they or the associated Talbird House were erected is not documented, but oral tradition suggests a date during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, which may or may not be correct. The following narrative outlines the history of the site; describes the main Talbird House before its destruction by fire in January of 1907; and gives biographical information about its probable occupants.

Black's Point

Prior to the American Revolution and for several decades thereafter, Black's Point enjoyed a certain autonomy since it lay just outside the eastern limits of Beaufort Town as first defined by Colonial statute near the beginning of the eighteenth century. In 1799 Thomas Fuller's survey of Beaufort ignored all settlement here but, following the town's formal incorporation

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(on 17 December 1803), the Intendant and Wardens began agitating for boundary changes as a matter of “*urgent necessity*” which would enlarge their jurisdiction east and west. Such efforts met with little success until 1809 when an Act was passed by the South Carolina legislature to annex neighboring lands, including Black’s Point into Beaufort Town. By the same Act, Beaufort’s civic authorities were given leave to name unnamed streets, set out new streets in the newly incorporated area and (following an assessment) collect sufficient taxes from property owners to pay one half of damages awarded to individuals whose land had been requisitioned for road building purposes. ¹

An anonymous and undated map of Black’s Point attributable to the later 1790s or very early 1800s shows that before new roads were laid out, land subsequently occupied by the Talbird house and its dependencies belonged to Mrs. Sarah Baynard (died 27 May 1793) who had probably inherited it from her father, James Black.² A well known merchant and shipbuilder, Black seems to have obtained most, if not all the land, located east of East Street before his death in 1770, probably building a house and boatyard near the southern mouth of a tidal creek which cut through the property. Subsequently, Black’s estate was divided between several children, Sarah receiving a six acre tract of triangular shape bounded north by the Beaufort River and west by East Street.

Exactly when and under what circumstance the tract again changed hands is not known, nor is it clear at what period it underwent subdivision. Talbird family tradition asserts that portions passed into their ownership before 1825 when Thomas Talbird (1784-1843) is said to have built a tabby dwelling on one parcel. However, it is now difficult to substantiate this story, since relevant conveyances have disappeared and nothing survives of the house except for its entrance steps. These were left in place after the house was demolished during the late 1920s following its partial destruction by fire in January of 1907. Little else of architectural interest could be salvaged from the ruin, only photographs (dated 20 January 1907) taken immediately after the conflagration by a photographer from Savannah named Wilson, preserving images of the building’s burnt-out shell.³

Talbird House

Photographs show that the lost building was a 5 x 2 bay, gable-ended tabby structure with internal end chimneys incorporating two-and-one half stories raised over a high, elevated basement. A tiered porch fronted the house on south, west and probably east facades. Along the north facade ran a raised single storey shed-roofed addition which projected east and west to

¹ Brevard, Joseph. *Public Statute Law of South Carolina*, Vol III. Charleston SC, 1814

² Beaufort Museum Collection, Beaufort, SC.

³ Collection, Mr. Talbird Reeve Sams, Beaufort, SC; Historic Beaufort Foundation, Beaufort, SC.

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create two small, lateral wings. Doorways positioned about the south facade's central axis at basement, first and second floor levels imply a central, through-hall plan, hallways giving access from the south porch to single rooms right and left. Few construction details are visible, with one image suggesting that exterior corners of the main block were laid up round by round in fired brick as the casting process proceeded, a measure which ensured accurate right angles at vulnerable junctions and helped keep heavy formwork plumb while being maneuvered into position.

Attribution

Bereft of its porches the Talbird House closely resembled the Saltus/Habersham house located at 802 Bay Street, Beaufort, another multi-storey, gable-ended tabby dwelling believed on the basis of a memorial laid before the South Carolina legislature to have been built for Captain Francis Saltus ca. 1796. Who Saltus employed as his contractor is not known, but the most likely candidate was Colonel Thomas Talbird (1759-1803) an uncle of the Thomas Talbird who is said to have built the Hancock Street house under discussion.

At the turn of the eighteenth century, Colonel Thomas Talbird was particularly active with construction projects, documented works indicating that he was then recognized as possessing expert knowledge of tabby building by Beaufort's leading citizens. Consequently, several prestigious commissions came his way including erection of Beaufort Arsenal (1795); repairs to St. Helena Church (1798), building a new Parsonage House for the same parish and most important, erection of Beaufort College (1802-04). Given this experience, it would come as no surprise to find him building an especially tall tabby dwelling for Captain Francis Saltus on Bay Street or a very similar house on Hancock Street for himself or another member of the Talbird family. However, if the latter structure is the Colonel's work then it must have been commenced by the time of his death in 1803, that is some twenty years before the traditional building date (for which it should be observed no independent evidence has yet been found).

