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Rescue and Recovery

Maureen Drost and Diane Ellis

It's difficult for those of us who find cleaning out a closet daunting to understand what motivates someone to take the plunge of rescuing a nearly 100-year-old house that is teeming with restoration challenges. Thankfully, there are people who can see beyond the ravages of neglect to the true merit of a building and understand that, when it comes to laboring to preserve something of value, virtue is more than its own reward. Such a person is James Reeves.

The story behind James Reeves's purchase of *Kildare* is one of being in the right place at the right time. "In the spring of 1975, while having lunch with a friend, we met another friend who came to our table to say hello and to tell us that she was now in real estate," said James in an interview with Maureen Drost. The real estate agent told James to call her if he ever wanted to buy a house. "I said I didn't have plans to purchase a house, but what was the story on *Kildare*? I had noticed it was empty."

"Later that day I got a call from her saying *Kildare* was available. We set a time for the next day to view the house. A few weeks later I had purchased a project that would occupy me for the next twenty-seven years."

James remembers seeing "the mess" that the McCormick house had become over the years but he was determined to greatly improve its condition. The various owners of the house after Mary Virginia McCormick moved out in the early 1930s had changed it to fit their needs. After the house was sold on July 12, 1932 (Cyrus McCormick, Jr. sold the four-acre plot containing the house for \$12,000),¹ the new owners remodeled it and opened it as the Kildare Hotel. The Kildare Hotel drew special attention from the local press when it opened. A large newspaper ad accompanied by a photograph announced the grand opening of the hotel on October 2, 1932 (see page 24). Despite such optimistic beginnings, just two years later Cyrus McCormick, Jr., petitioned the court for foreclosure on the hotel after financial problems developed. The foreclosure after only two years was a bad omen for the future of the McCormick house. Over the next 40 years approximately ten owners would use the house as a boarding house, a setting for beauty salons and health spas, and even a brothel. Plans for other

ANNOUNCING FORMAL OPENING

KILDARE HOTEL

Sunday October 2, 1932

With all preachers and lawyers of Huntsville as complimentary guests of the new hotel for the opening Sunday noon meal.



VIEW OF KILDARE HOTEL OVERLOOKING SPACIOUS GROUNDS

Advertisement for the Kildare Hotel.

Courtesy of James Reeves.

uses, such as a restaurant, fell through and some owners ended up in bankruptcy or default. For about a year before James bought the house, it was vacant. As he was about to discover, over time the house had been vandalized, with architectural elements and furnishings removed for personal use or to settle claims.² Smith quotes a snippet of an article in the *Huntsville Times* of July 7, 1975, that described the McCormick house "...a gutted run down old house, merely a remnant of its former self."³

Not long after James Reeves bought the McCormick house, he began taking steps to restore it, though the labor would often prove to be a daunting task. "I wanted to return the house to its original condition and room configuration if possible," he said. "To this end, I took out remaining divisions in the various rooms and also the false ceilings. A number



James Reeves.

Courtesy of James Reeves.

of the original fittings had been removed over the years, such as hardware, stair spindles, doors, light fixtures, and stained glass windows.

“Some items I recovered through the intervention of friends, some I claimed through serendipity, and others I replaced with my own or others’ concept of what would have been the original scheme.”

John White, then an art teacher at Huntsville High School, helped James find a few of the original fittings. He came over to visit and said he had bought a mantel and spindle that he believed were part of the original house. James bought the items from John and some other fittings from a shop in Birmingham. James also dug up some hardware that was buried in the backyard and re-used some old lumber that he discovered on the grounds.



*Front entryway, exterior of McCormick house.
Courtesy of James Reeves.*

While James said he regrets not being a handyman himself, he and his wife, Marion, did strip some of the woodwork at the house, including the silver closet and the bedroom of their son, Cedric. Five other individuals played major roles in the restoration of the mansion.

