

RETREAT PLANTATION  
130 Pinckney Retreat Road  
Beaufort vicinity  
Beaufort County  
South Carolina

HABS No. SC-860

HABS  
SC-860

PHOTOGRAPHS

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

ADDENDUM TO:  
RETREAT PLANTATION

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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# HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

## Addendum to RETREAT PLANTATION

HABS No. SC-869

Location: 130 Pinckney Retreat Road, Beaufort vicinity, Beaufort County, South Carolina.  
The plantation is located on the north side of Battery Creek.

Significance: This is the only surviving tabby-built plantation house of pre-Revolutionary date in Beaufort County which is still inhabited.

### PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

#### A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: The exact date is not known, however, the house is commonly attributed to a French immigrant, Jean de la Gaye. If the attribution is correct, it would place the initial construction at some time between 1738 and 1769.

2. Architect/ builder: Not known.

3. Alterations /Additions: The gables and end chimneys show signs of extensive rebuilding at upper levels, including the coping to the gables. This work was done in either in the 1850s or later, perhaps after the earthquake of 1886 when the so-called earthquake rods made of iron presumably were introduced. The house was abandoned in 1912. By 1939 its roof had collapsed. Fireplaces, floorboards, and other timbers were subsequently looted. Extensively reworked and restored in 1940, the house was again altered in 1950 when a rear addition containing a kitchen was erected. The gable-ended wing extended the house northward. Afterwards, more living space was added east of the wing and a new bedroom over.

#### B. Historic Context

Local tradition asserts that the tract located three or four miles from Beaufort Town on the northwest side of Battery Creek which, by the end of the eighteenth century had become known as The Retreat, was first granted to Jean (John) de la Gaye, a French native who settled in the Low Country during the 1730s.<sup>1</sup> If so, it is likely that the 250 acres warranted to him in

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<sup>1</sup>This individual is variously called John De la Gaye, John DelaGeyey, and John DelaGayé in contemporary documents. The last appellation is probably to be preferred since it was the one used by his attorney, Henry Laurens. Details of de la Gaye's life and activities have been obscured by numerous tales repeated without question or were further elaborated by local writers over the course of the twentieth century. The majority (if not all) such tales appear highly fanciful and are largely contradicted by what few original documents survive.

family right by the South Carolina Council on 1 July 1738 refers to this property.<sup>2</sup> Erection of the tabby house now called Retreat Plantation is attributed to the same individual, which would place its construction before 1769, the year when de la Gaye left Beaufort (for France) permanently.

While construction of the house before the American Revolution seems probable on the basis of architectural style, archaeological investigation has revealed evidence for little more than casual occupation of its surrounding site during the early- or mid-eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, there is nothing in the surviving historic record attesting to any agricultural activity at Retreat on the part of de la Gaye who, rather than a planter, emerges from local sources as one of Beaufort's more prominent early businessmen. Variousy called a storekeeper and merchant, his standing was high enough in Beaufort Town for him to be elected Churchwarden of St. Helena Parish on 20 April 1747 and Vestryman in 1761, a position he held intermittently down until 1768.<sup>4</sup>

Over this period, conveyances attest to numerous transactions involving the purchase and sale by de la Gaye of commercial property located on or adjacent to Bay Street in Beaufort. In 1746 he purchased Beaufort Town Lot No. 305, fronting east on Charles Street, for £1,100 South Carolina currency.<sup>5</sup> Subsequent purchases included Town Lot No. 301<sup>6</sup>, a desirable commercial

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<sup>2</sup>De la Gaye's petition mentions a family of five which presumably included himself, his wife Catherine and three other dependents (possibly children) of whom nothing is known. There are other records of land acquisition in the vicinity dating back to May of 1743 when "John de la Gaye *Gentleman* bought (for L500 currency) from Thomas Simmons (a cooper) and his and wife Mary another 250 acres "bounded NE John Grayton, SW and NN on a creek SE on Peter Palmeto".