Alternatively, it is possible that Talbird's building skills were transmitted to his nephew, either through an apprenticeship or the agency of specially trained slaves inherited or otherwise secured by the younger Thomas Talbird who was twenty-one years old when his uncle died.

Thomas Talbird the Younger (1784-1843)

While such speculation does not settle questions concerning the date of the Hancock Street house or dependencies, it is clear that the younger Thomas Talbird could have been responsible for the work some time during the early nineteenth century since he was then involved with various building projects, including repairs to Beaufort College following a storm in 1811 and demolition of the same building (abandoned after a devastating epidemic of yellow

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fever) for the sake of its materials in 1836.⁴ That the younger Talbird had practical knowledge of tabby construction is demonstrated by a report he submitted to the South Carolina Legislature in October of 1825 when he was Keeper of the Beaufort Arsenal. This document describes the Arsenal's dilapidated condition which was so advanced as to threaten structural collapse. High tabby walls enclosing the building's forecourt were far gone, Talbird observing "*these walls have never been rough-cast which is considered a great preservative & almost indispensable to Tabby work. And it is further calculated to resist dampness; which these walls are more or less subject to.*"

Three or so years later (ca. 1828) a petition to the South Carolina Legislature seeking incorporation of the Beaufort Mechanics Society further attests Talbird's standing among local builders since he is named as the Society's President, John M. Zealy (who may well have been Talbird's partner) being named Secretary.⁵ Talbird and Zealy appear again among expert "*mechanics*" asked to examine tabby walls of Beaufort's original Baptist Meeting House which appeared likely to give way in 1842. Talbird found the building near collapse and the walls in question unfit "*to support a new roof with safety.*" This view was affirmed by Zealy and another Beaufort builder Abram Cockcroft. Despite an emotional appeal by "*Brother D Turner..... to spare the old walls*" the mechanics' testimony convinced the congregation to demolish its old building and erect a new one in brick rather than tabby, on a previously unoccupied site located immediately south of the original structure.⁶

It seems probable that Thomas Talbird would have been given charge of new construction but he died during the following year (1843). It was left to Zealy to seek architectural advice from Charleston and more likely than not, supervise the contract. Details are sketchy but an early twentieth-century source attributes fabrication of the building's outer brick skin and interior decorative plaster to Cudjo McKnight "*a slave belonging to the Talbird family*" the same account adding "*Mr. Thomas Talbird..... trained some of his slaves in a trade, some being carpenters, some brick-masons, and among the slaves there was no one with more pride*"

⁴ Rowland *et al* (286) state "*One seventh of the town's population and a much higher percentage of students died*" during this epidemic. Beaufort College was sent into crisis, as enrolment fell off, staff resigned and Trustees removed themselves from the board.

⁵ SC Dept. Of Archives and History Petitions to SC Legislature, N.D. 2084 ca 1828. The Society sought to preserve a spirit of concord and harmony among tradesmen and mechanics; provide funds for the assistance of their windows and orphans; assist young men entering into business; foster a moral atmosphere and improve the minds of its membership.

⁶ Busch, James W. The Beaufort Baptist Church. Undated Typescript, Beaufort County Library, Beaufort, SC.

*than Cudjo McKnight. He, with Isaac Middleton and William Rivers, did the brickwork under probably a Mr. Brunner.”*⁷

The United States Census of 1840 confirms Talbird then owned seven slaves who were engaged in manufacture or trade but these individuals represented only a small percentage of his total holdings, which numbered 102 slaves, fifty of whom were agricultural workers. Like Colonel Talbird, the younger Thomas Talbird probably relied upon planting for income, his plantation most likely being located near the north end of Lady's Island.⁸

Franklin Talbird (1822-80)

