



**Brennen Building  
1210-1214 Main Street**



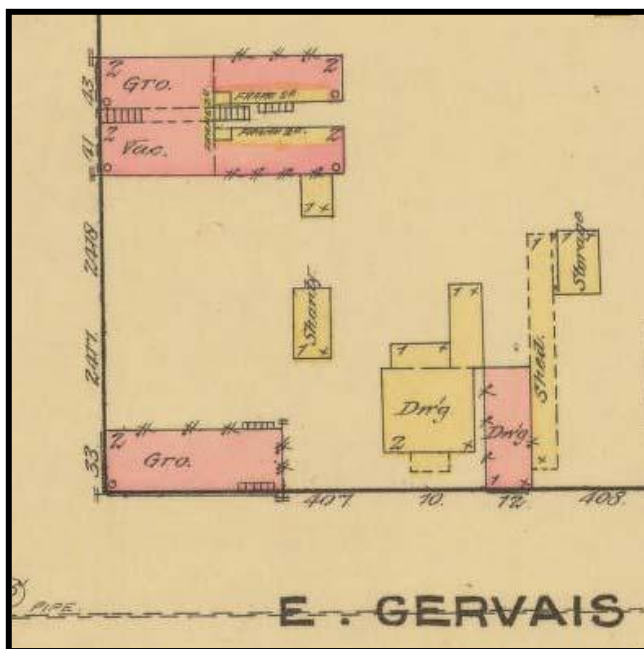
### **Historical Overview**

The property historically known as the Brennen Building, located on the east side of Main Street's 1200 block, takes its name from businessman Michael Brennen who bought the land this building rests on in December 1864 for \$85,000. His purchase included not only the lot but also a house and outbuildings, subsequently destroyed during the fire that consumed Richardson (Main) Street in 1865. Following the Civil War, in April of 1867, Brennen increased his holdings on the block as he purchased an adjacent property from Nancy Reilly. Though Brennen died in May of 1869, it is believed that the structure was likely already under construction, and it is known to have been available for lease by November 1870<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Keith L. Sanders, "Historic Structure Report- The Brennen Building," TS (CDA Architects, February 2005), 6, 41. His purchase included not only the lot but also a house and outbuildings originally part of the estate of Robert E. Russell. Brennen's assets subsequently were destroyed during the fire that consumed Richardson (Main) Street in 1865. Following the Civil War, in April of 1867, Brennen increased his holdings on the block as he purchased an adjacent property from Nancy Reilly.

After Michael Brennen's death, his widow, Mary, and John Agnew, the estate's executors leased the property to Joseph Taylor, who may have operated a grocery store there.<sup>2</sup> Then, in October of 1871, William M. Fine and Charles R. Franklin leased the building and opened a saloon, billiard hall, and restaurant. In 1873, they signed a three-year lease and continued to run their business at 41 and 43 Richardson Street until at least 1876.<sup>3</sup> In 1879, Edward J. Brennen, the son of Michael, and his mother opened a groceries and provisions establishment (represented at the top of this excerpt from the 1884 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map at right), which they ran until approximately 1897.<sup>4</sup> During this time the building's south side carried the sign, "E. J. BRENNEN FAMILY GROCERIES, CIGARS, and TOBACCO." Just before the turn of the century, in July 1899, the Brennen family sold the property.



Over the next century, the property's 1212 and 1214 addresses experienced a wide variety of uses with scores of businesses coming and going. Tenants included hotels, boarding houses, stores, barbershops, laundries, banks, loan offices and stores peddling drugs, liquor, candy, clothing, furniture and books. However, in 1911, what would become the building's most enduring fixture opened at its 1210 address. The Capitol Café, a popular restaurant for legislators, prominent citizens, and every-day diners opened its doors for the first time and continued to operate at the same address throughout the rest of the twentieth century until 2002. Popular opinion has it that as

<sup>2</sup> Sanders, "Historic Structure Report," 6. Joseph Taylor had been a grocer in 1868 and may have continued in this profession while leasing the Brennen Building in 1871.

