

RICHARDS DAR HOUSE MUSEUM  
(Charles G. Richards House)  
(Richard McMillan House)  
(Iron Lace)  
256 North Joachim Street  
Mobile  
Mobile County  
Alabama

HALS AL-4  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

## HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

### RICHARDS-DAR HOUSE MUSEUM (The Richards Home)

HALS NO. AL-4

Location: 256 N. Joachim Street, Mobile, Mobile County, Alabama

Latitude: 30.695892, Longitude: -88.045778 (the peak of the house roof , Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84)

Significance: The Richards-DAR Museum House is considered one of Mobile's finest examples of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century domestic architecture. It was one of the first Italianate-style homes built in Mobile, and it is the only Italianate home surviving that has been maintained with its architectural integrity. The property was placed on the National Register of Historic sites in 1973 and is a contributor to the De Tonti Square historic district. The property is significant for its association with the Ideal Cement Company and the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Description: The street frontage of the Richards-DAR House Museum has two striking features – two live oak trees (*Quercus virginiana*) form a canopy that extends over the street and front yard of the property, and the extensive and very ornate ornamental wrought and cast iron work in the fence along the property line, the stair handrail, the front veranda railing and columns, and on the second story balcony. Nicely-scaled cast iron posts topped with urns, mark the entry gate and transition points between the wrought iron fence and perimeter brick wall. The iron work was probably manufactured by the Mobile Foundry, with the exception of the Four Seasons inserts that came from Philadelphia.

The sidewalk consists of a granite curb, a planting strip where the oaks are planted, and a 15-foot<sup>1</sup> wide sidewalk paved with large rectilinear pieces of stone in shades of gray, charcoal and light brown. These stones are found at only two other locations in the state – at Bellingrath gardens and the Cathedral on Dauphin Street. These stones were originally used as ballast in English ships and were used throughout the city for sidewalks. The city acquired them when the stones were no longer needed as ballast. When the city decided to replace the stones with poured-in-place concrete sidewalks Dr. Bellingrath offered to pay for the city's new sidewalks if they would give him the stones. Also noteworthy on the sidewalk are three working cast iron gas street lights each with two wicks.

From the entry gate a short brick path laid in a basket-weave pattern, leads to

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<sup>1</sup> Dimensions provided are estimates.

marble front steps. The steps lead to the front veranda that is paved with checkerboard black and white marble pavers. To the right of the brick path, just inside the gate, a narrow 2-foot wide, exposed aggregate path with a 3" rounded curb on one side, leads to the yard on the south side of the house. Here as elsewhere throughout the garden the path is lined with mondo grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus*). Inside the iron work fence is a 3-foot wide planting bed planted with azaleas and sheared camellias. The path leads to a 12-foot wide concrete driveway along the south property line.

Midway along the narrow path the iron work fence transitions to a brick wall of the same 3 foot height – the end of the iron work is anchored with a post that matches those at the front gate. At the driveway there is a double gate made with 1 inch wide plain, metal pickets spaced 3 inches on center. The top of each gate panel slopes up to the middle. A matching gate is located at the northwest corner of the property. At the southwest corner the brick wall steps up to 6 feet and is covered with creeping fig (*Ficus pumila*) forming a solid, green wall.

The driveway leads to a one-story brick carriage house that replaced what had been a two-story carriage house and butler's apartment on the second floor. This building is currently used for meetings and as an event preparation space. The perimeter brick wall steps up at this location to form the wall of the carriage house, and is approximately 12 feet high.

The dominant plants on the south side of the house are a live oak (5' dbh) and a 35 foot tall fan palm (*Washingtonia robusta*). There is a quarter circle of lawn between the oak and the southwest corner of the house. The area beneath the oak is planted with azaleas in a deep layer of leaf mulch. Foundation plants include a crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*) known to be an original planting, cast-iron plant (*Aspidistra elatior*), chain fern (*Woodwardia fimbriata*), and a cleyera (*Cleyera japonica*).

Continuing down the driveway a large (27' x 40') brick patio comes into view in front of a mostly glazed gallery at the rear of the house. The brick here is laid in a herringbone pattern with wide (3/4" to 1 1/2") joints. The brick colors vary from red to dark red to orange-red. The patio has round metal tables and chairs, and an 8-foot long cast iron bench manufactured by the Waterman Foundry in Mobile, Alabama. There is another cast iron gas light in the patio similar to the streetlights. Another crape myrtle, also an original planting, is on the east side of the house.

Between the patio and carriage house at the east property line there is a 3-tiered cast iron fountain, set in a round, brick, 20" high raised bed. Plantings around the fountain include impatiens (*Impatiens walleriana*), ornamental cabbage, asparagus fern (*Asparagus densiflorus 'sprengeri'*), coleus (*Coleus x hybridus*) and lily turf (*Liriope muscari*). Behind the fountain is a double trunk (10" and

12" dbh) oak. Other plantings along the rear property line are Japanese holly fern (*Cyrtomium falcatum*), mondo grass, azalea, sword ferns (*Nephrolepis exeltata* and *Polysticum munitum*), fan palm, a multi-trunk camellia, and an unidentified large, small-leafed rounded shrub. A precast concrete bird bath with a sword fern planted in it, is in this bed a few feet north of the fountain

A brick path parallel to the east property line leads through a gate-like opening to a garden on the north side of the house. There is a large loquat (*Eriobotrya deflexa*) just beyond the "gate" opening. This garden was added when Ideal Cement Company purchased the property.