<sup>3</sup> In a personal communication (2 December 2003) regarding an archaeological survey of Retreat Plantation, the Principal Investigator, Beth Gantt observes "we found only three pieces of pottery that could be assigned to the early to mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, a piece of German stoneware and two fragment of what appear to be an olive jar. All of these were found approximately 700 feet northwest of the house. We did not do extensive testing around the house since this area will not be disturbed [by future development], but all of the artifacts from shovel tests indicate a middle to late 19<sup>th</sup> century occupation. It is probable that much of the earlier materials were swept away or that 20<sup>th</sup> century landscaping has muddied the archaeological deposits".

<sup>4</sup>In 1765 de la Gaye was appointed by the Vestry to oversee the rebuilding of St. Helena's Church. The last recorded Vestry meeting attended by de la Gaye was held on 23 May 1768. He was not re-elected at the Vestry held on 27 March 1769 which suggests that he had by then departed Beaufort District.

<sup>5</sup> Charleston, South Carolina, RMC Deed Book C-C, p. 328, 9/10 March 1746 Conveyance from Hillesdon Wigg and his wife Elisabeth.

<sup>6</sup>Charleston, South Carolina, RMC Deed Book Deed Book K-K, p. 258, 8/9 April 1752.

site on Bay Street, part of which he sold to Francis Stuart, Beaufort's wealthiest merchant in 1752.<sup>7</sup> He then sold the "front portion" to John Heyward "planter of St. Luke's Parish" in 1769.<sup>8</sup>

Earlier, de la Gaye must have bought a second lot facing the Beaufort River at the northwest corner of Bay and Carteret streets which, along with the neighboring Lot No. 45, was purchased by the Charleston merchant William Harvey in 1762. During the same year de la Gaye purchased Town Lot No. 12 (another prime parcel located overlooking the Beaufort River) along with the "water lot" fronting it from the estate of Samuel Prioleau.<sup>9</sup>

It is possible that de la Gaye then set about improving the property, building a one and a half story, tabby storehouse<sup>10</sup> from which were sold a wide range of household items such as paint, cloth, and nails, plus European goods imported from London and Bristol.<sup>11</sup> There was a brisk market for such items in Beaufort, always providing that the merchant extended sufficient credit to tide impecunious planters over between seasons. But, unsecured loans were risky as Francis Stuart's premature death at the age of thirty-four or thirty-five proved in 1766. Stuart had given credit for goods worth almost £150,000 an enormous sum for the period, apportioned between more than one hundred individuals including merchants, ships' crews, and scores of plantation owners.<sup>12</sup> Little cash was ever recovered and Stuart's once thriving business collapsed.

Shaken perhaps by this failure, Jean de la Gaye left South Carolina in 1769 for "Nimes, in the Province of Languedoc" (France) soon thereafter. Between 1769 and 1774 another

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<sup>7</sup>Charleston, South Carolina, RMC Deed Book N-N, p. 346, 16/17 October 1752.

<sup>8</sup>Charleston, South Carolina, RMC Deed Book Q-3, pp. 132-39, 27/28 February 1769.

<sup>9</sup>Charleston, South Carolina, RMC Deed Book Z-3, pp. 109-15.

<sup>10</sup>External tabby walls of what was probably de la Gaye's store still stand at 715 Bay Street in Beaufort. Originally a gable-ended structure, this building was damaged in the fire of 1907, subsequently being rebuilt with considerable alteration including a new timber-framed upper story.

<sup>11</sup>South Carolina *Gazette*, 12 February 1762, cited Rowland et al., (1996):189. If de la Gaye built the handsome, three and one-half story, tabby dwelling house known to have stood next to the store before the American Revolution is not certain. If built by de la Gaye, the residence would presumably have been erected some time between 1762 and 1769. Alternatively, it is possible that Daniel DeSaussure built the structure soon after acquiring the property in 1774. Either way it is clear from contemporary newspaper advertisements that de la Gaye had a store on Bay Street in 1762. Badly damaged in the fire of 1907, the adjacent house was subsequently demolished and its tabby foundations (still extant) built over.

