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## Brick House not as solid as name implies

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EDISTO ISLAND - What can you do with a ruin? For the family that owns Brick House, the question is becoming urgent - particularly since part of it appears ready to fall down.

This is no ordinary ruin. The surviving brick shell of the Paul Hamilton House, which was built around 1734, is the oldest surviving European structure on the island and is a decade older than Drayton Hall.

Unfortunately, the house burned in 1929, leaving only its four walls and two towering brick chimneys in the middle.

And those chimneys got lopped off by about 12 feet in the 1960s because of fears that they would topple over, damaging the walls.

Still, the ruined shell is considered a significant enough part of Lowcountry history - and the nation's - that it was made a National Historic Landmark, the highest designation possible by the government.

It's one of the few plantation house ruins that survive in a two-story form.

Among the details that survive are the brick quoins, a face (presumably Hamilton's) in a keystone on the western facade.

"It was a grand structure," says Simons Young, a Charleston architect and member of the family that owns the property. "It wasn't just a place to reside. It was a statement."

Frances Ford, a conservation lecturer who has studied the house, agrees.

"Evidence of its elegant Georgian design is still evident in its exceptional craftsmanship, such as superb brick work with delicate mortar joints similar to those found at Drayton Hall," she says. "Unusual decorative elements like the stuccoed false openings on the east and west elevations and stucco over brick quoins make Brick House, even in its ruined state, a Lowcountry treasure."

The State Historic Preservation Office has given the family a \$2,500 matching grant for a study on how best to preserve the ruin.

Today, the greatest issue seems to be the southwest corner, where a series of cracks give structural engineers the most heartache.

"What is really evident here is how the middle is falling in on the south facade," Young says. "The western chimney is leaning a few degrees. If that goes, it probably will take the southwest corner with it."

Some of the window openings were reenforced with steel not long after the fire, but that has rusted and expanded over the years. The house is on private land but has been opened for tours to benefit the Edisto Island Historic Preservation Society. The house would be the oldest surviving house on this island, if one still considers it a surviving house, says the society's director Gretchen Smith.

It is clearly Edisto's most endangered historic site, she adds. "It really needs to be stabilized or it's just going to further deteriorate. You can see a huge change over the years."

The family hopes to get more clarity about immediate steps that should be taken to shore up what is left. Down the road, it will have to grapple with the even more complicated question of whether to do any more.

Reconstructing the house is an option, but doing that right would carry a hefty price tag.

Young says he would like to see improvements that would allow people to enter the structure safely, perhaps even a stair and platform on the second floor level, to give people a sense of the space.

"I do think being able to occupy it somehow is a good end goal," Young says.

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