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## Joe Watson's Restoration of the 1887 Goldsmith-Donovan House

Frances Osborn Robb

For two and a half years, friends of Huntsville contractor Joe Watson came by to help or watch. "They're looking at me," he recalls, "and saying you're crazy." Joe thought, "I'm going to prove them wrong."

Joe was restoring the 1887 Goldsmith-Donovan house (See fig. 1, page 13), at 506 Franklin Street in the Twickenham Historic District. He planned to restore the house, then sell it to finance long trips to South America and Bhutan, Tibet, and other remote areas of Asia.

The Goldsmith-Donovan house was Joe's second house restoration. In the early 1990s, he had spent several years building new houses and remodeling others, but he had begun to tire of the "cookie cutter" look and had been looking for a new challenge.

He found his first new challenge by chance in 1994 when he bought the 110 Steele Street property. On it stands the small 1881 Bernstein house (now the residence of Anna Warren). At the time, Joe was a complete novice; he did not understand the term "historic district." Believing that the little old house was "too far gone," he wanted to tear the house down and build a new one on the site. [For a complete history of the Steele Street House restoration, see *Quarterly* issues, Spring 1998 and Fall/Winter 1999.]

At that point Harvie Jones, Huntsville's late premier restoration architect, entered the picture. Where historic buildings are concerned, Jones was a strong-minded combination of irresistible force and immovable object. He objected vehemently to Joe's plan to tear the house down. Then Jones, a key member of the Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission, persuaded Joe that preserving the old house was not only the legal thing to do, but it also was the right thing. He convinced Joe that the restored house, even if enlarged to meet modern needs, would be appropriate for its historic district and present some new challenges.

Jones promised Joe that he would help him with the restoration work, providing Joe with drawings of architectural details and basic plans for the addition. These would be a *pro bono* contribution by Jones to the community and to historic preservation.

Joe committed himself wholeheartedly to the restoration. He took his time, and a year and a half later, he sold the house to Mr. and Mrs. Jack Charlton, who lived in the house a few years, then sold it to Anna Warren.

When, on February 24, 1997, Joe brought a proposal for restoring the Goldsmith-Donovan house to the Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission, Jones annotated the official paperwork with what was, for him, high praise. “Joe Watson restored the derelict 1881 Bernstein House at 110 Steele Street in circa 1994-5. Did excellent job.”

Realtor Buster Frank first brought the Goldsmith-Donovan house to Joe’s attention. It would become Joe’s second restoration challenge. The house, more than a century old, had aged along with its owners. From the street, Joe could see that the 2-story, late nineteenth-century house had been covered with vinyl siding. A corner finial was missing from the metalwork atop the tower (See fig.2, page 13). The main gable featured fancy gingerbread woodwork, in poor condition and in strong contrast to the plain front porch.

Joe consulted with Harvie Jones about his new project. “I really miss Harvie,” he says. “His experience made him a great person to talk to.” (Harvie died in December 1998.) Jones had, with his usual meticulousness, researched the house history, discovering that most of the house dates from 1887 and 1894. (An account of the house history can be found in Donna Castellano’s article “History of the 1887 Goldsmith-Donovan House” in this issue.)

After looking at the house inside and out, Joe decided that the house would make a good project, and he purchased it. With Jones as an advisor, Joe knew he had the skills and resources needed to restore the house and adapt it to modern living.

## **Structure and Exterior**

When Joe began to work on the house, he made a close inspection of the exterior. He prised open the vinyl siding here and there. In his estimation, about 98 percent of the wood beneath was in excellent condition, though it had lost its protective paint covering, in Joe’s estimation, about sixty years before. The vinyl had clearly been added to avoid preparing and painting the old wooden siding, not to conceal rot, missing boards or other problems. To Joe, that was a plus.



*Note: All photographs are by Harvie P. Jones, FAIA. Courtesy of Lynn Jones.  
Figure 1: East front, Goldsmith-Donovan House, as it looked in 1996.*



*Figure 2: Metal cresting, tower. Goldsmith-Donovan House in 1996. Behind the finial at the right, a finial is missing.*

The house was in good structural shape, except for one major, but remediable problem: over the years, insufficient drainage from the corbelled brick footing of the house had caused it to sink into the ground. At the corners, and beneath the tower, where the weight of the house was greatest, the house had sunk considerably. Joe noted that the corner beneath the tower had sunk about three inches.