<sup>12</sup>Charleston Inventories X: 101-04, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia.

prominent member of Beaufort's merchant community, Daniel DeSaussure, is said to have managed de la Gaye's local business while the Charleston merchants, John Savage and Henry Laurens, handling all legal affairs.

The business itself, or at least its most valuable assets, Lot No. 12 and the water lot to the south (giving access to the Beaufort River) ultimately passed into sole possession of Daniel DeSaussure according to a deed recorded in Charleston on 24 February 1774.

If de la Gaye ever returned to South Carolina is not known, nor is it certain when he died. State records attest that "*the Retreat*" had passed to "John Barnwell Esquire of Port Royal Island" by 1783 when the latter mortgaged "a tract of 1170 acres on Port Royal island commonly known by the name of the Retreat" to William Parker and Edward Blake, Commissioners of the Treasury.<sup>13</sup> This mortgage was satisfied on 22 November 1793.

From General John Barnwell, who died in 1800, the property passed to his son, Captain John G. Barnwell (1778-1828) who subdivided the tract some time before 1 June 1819 when the citation to an otherwise lost plat records the property devolved upon his daughter, Sarah B. Barnwell.<sup>14</sup> In 1840 Sarah made over, for the sum of three dollars, "The Retreat containing 310 acres and more bounded N. by creek leading from the Battery river, on south by Battery River and on west by lands belonging to Rev. Stephen Elliot Jnr." to her sisters, Anne B. Barnwell and Emily H. Barnwell.

Anne B. Barnwell married the Rev. Edward T. Walker (1819-96), rector of the so-called White Church, now Chapel of Ease, on St. Helena Island. Walker eventually bought out the other individuals holding portions of Retreat, Emily Barnwell for instance selling her half of the property to Walker for \$3,000 on 1 January 1856.

In 1860, the U.S. Census returns for St. Helena's Parish record that Walker who was then aged thirty-nine was living (presumably at Retreat) with his wife, Anne Barnwell also thirty-nine and three children, Emily Barnwell (aged fourteen); Eliza (aged ten) and Edward (aged seven). Walker owned real estate worth \$12,000 and other property valued at \$30,000, the U.S. Census of 1860 listing thirty-five slaves under his name, nineteen of whom were male and the rest female. This population (almost certainly housed at Retreat), was accommodated in fourteen slave dwellings.

Today, Retreat's slave rows have disappeared, but photographs taken during the Civil War show what may have been two settlements. An image by Hubbard and Mix entitled *The*

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<sup>13</sup>Charleston . South Carolina. RMC Deed Book M-5, pp. 215-17, 16 June 1783.

<sup>14</sup>South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Columbia.

*Street and Negro Quarters, Retreat Plantation*<sup>15</sup> illustrates a mixed group of structures strung out linear fashion along one side of the unpaved street. In the foreground, at the head of the row, stands a rectangular one and one-half story, timber-framed storage building (a cotton house perhaps). Three smaller, timber framed dwellings can be seen beyond, each distinguished by an exterior end chimney. Two of the dwellings appear similar in size, and one is larger. As a whole, the row lacks uniformity suggesting that it evolved over the course of more than one building episode.

What was perhaps a second settlement is less securely identified, several anonymous stereoscopic images thought to be of Retreat, showing a another slave street with a row of single, gable-roofed slave dwellings.<sup>16</sup> These timber framed, weather boarded structures were each organized around central doorways and an end chimney. Chimneys were substantial, each comprising a rectangular tabby base (approximately 6'-0" high) cast in three successively higher pours. Approximately twelve courses of corbeled brick (or more likely, tabby brick) produced a transitional zone of shouldered form between the tabby base and a free-standing chimney stack which was also carried up in coursed brick (or tabby brick). All exterior building surfaces, whether of tabby, brick or weatherboard appear whitewashed, contemporary testimony indicating that whitewashing was an annual activity on well managed plantations.