Linda Burrows, who lived at the house five years, spent 8 to 25 hours every weekend landscaping the grounds, James said. She brought in truckloads of topsoil and planted dogwood trees and such flowers as roses and impatiens. Arthur Smith, who lived briefly at the house, completed a variety of projects when he wasn't working at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. His description for Maureen Drost of the work he did on his bedroom windows reminds us of the grinding hard work every detail of restoration requires, and of the rewards of one's labors.



*Front entryway, interior of McCormick house.
Courtesy of James Reeves.*



Ballroom.

Courtesy of Linda Bayer Allen.

The forest green paint and inner varnish had cracked, putty had fallen, and worse, several sash cords that hold the two hidden counter balance weights that keep the window as open as you wish needed replacing ... In the cool basement I toiled, ripping the paint off, sanding, repainting, varnishing and [doing] the rehanging. In restoration one tries to stay as original as possible and so James provided genuine sash cord, bemoaning how soon it failed. ... Something immensely satisfying struck when the first window that had been immovable was restored to free and easy opening. Over the years many windows were re-hung on polyester [cord]. Some, like the grand 70-pound one in the breakfast room, needed assistance from James. When it was hung, the cherry sides cleaned and polished and the window once again mobile, it was magnificent.

Two stained glass artists, Wayne Lumpkin and Robert J. Perrella, made significant contributions to the restoration. Wayne designed replacement stained glass windows for the kitchen. Robert, who worked for Lumpkin at times and at other times for himself, replaced ten glass



*Replacement stained glass window in ballroom.
Courtesy of Linda Bayer Allen.*



*Ballroom mantel added by Virginia McCormick.
Courtesy of Linda Bayer Allen.*

panels and restored several more. He said his work included an *art nouveau* stained glass window for a bedroom and all the replacement beveled panels, including a few transoms and the windows in the front door.

David Shippey, a math instructor at Huntsville High School, deserves the most credit, says James. He and Shippey shared a 25-year-long working relationship that began shortly after James moved into the house.

Cedric, now a senior at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, admires David Shippey, who worked on restoring the house until about a year ago. "When I was 15 or 16," said Cedric, "I worked with Mr. Shippey and we replaced a roof over the verandah." Cedric called David a character, someone who made plenty of jokes and loved to laugh, especially as he told stories about growing up on a farm, with his father who was a preacher. Shippey's trademark, Cedric said, was the floppy hat he always wore with his overalls. It was John White who introduced David Shippey to James, and James recalls the conversation well. "I know somebody you need to see," John told him. "He does projects in his garage, and you might talk to him about doing some woodwork."

James called David and what started as a repair of a screen door on the verandah grew into a commitment lasting a quarter of a century. "In fact," James said, "he did much of the restoration and, as much as any human being, he saved this house."

David, who is now retired from Huntsville High, said he spent untold hours after school, on weekends, and in the summer at *Kildare*. His projects are too many to list, but they included restoring a suite of three rooms in walnut on the second floor; building a kitchen on the first floor, complete with counters, cabinets, a new floor, new wiring, and appliances; repairing dozens of windows and all the doors in the house; replacing baseboards; and repairing the roof over the porch and plenty of leaks in the ceilings inside the house. David said the project he worked on with Cedric took an entire summer because the temperatures were so high that they were unable to work past 11 a.m. each day. They repaired the doors on the verandah, put in a new ceiling, and replaced the roof.



*Mantel in double drawing rooms.
Courtesy of Linda Bayer Allen.*

Though the restoration of *Kildare* took so much of his free time over the years, David truly enjoyed his work and believed in it. “It was such a beautiful house inside,” he said. “I just felt sick about it rotting away.”

Today, James says, the house has 113 windows, including 8 stained glass windows, 9 beveled windows, and 8 beaded windows. There are ten exterior doors and twenty fireplaces. The total living space, including the caretaker’s house still on the property, is 17,000 square feet.

James’s determination to restore the house, supported by the talents and dedication of friends and helpers, was rewarded with *Kildare*’s listing in the National Register of Historic Places, in 1982, just seven years after he bought the property. The nomination noted that the mansion was “architecturally significant for its imposing scale, the high quality of its materials and workmanship, for being one of the finest examples of Queen Anne style domestic architecture in the state, *and for its excellent state of preservation.*”⁴ [Emphasis added.]