How and upon whom the estate was settled after Thomas Talbird's death is unclear. Family tradition asserts that the Hancock Street property devolved upon his son Franklin Talbird. However, the latter probably did not inherit his father's work force since the United States Census of 1850 shows only three slaves (all female aged twenty-eight, six and two years respectively) in his ownership. Ten years later Franklin Talbird's circumstances had changed, the United States Census of 1860 listing twenty-two slaves under his name, personal property worth \$22,000 and real estate valued at \$7,000. Ten of the slaves were male, this group comprising a group of unusually mature individuals. The youngest was twenty-two years old, the oldest eighty-five. One was thirty-six, the remainder aged between forty-eight and sixty. An explanation for this pattern might be that Franklin Talbird followed the younger Thomas Talbird's example, either training or perhaps inheriting experienced slaves with craft skills.⁹ It is clear that he followed what had become a family trade over four generations, being listed as a builder by the United States Census of 1860, brick mason in 1870 and retired brick mason in 1880. His commissions are not well documented, with known examples including several domestic structures in Beaufort as well as the Brick Baptist Church (dated 1855) on St. Helena Island.

Franklin Talbird married Johanna M. O'Grady (died, 1905) a native of Ireland by whom he had three children: Thomas (1855-1928); Christiana (1857-1904) and Annie (1859-86). In Beaufort, surveys prepared for the United States Direct Tax Commission in 1862 show that just before the Civil War, he owned Lot C of Block No. 9 at Hancock and Hamilton streets where the

⁷Beaufort Gazette 23 March 1917.

⁸ The map of Beaufort District prepared for Mills's Atlas of South Carolina shows property belonging to an unspecified Talbird located on the north shore of Lady's Island. While its exact location is not given by the US Census of 1840, the sequence of entries strongly suggests this plantation was then owned or at least occupied by the younger Thomas Talbird.

⁹ These individual are not enumerated in the Agricultural Schedule of the 1860 US Census, indicating that they were not employed in agricultural activities. Slaves with special skills are mentioned in a mortgage dated 1857 registered in Greenville County, SC (Greenville County Deeds, Vol. Y: 135). Among slaves listed as belonging to Franklin Talbird, are Stephen, a carpenter about forty years old and John a carpenter aged about twenty-three to twenty-four years.

Talbird house under discussion once stood; Lot B of Block No. 8 located immediately north overlooking the Beaufort River (purchase by Franklin Talbird in 1847)¹⁰; part of Block No. 10 to the south; and commercial property, including a wharf, located off Bay Street. Additionally, he had come into possession of the *Talbird Place* on Port Royal Island and an adjacent property called Paukie Island which together incorporated 130 acres.¹¹

Civil War

All these holdings became forfeit following the Battle of Port Royal (November of 1861) when Beaufort's white population fled their lands and houses in fear of advancing Union troops. But Beaufort was not occupied by Federal forces for another month, the town and surrounding islands descending into anarchy during the interval as slaves and marauding soldiers looted empty buildings without restraint. Franklin Talbird subsequently claimed significant losses, including real estate, household effects, materials and holdings related to his construction business. Chief among the latter was a brick yard (probably located on the *Talbird Place*, Port Royal Island near Whale Branch) valued at \$3, 500 which had been abandoned along with quantities of brick (both fired and unfired), timber and tools (valued at \$3,000), carts, a buggy and an unspecified amount of lime. There were also "3 bales fine cotton packed" and ten bales "unpacked" (together valued at \$1,400) which confirm that Talbird had part of his lands under cultivation despite an apparent shortage of labor, the claim listing only seven slaves (valued at \$6,500) and an unspecified interest (worth \$1,500) in another three enslaved men.

Enumerated losses in Beaufort included "*Buildings and Lots*" worth \$6,000 (presumably comprising parts of Block No 8 and Block No. 9); "*one third of stores and lot in Beaufort*" (valued at \$3000) and "*3 shares in port Royal road company*" (valued at \$1, 500). Talbird also had more brick, tools and ironwork (valued at \$4, 400) stored in town along with "*Flats and boats*" worth \$2,000. Among personal items, furniture, bedding, books, kitchen utensils, clothing, crockery and silver added \$1,400 to the total.

Some valuations were perhaps inflated since the United States Direct Tax Commission considered Talbird's Beaufort house and lot (Lot C, Block No 9) worth only \$900, levying taxes in the amount of \$40 against the property under authority of an act for the "*collection of direct taxes in insurrectionary districts within the United States*" approved by Congress on 7 June 1862.¹² This levy going unpaid, the United States Direct Tax Commission offered the Talbird

¹⁰Beaufort County Deeds, 7:391

¹¹ US National Archives, Application for Redemption of Property, date uncertain.