Joe used hydraulic jacks to raise the house. Then he stabilized it, until its windows and doors worked as they should (in a house that has sunk at the corners, the windows and doors may not close properly).

The next step was to repair the roof, making the house watertight: a necessary step before interior work was done. Then he started removing the siding (See fig.3, page 14) and assessing the house's exterior ornamentation.



*Figure 3: East front, Goldsmith-Donovan House, during restoration, December 1997. Joe Watson is atop the ladder:*

The gable's gingerbread ornament was rotten, held together only by the paint. It would have been prohibitively expensive to restore it, so Joe contented himself with a plain gable. The ironwork cresting at the top of the tower was in good condition. It was removed and bead-blasted to remove old paint, then repainted. Only one finial was missing. Joe had it duplicated and replaced.

With the gable restored, the house has a definite Italianate feel (such houses should be at least as tall as they are wide). However, the boxy mass of the porch tended to diminish the coherence of the Italianate design.

The porch had been added about 1900 (in the 1900s and 1910s, Huntsvillians added such plain boxy porches to buildings of all sizes, periods, and styles). Replacing it with a Victorian-style porch would strengthen the house's late nineteenth-century character, so Joe tore off the existing porch.

Architect Harvie Jones contributed pro bono work to this project, just as he had for Joe's first restoration. Among his contributions was a design for the porch, based on its appearance in two old photographs and the porch's footprint, as depicted in two 1890s Sanborn insurance maps. The reconstructed porch would be as close to the original as the surviving documentation could make it. (See porch detail, page 30.)

At some time, the front door had been shifted a few feet to the north, and two windows on the south side of the house had been walled in. Joe returned the front door to its original position. He restored the windows, copying size, proportions and casing from the windows above.

When Joe acquired the property, a later addition jutted west from the back of the house. It was in poor shape and made of poor materials (in his notes on the Goldsmith house restoration, Harvie Jones noted it as a "makeshift addition"). The Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission approved a request to remove it (See fig.4, page 16). It was replaced with an addition, based on a sketch by Harvie Jones, that provided more living space on the ground floor.

As Joe worked on the house, it was also slowly revealing its history to him. By the time he was finished with his restoration, Joe had figured out what the house had looked like originally, and what had been added to meet the needs of later residents. He knew every joist and every stud. Shadows of molding on the woodwork showed him where a wall or window had once been located.

While he was working on slow repetitive tasks, such as removing the siding, Joe had time to imagine what the house had been like, to fit pieces of the puzzle together, to think of solutions to problems he was encountering. Most important, these times gave him the opportunity to figure out what the original plan had been, and how that plan might be changed to make the house a better “machine for living” for new residents, more than a century after the house had been built. Joe did not intend to create a house museum, restoring exterior and interior exactly to their time periods. He says that he would never have found a buyer if he had followed that route.



*Figure 4: West rear during 1997 restoration, after removal of “makeshift addition.”*

### **Interior**

After the structure had been stabilized and the roof sealed tight, restoration of the interior could begin. The interior was rather daunting. Here the house showed its age.

The plaster had completely failed. It came away in powdery chunks when the wallpaper was pulled from it. On the positive side, Joe notes

that it was impossible to preserve the old plaster. This made it easier to rewire, replumb and insulate the house. Once the decision was made not to try to save the old plaster, another positive consequence followed: interior walls could be relocated. Although the exterior would reflect its late nineteenth-century origin, the house could become a functional modern “machine for living” on the interior.

If an old wall is to be kept, however, removing the plaster has a negative aspect. Plaster is laid directly onto lath. A smooth coat of plaster evens out irregularities in the lath placement and conceals the frequently irregular intervals of the studs. In modern dry wall construction, evenly spaced studs are a must-have. Joe spent a lot of time removing lath and restudding, to get the support true for the dry wall.

The house’s hardwood floors and woodwork (mostly walnut and oak) were in good condition. However, much of the woodwork had been overpainted, as seen on the molding of the stained glass window (See fig.5, page 18) at the top of the elaborate staircase. The staircase itself had been overpainted in black and white (See figs.6-7, pages 19, 20). The floors were redone by a friend, but Joe himself stripped “acres of paint” from the old hardwood staircase, mantels and trim (See fig.8, page 21.)