Like all other plantations on Port Royal Island, Retreat was abandoned by its white inhabitants a day or two after the defeat of Confederate forces at the Battle of Port Royal (9 November 1861). The owner and his family fled inland, settling in Edgefield, South Carolina. According to Walker's own testimony, the following items had been left behind at Retreat:

*46 Negroes; 40 bales of Sea Island Cotton (burnt by Order), Cattle 10 head; Sheep, 12 head; Hogs, 40 head; Blades and Hay, 40 thousand pound; 8 oared boat, worth \$350; Flat worth \$200; Library worth \$3,000; Piano worth \$350; household furniture.*

Judging by an inventory taken for the U.S. Direct Tax Commission in 1862, the piano, books, and boats mentioned by Walker soon disappeared, less valuable furnishings (a bedstead, wardrobe, table, washstand, two chairs, bathtub, andirons and fenders) being sold off for a few dollars soon

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<sup>15</sup> Stereoscopic image mounted on card with photographer's label on back. Beaufort County Library, Beaufort, South Carolina.

<sup>16</sup> These slave house are attested to by two stereoscopic views held by Beaufort County Library, Beaufort (BCL Stereoscope Collection #22 and #26). Unfortunately both views lack contemporary identification, leaving both the subject location and photographer uncertain.

thereafter.<sup>17</sup> Contemporary surveys show that Retreat then comprised “600 acres bounded N. Salem and Myrtle bush. S. Battery Creek, E. battery Creek, W. the Elis’s Cherry hill and the Street.” Appraised at \$2,400 the tract was assessed taxes in the amount of \$48 plus penalties but this sum was not paid by its dispossessed owner, who, like the vast majority of local owners remained ignorant of any delinquency. Consequently, the U.S. Direct Tax Commission offered Retreat for sale at a public auction held during January of 1863, perhaps selling it as two separate parcels. Sale certificates<sup>18</sup> indicate the property found one or more buyers but the full purchase price failed to materialize and title became vested (temporarily) in the United States.

Contemporary photographs indicate that the main house and its settlements continued to be occupied during the Civil War though by whom and for how long is not known. Activity by northern missionaries seems likely since the storehouse described above as constituting part of the slave row is identified on the back of one photographic image as a Freedman’s School. Another image taken before 1864 shows that fields at Retreat were still being cultivated by black workers.

Edward T. Walker made an *Application to Redeem* Retreat on 6 February 1873 and succeeded in recovering at least part of the holding. Family tradition relates that he subsequently sent his young son, Edward Barnwell Walker (1859-1926) to work the plantation where a small dairy was put into operation. Edward Walker lived on the place with his wife (Elizabeth Heyward Guerard Walker) down until 1912 when the couple moved to Beaufort. The main house fell into disrepair during their impoverished tenancy. Some time before 1939, the building’s roof is said to have caved in. Looters removed mantles and wainscoting, probably tearing up original floors for firewood.<sup>19</sup> When Retreat’s slave settlements were destroyed is not known, however, their destruction is now complete with nothing standing above ground to indicate their former location.

The despoiled main house probably continued to stand empty and overgrown until 1938 when Retreat was bought by Mr. and Mrs. James Sturdevant who later (1940) restored the dwelling to habitable condition. A new kitchen wing was added at the rear of the building by a

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<sup>17</sup> Record Group 58, US Direct Tax Commission, South Carolina, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. A fender and set of andirons (valued at \$2.25) were bought by the well known missionary, W. M. French. With the exception of a bathtub (bought by W.G. Reed for \$2.50) the rest of the furnishings went to “Leacock” the majority for a dollar or two a piece, only the wardrobe fetching more (\$5.00).

<sup>18</sup> A map prepared by the US Direct Tax Commission (copy, Beaufort County Library, Beaufort) records that Army and Navy Certificates Nos. 229 and 370 (recipient’s name not given) were issued following sale of the property. The same map indicates that the full purchase price was not paid.