¹²Regarding this tax, Rosengarten (1986: 260) explains: "On August 5, 1861 Congress levied a tax on all the States, including the eleven which had seceded, to raise money for the War. South Carolina's share was computed at \$363, 570.66. Once Federal authority was established on the Sea Islands, the Government could begin collecting." Amounts owed were to be determined by the Direct Tax Commission.

House (along with most other delinquent Beaufort properties) for sale on 13 March 1863 when it failed to find a buyer and was bought-in by the United States. A few months later, all structures occupying Block No. 9 (including the Talbird House, an adjacent dwelling once owned by Dr. Lewis Reeve Sams and John Archibald Johnson's town residence to the west) were fitted out as a makeshift Union medical unit designated Beaufort Hospital No. 3.¹³ The need for this and other hospitals prepared by the occupying forces, soon became all too clear, the Free South for 25 July 1863 reporting:

Sunday last was a sad day in Beaufort. The arrival of the Cosmopolitan with the wounded from Morris island, bringing also the intelligence that our brave troops had been repulsed in the assault upon Fort Wagner....As the vessel neared the wharf with its freight of suffering, a silent mournful concourse gathered around the landing, eager to lend a helping hand in removing the wounded to the hospital. As those who were able to walk filed off the boat and wended their slow way through the crowd, the scene was truly pathetic....The wounded of the 54th Massachusetts came off the boat first, and as these sad evidences of the bravery and patriotism of the colored man passed through the lines of spectators every heart seemed to be touched, and we will vouch for it that no word of scorn or contempt for any Negro soldiers will ever be heard from any who witnessed the sight....All day and far into the night did the sad procession pass toward the hospital, and every man and woman at the post who could do anything to alleviate the suffering of our brave fellows was soon busily at work."

The Cosmopolitan had docked at 3 p.m. By 3 a.m. the following morning "some hundreds were made comfortable." At Hospital No. 3, the Free South reported: "Dr. Hayden has here 47 beds of wounded. The "convalescents" have been sent to the doctors own house to make room for Folly island martyrs". The same source names twenty-one patients under Dr. Hayden's care. All were privates, eleven belonging to the 100th New York Regiment, the rest belonging to units raised in New Hampshire, Maine, Pennsylvania and Ohio.

How long Hospital No. 3 continued in operation is not known, however the Talbird House was offered once more at an auction of unsold Beaufort properties held during January of 1864. According to results published by the New South (30 January 1864), Lot C, Block No. 9 was struck off to a Captain William James for the derisory sum of \$60. Military buyers enjoyed certain privileges, receiving sale certificates "on paying a quarter of the purchase price, and the

¹³ Beaufort's military hospitals are identified and illustrated by a manuscript map held by the Library of Congress (G3914.B4E58). Three principal houses making up Hospital No 3 are shown by this map along with two large tents pitched behind the Lewis Reeve Sams house, but, unfortunately, all outbuildings then standing on Block No. 9 were omitted by the anonymous surveyor.

residue in three years from the date of sale."¹⁴ But, it seems Captain James defaulted, Claudia C. Johnson, Franklin Talbird's sister, paying the United States Treasury \$250 for the property in 1866.

Late Nineteenth/early Twentieth Century

Franklin Talbird returned to Beaufort before 1870, at which time the United States Census recorded real estate valued at \$3500 and personal property worth \$200 under his name. He died intestate on 20 November 1880 and was buried at Beaufort's St. Peter's Catholic Church. His eldest son, Thomas Talbird III (1855-1928)¹⁵ subsequently occupied the Hancock Street house and was living there in January of 1907 when airborne sparks from the great fire which devastated the eastern end of Bay Street and neighboring parts of Carteret Street, ignited its roof.¹⁶ The main house was soon reduced to a burnt-out shell. Outbuildings located north and northeast most likely suffered a similar fate. According to insurance maps, ruins of the main house were still standing in 1924 but they were deemed dangerous soon thereafter and demolished. What remained of its outbuildings presented far less of a threat and were left untouched. Today they still stand, functioning as landscape features.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Description

The outbuilding here described is one of two ruined dependencies located north of the Talbird House which, before its demolition during the 1920s, stood at the northeast corner of Hancock and Hamilton streets in Beaufort.¹⁷

B. Exterior Description

¹⁴ Free South, 26 September 1863.

