

February-March 2011

Award-Winning Endeavor

by Stephen Delaney Hale



As far as Patricia and Bernard Dukes were concerned there was never a question about the future of the carriage house at Red Top. “When something is a hundred years old, you take care of cannot be built again,” says Patricia Dukes. The structure in reference is the carriage house at Red Top, the couples’ century-old Winter Colony cottage on Dupree Street in Aiken, S.C.

It is that respect for things of age and value, along with the Dukes’ commitment to preserve the once dilapidated carriage house despite the challenges that have earned them the Historic Aiken Foundation’s 2011 President’s Award, “in recognition of outstanding rehabilitation of an historic building destined for demolition.”

To understand the extent of those challenges, it is useful to know the series of events.

As recently as five years ago, Red Top’s previous owner petitioned the Aiken Design Review Board for permission to demolish the carriage house. At a board meeting, an architect testified that the structure should be demolished because it “is now twisting and leaning because the foundation is almost non-existent. The bricks have been allowed to decay to a point where there is no structural capability to them. The floor frame system sits on the ground which is causing it to rot.” The architect further pronounced, “It is a fire hazard; it is useless; it is falling down; it is a hazard to life and limb.”

In the face of a 16-citizen protest against the demolition, the board voted to postpone the petition until they could tour the building. The owner withdrew his request for demolition three days later. So the carriage house remained in its untenable state until Bernie and Trish Dukes entered the picture the following year. Originally from southern England, the Dukes moved to Aiken to be with family in 2007 and received the keys to Red Top that July, moving to the States several months later. They spent their first year remodeling the main residence, filling it with furniture from their former residence—a century-old hunting lodge in the Scottish Highlands, which they had spent years restoring.

“By the fall of 2008 we turned our attention to the carriage house,” says Bernie. The project was finished in late 2009. “We stopped work during one lengthy return to England, which gave us time to think about whether we were doing it right,” says Trish.

“We just wanted to live in Red Top and this was sitting in the corner of the property. After we bought it we went upstairs [in the carriage house] and when it didn’t fall down we were relieved,” says Trish. “Now we love showing people around it. We are really quite delighted the way it worked out,” she says.

The first order of business in the structure’s restoration was to find the right contractor. They were introduced to J.D. Cooper, an Aiken polo player who operates C. Spear Builders, LLC, and Cooper Home & Stables polo team, who came highly recommended for such a project. The couple determined he was the man for the job.

“He took a great interest in the restoration,” says Bernie. “He had very good, skilled workers. The people who were working on it loved it. They loved the challenge. They could use their skills that usually don’t come into play in normal construction.”

Trish says, “They looked at us rather quizzically at first, but as it came about they could see it and they loved it.”

Cooper recalls his first impression of the long-neglected house. “It looked like a hopeless cause frankly. It really presented a lot of challenges. But the Dukes were persistent. They had done large rehabilitation jobs in England and Scotland and, in the end, they were right.

“There was no plumbing, no usable plumbing that is, very little electric. That all had to all be torn out and put in,” he says. “There was no insulation. The joists on the roof system on the second floor were about the only parts of the building left with much integrity. In fact, some of the floor on the first floor had been torn out and concrete poured for the carriages.”

The grooms’ living quarters upstairs must have also doubled as feed rooms “from the amount of grain we found between the floor joists on the second floor,” Cooper says. Much of the exterior siding had decayed and rotted and had to be replaced as did many of the old double-hung windows. “We had them rebuilt to the original specification so the windows on the building are exactly as they were,” says Cooper. “The tin roof was in surprisingly good shape, which is the development that probably saved the building.”

And the list continues: “Installing a cooling system was a challenge. There had been wood burning stoves as you could tell from the chimney flu, but of course no air conditioning.”

Despite all this the Dukes were adamant about returning everything, the windows, door trim and molding, to its original state. “At first we really didn’t know where to start,” Cooper says. “We got in there and started digging away and as we exposed more of it we could tell what we had to do.”

It was a labor of love for all concerned. “Every one of the employees just loved working on the old place,” says Cooper. “There wasn’t anything that was typical construction. It all had to be rethought and studied and reconsidered as to how it should go back together.”

The structure was designed to house carriages, two or three horse stalls and a tack room downstairs, which is now the kitchen. It has the old type windows with counter weights—solid

lumps of lead with ropes to raise and lower the sashes. It also has a Massachusetts beam, a structural iron piece that runs along the ceiling through the middle of the main room downstairs. The weight of the top floor pushed down and that energy is transferred to the beam, pulling the walls in.

Upstairs was originally a flat for the grooms with a kitchen, bathroom and three bedrooms. Trish says, "We made slight alterations in the upstairs," says Trish, "a master bedroom and bath. The upstairs grooms' kitchen became a second upstairs bedroom. We took all the years of debris off the roof and it was sound. We just cleaned it and painted it."

One unexpected find the Dukes are still laughing about was the former resident squirrels. "Quite a lot squirrels nested between the floors. They had to be removed and all their nests taken out. One of the workmen went up under the roof to be met with a five-foot black snake who happily dined on squirrels.

"It seems everybody in Aiken has a Red Top story," laughs Bernie. "Everybody we meet has been here, always saying, 'Oh I know about that house.'"

Red Top has been a contemporary of its other illustrious neighbors, Hopelands Gardens and Rye Patch, for more than a century. Bernie believes Red Top was built in 1904 and records show that C. Oliver Iselin bought Hopelands' 15 acres in 1897.

Bernie also believes the carriage house predates the main building and might even have been a part of the property of Rev. John H. Cornish who led St. Thaddeus Episcopal Church from 1846 to 1869. Cornish also taught at a school here operated by a Mrs. Dupré of Charleston. Cornish lived on Mrs. Dupre's property for his first six years in Aiken and it is this estate to which Bernie thinks the carriage house might have first belonged.

In announcing the President's Award, Historic Aiken Foundation board member Robert Stack said, "We are amazed and pleased that the Dukes undertook this project with such gusto and great care. They are wonderful people and a wonderful addition to our community." Praising some past recipients of foundation awards, Stack said, "One of the great things about my job is meeting people like the Dukes."