<sup>3</sup> Sanders, "Historic Structure Report," 6-7; Columbia, South Carolina City Directory, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, 1875-1876; South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, <http://www.sc.edu/library/digital/collections/sanborn.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Sanders, "Historic Structure Report," 7; Columbia, South Carolina City Directory, 1879-1880.

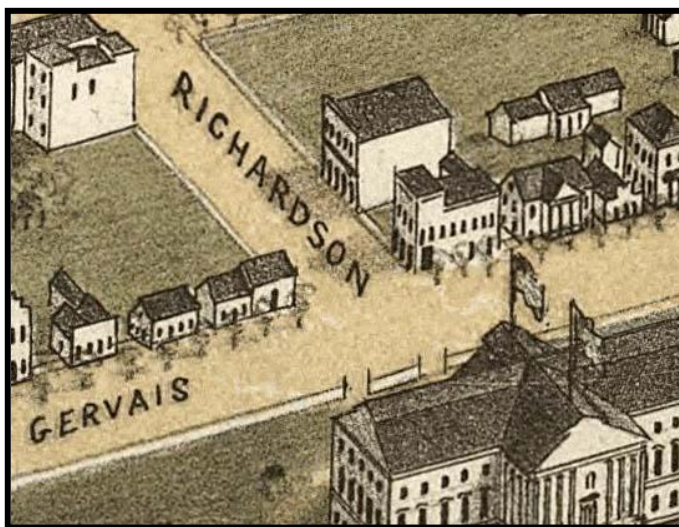
<sup>4</sup>Columbia, South Carolina City Directories, 1895-1899.

much politicking and deal making occurred at the Capitol Café as it did at the State House located across Gervais Street to its south. First Citizens Bank currently owns the building, which has been vacant since the close of the Capitol Café and is in the process of determining its future use.<sup>5</sup>

### Architectural Overview

Architecturally, the Brennen Building can best be described as a symmetrical, two-story masonry structure that is representative of most of the commercial buildings constructed in Columbia immediately after the Civil War.<sup>6</sup> The two-story building's proximity to the State House is evident in C. Drie's 1872 Birdseye Map of Columbia, shown below. In

previous architectural assessments the property has been described as French Victorian based on its decorative cast iron window treatments and balcony. However, recent research has determined that these elements were later additions to the building, apparently occurring sometime between 1910 and 1919.<sup>7</sup>



Like many commercial structures of its time the Brennen Building features double storefronts, which flank a smaller central store, formerly the access to the second floor. Such a layout typically provided retail or service space on the street level and offices or storage areas on the second story. It is unique because it is the only relatively untouched example of a once popular and ubiquitous style in the capital city. The structure's architectural significance led the property to be listed in a 1977 survey of significant

<sup>5</sup> The Capitol Café eventually became known as the Capitol Restaurant.

<sup>6</sup> Bultman Coulter Gasque Associates, *Columbia's Commercial Heritage: An Inventory and Evaluation of Older Commercial Buildings in the City Center* (Prepared for the City of Columbia, South Carolina and the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1977), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Sanders, "Historic Structure Report," 2.

buildings in Columbia, which assigned it a “Group 1” level of importance denoting “buildings of outstanding design, probably unique to the city; they are of primary importance to the visual quality of Columbia.”<sup>8</sup>

Two years later, in 1979, the Brennen Building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The nomination reports:

The Capitol Café building is the best surviving example of the Victorian commercial structures that once lined Columbia’s Main Street. The symmetrical second floor façade with cast iron balcony and window and door surround is characteristic of the late nineteenth century. Located one block away from the State House, the Capitol Café, a restaurant, has been in the building since 1913 and is well known locally as a meeting place for legislators.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to these recognitions, the Brennen Building is protected from demolition or alteration though its local landmark designation.

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<sup>8</sup> Butman Coulter Gasque Associates, *Columbia’s Commercial Heritage*, 5.8.

<sup>9</sup> National Register Nomination, 1979, State Historic Preservation Office, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, SC.