<sup>19</sup> Moussatos (1980).

subsequent owner, Bronson Lamb, in 1950. In 1955 the property passed to Antonio Ponvert who introduced a formal garden on the building's east side. Ponvert's caretaker, B. J. Pinckney, purchased Retreat in 1965, selling the house and land for development in 2003.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

1. Plan and organization: The main house at Retreat Plantation is a one and one-half story, rectangular, gable-ended structure with internal end chimneys, measuring before its twentieth-century additions, 28'-4" north-to-south x 36'-1" east-to-west excluding the porch running along its south (entrance) facade. Interior spaces have seen considerable alteration. The current plan of the principal floor incorporates a large heated through-hall (west) which opens east into two smaller rooms (northeast and southeast). These subsidiary rooms are separated by a framed partition and the east chimney which, triangular in plan, incorporates back-to-back hearths arranged to heat the two secondary spaces.<sup>20</sup>

How the original staircase was organized is not clear. The present stair, dating to probably the mid-twentieth century, is located on the north side of the main space and gives access to an attic. The attic is now divided into two rooms of unequal size, divided by a partition running north-to-south, the whole appearing substantially reworked.

### 2. Construction

Exterior Walls: Except where interrupted by end chimneys, external walls are of load-bearing tabby cast to a common width of approximately 1'-9".

Chimneys: The chimneys are made of fired red brick laid up in a somewhat irregular variant of English bond. Lower levels of both chimneys were bonded into the adjacent tabby walls in alternately long and short patterns as the wall construction proceeded. Whether long or short, each brick nib corresponds in height with individual tabby wall pours. The broad outer face of each chimney features a simple decorative treatment

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<sup>20</sup>A similar plan is illustrated by the now substantially ruined Laurence Fripp House, located south of Orange Grove, St. Helena Island, South Carolina. Measuring 49'-0" east-to-west x 28'-10" north-to-south, this tabby built structure preserves a large, triangular chimney base. This feature projects 5"-8" into the building at one end and was clearly cast in concert with the external walls. Organization of the house is no longer clear but a large room flanked on one side by two subsidiary spaces with back-to-back hearths is more than likely. When the Lawrence Fripp House was built is also uncertain, but details of tabby construction (notably the use of 22" inch high forms tied with 1¾" diameter dowels) suggest a date just before or soon after the American Revolution. At the lowest level, the tabby external walls here are 20" wide, reducing possibly to 10" in width above.

consisting of an elongated diamond outlined by vitreous headers. Each large diamond is subdivided into smaller ones, again defined by vitreous headers. Just above the head of the lower windows, bonding becomes more variable suggesting the gable and portions of the chimney stack have been rebuilt or seen extensive restoration.

3. Facade arrangement: The long, south facade incorporates five bays, defined by a pair of double-hung windows glazed with nine-over-nine lights arranged to the right and left of the central entrance doorway. Each window is approximately 2'-9" wide.

The east and west facades each incorporate a single window flanking the chimney right and left at both the first and attic floor levels. The lower windows are double hung and incorporate six-over-six lights. All sashes appear to be modern replacements. Civil War period photographs show that the upper windows were then similar, double hung and glazed with six-over-six lights, but the sashes have now been replaced with casements.

Original organization of the north facade is obscured by mid-twentieth-century additions.

4. South Porch: The south facade is fronted for its entire length by a porch measuring 10'- 1 ½" in width raised approximately 18" above grade on low tabby walls. Built at a lower pitch than the main roof, its shed roof is now supported by four slender, rectangular timber posts. These are replacements; Civil War period photographs dated to ca.1863 show six timber porch supports of a similar design. There is no balustrade visible in early views or present today.

5. Roof: The gable roof was rebuilt ca. 1940, apparently following the line of the lost original. A Civil War period photograph illustrates three, south-facing gabled dormers, each enclosing double-hung sashes glazed with six-over-six lights. The present dormers are probably twentieth-century replacements and feature casement windows.

### PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Plans and Early Photographs: No original or early plans are known. Several Civil War Period stereoscopic photographs of the main house and its slave settlements are held by Beaufort County Library, Beaufort, South Carolina.

#### B. 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 D. Hill, Beaufort County Planning Department, and Colin Brooker, Brooker Architectural Design Consultants, to identify subjects of study and locate them in the field in 2002 and 2003. 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.