



Photos by Andrew McLemore

New owners of the 120-year-old house on 803 College Street are restoring its 19th-century character with some modern additions – and learning about the home’s rich history along the way.

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Section B

New owners make their mark on College Street monument

Editor’s Note: This is the first in an occasional series on notable historic renovations in the area, and the characters old and new who have brought the old buildings to life.

By ANDREW McLEMORE

It would be difficult to live in Georgetown and never notice the two-and-a-half-story house that looms like a small castle over cars driving past the corner of College and Eighth streets.

Over the years, the home’s many admirers didn’t need to crack open a dusty library book to understand that it was an artifact from another era. The Victorian architecture, imposing size and

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bold placement on one of the city’s oldest streets, makes it clear enough.

Todd Cox is one of those admirers, and since buying the property on foreclosure last year he has poured time and money into remodeling and expanding the 120-year-old home.

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John Giddings of ABC Flooring makes complex and timely repairs to the wood floors of the home’s master bedroom Thursday afternoon.

BUILDING

Renovations mix the old with the new, and the secretive

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"I had my eye on this as soon as I learned about it," he said. "You could write a book on this place."

The house on 803 College Street is named after its original owner John Leavell, a wealthy dry goods merchant who led the first hook and ladder company of the Georgetown Fire Department. He built it as a family home, and his wife, daughters and sons-in-law all lived in it at one time or another.

According to a story that ran on the front page of the *Sun* more than 100 years ago, Mr. Leavell suffered from chronic mental illness and had been placed in a sanitarium. He was released and eventually returned to business, accumulating a large fortune.

His restlessness and depression returned, however, and staying up late one night in December 1898, John Leavell decided to end his suffering. Standing before a mirror in his office, he put the barrel of a Winchester rifle to the side of his head and pulled the trigger with his toe.

Perhaps the memory of their father's suicide was too painful, but for whatever reason, Mr. Leavell's children sold the house and it has seen many owners since, though most didn't stay for long.

The house has been remodeled at least twice before, once in the '40s and again in the late '70s or early '80s.

Mr. Cox knows all the history and in his opinion, the John Leavell house has never regained the level of grandeur it must have held for Georgetown residents during those first few years when its owner was still alive.

Never, that is, until now.

"It's been really exciting. We were looking for a project," he said of he and his wife, Kathie.

After buying the John Leavell house, the couple moved from Round Rock into a smaller home next door while they planned and designed how they would restore the

older building and then augment it to fit them.

Neighbors told them that the historic house had sat in disrepair for a long time, but in about five weeks the Coxes will have completed what will be their newest and certainly their largest home.

"It's been fun to watch it change," Ms. Cox said. "I love history and that's kind of what drew me to it."

The couple is retaining much of the home's vintage character, using old photographs to restore it as accurately as possible.

That means refurbishing the staircase, all six stone fireplaces, the wrap-around porches, 90 percent of the original wood floors and 70 percent of the old-fashioned glass windows, many of which are surrounded by small squares of stained glass in shades of red, yellow, blue, green, purple and orange.

But neither are the Coxes content to simply restore the building as closely as possible to its 19th century design.

They have added a second-story bathroom, a master closet, a balcony and an elevator so that Ms. Cox's parents — who can no longer climb stairs — can still stay with them in the second floor's guest bedroom.

And in a spark of inspiration reminiscent of James Bond films, Mr. Cox is converting the third-floor attic into a secret library accessible by a wall of bookshelves that swings open when pushed in the right place.

Mr. Cox said some neighbors weren't happy with the additions, but he and his wife wanted a historical home they could preserve while still changing it to fit their personality and individual needs.

"I had no intention of restoring this house exactly to original because I wanted it to fit me and have modern conveniences in it, but we kept the character of the house intact," he said.

The Coxes said they may sell the house if maintaining it becomes too difficult, but living in Georgetown for the last year has endeared them to the city and their soon-to-be-finished dream home.

"We may live in it for the rest of our lives," Mr. Cox said. "We have really loved living here. We love the downtown and we love Georgetown."