Joe soon learned to use exactly the right amount of heat from a heat gun so that he could strip the old paint in long sheets from the wooden surfaces. Under the white-painted mantels was fine walnut and oak, originally surfaced with shellac to give a sheen and make cleaning easy. The shellac layer was a bit of luck, for it was resistant to paint removers and the heat gun, so that Joe had a useful stopping point for his removal efforts.

Once the old paint was gone, Joe removed the shellac with denatured alcohol. When all surfaces were clean, he oiled the wood, using his own mixture. The staircase was particularly responsive to his procedures and is now, in Joe’s view, “the most spectacular staircase in Huntsville.” In all, Joe estimates that he spent about seventy hours a week, for two and one-half years, restoring the Goldsmith house. “All the people who worked on the house were my friends, from the guy who did the floors to the friend who helped me put up the dry wall.” In addition Joe spent many hours talking with Harvie Jones about the project, its progress and its challenges.





*Figure 5: Original stained glass window at top of staircase, December 1996.*

But long before he and Jones got together, Joe had developed his ideas for the eventual house plan. “I took so long getting the interior of the house ready to work on it, and did so many slow repetitive tasks, that I had time to think about the house: every inch, every board. As I walked through the rooms, I looked hard, and stored up things to think about later. When you know a house very well, ideas come in, and some of those ideas will work.”

It was Joe who figured out where the new rooms and traffic flow should be. From the beginning, he says, “I knew I needed a master bedroom on the first floor. In Twickenham, people often stay in their houses for a long time, for decades. Some grow old in these houses. A master bedroom on the main floor makes it easier for this to happen. And, of course, a master bedroom with ample closets and a big bathroom.”

Joe had his ideas in hand. He knew that he would need to build an addition on the back of the house (replacing the one that had been torn down) to give him the ample downstairs space he needed for a small front parlor, a large library and big den. He wanted a big foyer to show off the spectacular staircase. And he wanted a kitchen convenient to the den and dining room, and, of course, the master bedroom suite. Two other bedrooms and a workroom or office would be located upstairs.

When Joe and Harvie Jones conferred, Jones was able to point out (“from his vast amount of information and experience,” Joe notes) details and architectural requirements that Joe had not thought of. But Joe’s ideas



*Figure 6: Entry hall before renovation. Note black and white paint on staircase.*



*Figure 7: Detail of staircase, December 1996, before removal of black and white paint.*

were solid, practical and highly functional. It was not difficult for Jones to turn out preliminary designs for the plans of the first and second floors.

Then, as Joe did the work, he created more accurate plans, carefully remeasuring and adapting Jones' preliminary plans (Joe calls them "Harvie's sketches") to actual site requirements. One of the most important things, Joe notes, about restoring an old house is making careful measurements and remeasuring ("checking the dimensions," as he puts it). Another is being flexible, willing to adjust to specific circumstances.



*Figure 8: Staircase during cleaning, December 1997. Some of the black paint remains.*

Joe sold the house to Mr. and Mrs. Kermit Moore when it was not yet finished. "It was time," he comments. "When it's time to start choosing colors, bathroom and kitchen fixtures, that was the time to put it on the market." It was only on the market a week or two before Mrs. Moore saw the "for sale" sign in the yard. Joe recalls that she had been looking for years, likes Victorian, and likes the light airy effect of this particular house. She was willing, he remembers, to finish the house on her own. The Moores promptly bought the house.

Joe "took the money and ran," first to South America for several months and then to remote Asian regions for about a year. Between trips, he worked on the house for the Moores for a month or so. But that time, he recalls, he just worked on little things. "I was glad to do them," he recalls. "They are truly nice people, extremely appreciative of everything I did for the house."

Joe could have restored the house to selling point in a year and a half if he had pushed and skimped. Why, then, did he spend another year working on the house? "You have to understand," he said, "I knew I would make a profit on this house. It was my job. I am a businessman. But also," he continued, "I live in zip 01. I drive down Franklin Street every day, and I don't want to have to turn my head away every time I pass this house. I want to be able to see it and know I did a good job."

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