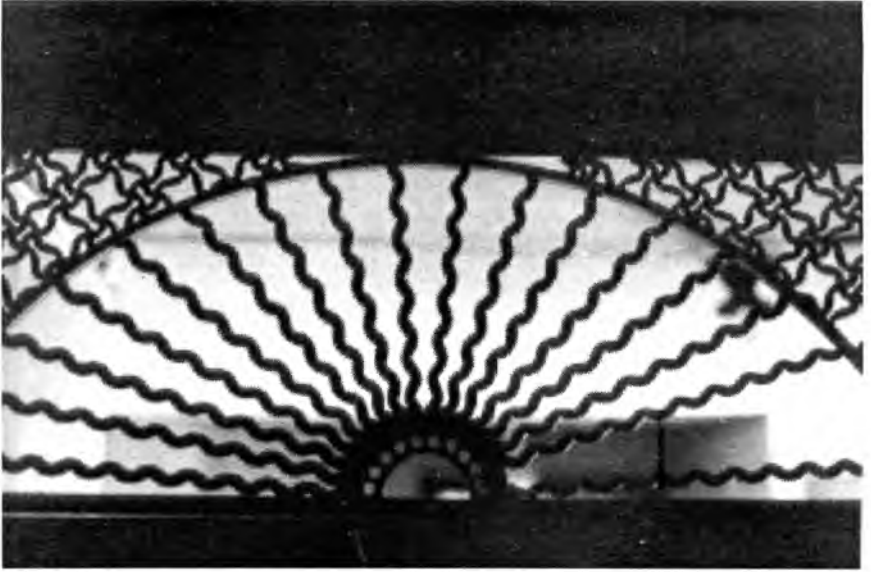
James has used *Kildare* as his home and as an antique shop. He and Cedric have fond memories of the many parties given at the house. “Our tenancy has been one of great joy, with birthday parties and lots of



*Dining room.
Courtesy of Linda Bayer Allen.*



*Staircase to second floor.
Courtesy of Linda Bayer Allen.*



Spindle screen.
Courtesy of Linda Bayer Allen.



Original stove in basement.
Courtesy of Linda Bayer Allen.

cats and dogs. I moved into the house in July of '75 and that October I held a party for the [Southern Association of Sculptors] with dinner being served by the Greek Ladies Auxiliary for 315, and a slide presentation by a visiting artist.

"Later," James said, "we had a cocktail party for the contestants who were in Huntsville for the Maid of Cotton contest, the winner of which would complete for the title of Miss America." Other events included a series of parties for the Huntsville Chamber Music Guild, in the Viennese *Hausmusik* tradition. Historic Huntsville Foundation held its annual membership tea at the McCormick house in 1995.

Parties for family and friends, said James, included Easter brunches and Thanksgiving dessert parties for as many as seventy-five. "I remember when my parents would have parties here," said Cedric. He especially remembers his childhood curiosity about weddings at the house. "Sometimes my friends and I would crack the stained glass window at the top of the servants' staircase to the first floor and watch from below."

Cedric shares his father's love for art and antiques and recalls his father buying paintings for the antique shop or his own collection. "I was always sure I wanted to do business like my father," Cedric said. "I remember seeing him at his desk on the phone talking about business and going to meetings."

As for James, he says he never dreamed he would own such a house, calling it "a happy accident." "It has been a joy to live in this marvelous place, *Kildare*," he said, "and a treasure to share it with so many wonderful people."

Endnotes

1 Linda Bayer Allen, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form November 1976.

2 A.E. Smith, *The Lives, & Times of the McCormick Mansion, A Celebration of the Warmth, Charm, Hospitality & History of Southern Folks in Rocket City, Alabama*, 1996-1999, unpublished ms., p.131.

3 Ibid.

4 Allen, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form November 1976.