¹⁵ A graduate of Manhattan College New York, and William and May College, Virginia, this Thomas Talbird was admitted to the South Carolina bar in 1879 and served three consecutive terms (from 1899-1904) in the South Carolina Senate.

¹⁶ A contemporary account of the fire published by the Beaufort Gazette relates: *While the fireman were fighting the fire with all the power they could [on Bay Street] the flames spread northward along the west side of Carteret street, burning the fire engine house and hall and two residences. Crossing the street, it kept on, burning the office and several houses belonging to Mr. Thomas Talbird, and at last caught and consumed the Town Market. Crossing Craven Street, it consumed the Town Hall....*

¹⁷ Located to the southwest and now substantially ruined, the second tabby dependency is said to have been a kitchen.

1. Dimensions: The outbuilding is a single-story structure measuring 26'-2½" east/west x 10'-2" north/south.

2. Structural System: Walls are made of load bearing tabby, cast to a uniform above ground thickness of 10" using forms measuring 25" in height. Corners of the building are reinforced with fired brick laid in alternatively long and short patterns corresponding in height with successive tabby pour lines.

3. Facade Organization: The south facade has suffered partial destruction but enough survives to attest a symmetrical elevation featuring two entrance doorways of uncertain size, one positioned toward the building's southwest corner the other positioned toward the southeast corner. Nothing is known about the south facade's fenestration (or lack of it). By contrast, north, east and west facades are preserved nearly to their full original height, although, all are damaged.

4. Openings

a. Doorways and doors: The two doorways giving entrance from the south are incompletely preserved. While it is clear they were similar, or more likely, identical in size, no exact dimensions can be ascertained.

b. Windows and shutters: The north facade features two small window openings (measuring about 31" wide x approximately 30" high). Each window opening is positioned opposite one of the two entrances just below the original eaves line. Neither window opening is complete, both having disintegrated around what was probably a lintel bearing. The west facade features another similar but slightly larger window opening (measuring approximately 3'-0" in width) which preserves impressions of a timber sill which must have been cast in place as wall construction proceeded. The east facade is blank and shows no sign of alteration.

5. Roof: All traces of the roof and its covering have disappeared.

C. Interior Description

1. Floor plans: While the pair of entrance doorways suggest interior division into two discrete spaces, no evidence for any partition is visible. If a partition did exist, as seems probable, it was timber framed and built independently of the exterior walls.

2. Floor Construction: Sockets attest to timber floor joists, now lost, measuring 3 ¼" x 8" or 8½" set about 32" on center that originally spanned across the building north-to-south, the first floor being elevated about 18" above present grade. Assuming a ceiling, the interior was about 6'-10" high.

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3. Sub-Floor Features: Below the original floor line, 9" wide tabby cross-walls (running between north and south exterior walls) define four subterranean chambers of slightly variable width (measuring between 6'-2" and 6'-10" wide). The depth of these features has not been determined, oral testimony indicating that they descend more than 4'-0" below grade. Just above the four chambers but below the original floor level, exterior walls on the building's north, east and west side are pierced by a series of rectangular slits. Measuring 3¾" wide x 9¾" high, these small openings (which show no sign of ever having been blocked) are distanced about 2'-7" on center and carefully aligned in a discontinuous horizontal band around north, east and west sides of the building.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION.

A. Architectural Drawings: No original or early architectural drawings are known. The structure was surveyed and measured by Colin Brooker in 2002.

B. Interviews: Oral information concerning the Talbird House and its history was collected by Colin Brooker from the present owner, Mr. Talbird Reeve Sams. Mr. Sams also furnished early twentieth-century photographs of the site and its main house taken before the latter's demolition.

C. Bibliography:

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was sponsored by the Historic Beaufort Foundation and by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) division of the National Park Service, Paul D. Dolinsky, Chief, HABS. This report is one component of a larger survey of extant examples of tabby architecture within Beaufort County, South Carolina. The documentation was undertaken by HABS under the direction of Paul D. Dolinsky with assistance from Virginia B. Price, HABS Historian, who worked with Jefferson G. Mansell, (formerly of) the Historic Beaufort Foundation, Ian Hill, Beaufort County Planning Department, and Colin Brooker, Brooker Architectural Design Consultants, to identify subjects of study and locate them in the field. Colin Brooker, whose research underpinned the project, wrote the historical report. Evan Thompson, now with the Historic Beaufort Foundation, assisted Brooker in the production of the reports. Jack E. Boucher, HABS Photographer, took the large format photographs.

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