The north garden consists of a long rectangular lawn (100' x 35') edged with an exposed aggregate path that matches the path on the south side of the house. The corners of the lawn are rounded. Mature southern magnolias (20" dbh) anchor the corners of the property. Planting beds at the perimeter of the lawn are lined with 2 foot high boxwood hedges. These beds are planted with saucer magnolias (*Magnolia soulangiana*), one banana shrub (*Michelia figo*), crape myrtle, a large gardenia (*Gardenia augusta*), and an understory of azaleas. At the far end of the lawn, near the street, there are two more cast iron benches that match the one on the brick patio. The brick wall along the north property line is 4 feet high and has a precast concrete cap. At the street the wall dips down to 3 feet.

At the center of the lawn there is a flagpole surrounded by an 8 foot diameter wheel of boxwood and an 18 foot square brick terrace, in a running bond pattern. Each corner of the brick terrace is planted with ornamental edible greens and yellow pansys. The planting bed inside the wall/fence at the sidewalk has three sheared camellias (*Camellia japonica* and *sasanqua*), a dogwood (*Cornus florida*), heavenly bamboo (*Nandina domestica*), and azaleas. A Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) is growing on this wall.

History: Charles G. Richards, a steamboat captain from Maine, and his wife Caroline Elizabeth Steele of Claiborne, Alabama purchased the property and built an Italianate-style antebellum townhouse and garden in 1860. At least 3 existing crape myrtle trees are known to be original to the house.

Captain Richards and his wife raised eight of twelve children while living in the home. Shortly after the death of their youngest child, Joseph, Mrs. Richards died. Mr. Richards remained at the house employing a nanny to help raise the children. He did not remarry. The family had other servants but no one who worked for the family was a slave. The Richards family remained in the home for three generations until 1946 when a grandson sold it to the Ideal Cement Company. The grandson stipulated that the structural authenticity of the house was to be maintained in perpetuity. Fortunately the president of the Ideal Cement Company was a preservationist and agreed to the terms.

Ideal Cement Company also purchased the adjacent lot and demolished an existing home in order to add a formal garden on the north side of the Richards home. They restored the Richards house and property in 1947. Ideal Cement Company used the downstairs as offices and the upstairs bedrooms for visiting employees. When Ideal Cement installed the central air conditioning, the metal screening on the east wing of the house was replaced with glass. The original 2-story carriage house was replaced with a single story brick building, and brick paving was added to the motor court.

Ideal Cement Company gave the property to the City of Mobile with the understanding that they would maintain it as a historic house museum in perpetuity. In 1972 the city paved over the cistern leaving the tank intact below the paving. The Richards home is considered one of Mobile's finest examples of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century domestic architecture. The property is a contributor to the De Tonti Square historic district. The house was added to the National Register of Historic Properties on February 7, 1972. The City of Mobile leased the house to six local chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) in 1973. Five chapters of the DAR currently occupy the building and manage it as a house museum.

In 1985, Leonard M. Riggs, Louisiana Landscape Architect No. 107 and Texas Landscape Architect No. 1 prepared a plan for the garden as a memorial to a revolutionary era ancestor Abraham Riggs. He labeled the plan drawing No. 4460 dated January 1985. This plan identified then existing trees and showed planned improvements. Some but not all of the changes shown on the plan were made. The existing trees that were shown on the plan that remain in 2013 include two live oak street trees, a third live oak near the driveway, the fan palm by the driveway, three crape myrtles, two southern magnolias, one banana shrub, several saucer magnolias, several camellias, a cleyera, and a dogwood. Some of these may have been planted by the Richards while others were likely planted by Ideal Cement Company. Docents at the home noted that the Richards family had a kitchen garden during their residence.

Two existing features shown on the 1985 plan that were added at that time are the flagpole and planting at its base, and the three-tiered cast iron fountain in the raised brick planting bed. New plants shown on the 1985 plan that remain today include six varieties of azaleas – 'George Taber', 'Formosa', 'Mrs. Gerbing', 'Daphne', 'Troupier', and 'Hampton'. Also, the boxwood hedges and mondo grass edging are shown on the 1985 plan.

#### Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR)

The DAR is a membership organization for women who can trace their lineage back to an individual who served during the revolutionary war. They are a non-profit that promotes historic preservation, education and patriotism. As of 2012,

850,000 women had become members. The first chapter was founded October 11, 1890. One of the founding members was a great grand-niece of President George Washington. The wife of President Harrison, Caroline Lavina Scott Harrison was another founding member and past president. The DAR started the tradition of adding American flags to the graves of soldiers on Memorial Day. The organization has purchased and operates several historic homes throughout the United States where they have chapters in every state.

Sources: Site visit made in April 2013 and information learned from Barbara Preston, member of the Mobile chapter of the DAR and museum docent.

Richards-DAR House Museum website: <http://richardsdarhouse.com>

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2013 HALS Challenge Entry: *Documenting the Cultural Landscapes of Women*



Front of the house showing one of two live oak street trees, two gas lights, the ornamental cast iron, and the ballast stone sidewalk (Chris Pattillo, April 2013).



Cast iron fence and corner post with ballast stone sidewalk paving. Veranda rail and posts (Chris Pattillo, April 2013).



Detail of the cast iron fence and brick wall transition (Chris Pattillo, April 2013).



View from the southwest property corner looking at quarter circle of lawn; 1 of 3 original crape myrtle trees; the foundation plantings with mondo grass border; the veranda in the background; and the 24" wide path at left edge. (Chris Pattillo, April 2013).



Gallery on the east side of the residence and brick patio (Chris Pattillo, April 2013).



Photo taken from the northwest property corner looking at the rectangular lawn, flagpole and foundation plants on the north side of the home (Chris Pattillo, April 2013).