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History lessons at Miss Pearl's

BY RICHARD AMRHINE THE FREE LANCE-STAR





The Rev. Sam and Mary Ann Harris, the original builders and owners, pose for a photo taken sometime in the latter part of the 1800s. (HARRIS FAMILY PHOTO)

To Elaine Taylor, it was a piece of Louisa County history worth saving. The bulldozer was edging closer, and if Oakshade was to be saved, it was now or never.

It was sitting in an area called Apple Grove, off U.S. 522, and would need to be moved about 10 miles to the Orchid area, where Taylor owned some property. If you know Cuckoo and Gum Springs, down the road from Mineral, you know the area we're talking about.

The Apple Grove property owner agreed to sell her the 19th-century house and gave her a week to move it. It actually took a few days more than that.

Taylor, who happens to be the director of the Louisa County Historical Society, called on Craig Jacobs of Salvagewrights Inc. in Orange, who is the go-to guy for such projects around here. He took one look at the old house and appreciated its value and importance.

"You drive by there and it just stops you, the roof pitch—the 'cat-slide' roof—the classic lines," he said.

He called it a rare "cube house," meaning that it has a square footprint as opposed to the usual rectangle, and has about the same height as well. He also called it "pure," in that it hadn't been messed with hardly at all over time.

What followed would be the nerve-jangling rescue of an 1840 family home that had been built and lived in by the same family ever since—until 2009, anyway, when when Miss Pearl died at 104.

"None of this can be done over," Taylor said. "But you can go back and fix it. It takes creativity to bring these things back to life."

And she knew Jacobs would help her do that with Oakshade.

She said people who have lived in Louisa for a generation or two know the house and about the Harris family. Malcolm Harris, Pearl's brother-in-law, wrote a book called "A History of Louisa County, Virginia." Plenty of folks have thanked her for saving the old place. If you went to school in eastern Louisa in the middle decades of the 20th century, you were probably taught by Miss Pearl.

THE FAMILY HOME

The house was built in 1840 by Sam and Mary Ann Harris, the grandparents of Miss Pearl's husband, also Sam Harris.

Despite his familiarity with such structures, Jacobs is always impressed when he considers the work that went into building them.

"They would take down the trees and hew the bark off them and lighten them up to carry back to the site, where they would probably pit saw them," he said.

This was a post-and-beam timber frame house that was pegged together without nails. The craftsmanship was amazing, he said. Then they would make the the lathes for the plaster walls by hand.

"It was a tremendous process," he said.

He credits the timber frame method, and the still-pristine southern pine and oak used in construction, that allowed the house to survive all these years and then come through the 2011 earthquake virtually unscathed. It was just a few miles from the quake's epicenter, and all it lost was its brick chimney.

Jacobs and his crew took the house apart, board by board, post by post and beam by beam, numbering each piece in order for it to be reassembled exactly as it had been built.

He then stored it all for a year or so to let Taylor prepare for the reconstruction.

Eventually she got builder Dan Spear involved. Spear, who owns Spear Builders of Virginia, has a history of working with Jacobs in the reconstruction of several cabins and other structures for his events venue called Stevenson Ridge in Spotsylvania County.

Spear's experienced crew would do the grading work, pour the footers and handle other aspects of the project as well.

THE RECONSTRUCTION

Taylor said Louisa officials were helpful and encouraging throughout the project, especially chief building inspector Paul Snyder.

To provide a home with modern space and convenience, Taylor has added a wing that includes a master bedroom, bathroom and laundry room. It has been built using a mix of new and salvaged materials.

The original lumber tells the tale of its origins, with some being hewn on one side, sawn on the other. Original doors and hardware are being used where possible.

Much of the original brick was not salvageable. Reclaimed and old-looking new brick make up the chimney and cooking fireplace in the living room. In order to meet code requirements, new "ugly" gray mortar was used, but Taylor is intricately treating it with a dye to give it a creamier color. She also plans to use a brick veneer to cover the new concrete foundation of the addition in order to match the original.

It's just another of the "countless details" that Taylor noted such a project entails.

The entire structure has been covered in beaded wood siding on the front and sides that she admits will eventually require repainting. Because the back of the house will get limited sun, she opted for matching vinyl siding there for ease of maintenance.

The roof is standing-seam metal and maintenance-free.

With leftover salvaged materials, a screened porch was added to the side against a board-and-batten exterior wall.

The exorbitant cost prevents the plaster walls from being replicated, but she's discovered a way to apply a plaster skim coat on drywall that she said will provide the same appearance and even sound as plaster walls.

Soon the salvaged tongue-and-groove pine floors will go in and the house will become home. She expects that work will be complete by October.

Altogether the house will have about 1,250 square feet of living space with an upper-level loft.

Around the house are assorted piles of reclaimed boards and lumber that will at some point be put to use. Some of them will be used to reconstruct the old smokehouse, whose metal-covered roof structure actually made it to the site in one piece.

But that's a project for another day.

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CONTRACTORS

Contractors involved with the project:

Craig Jacobs of Salvagewrights Inc. in Orange, dismantling and reassembling, framing, interior and exterior trim, etc.

Dan Spear of Spotsylvania, grading, footers, siding

Mike Guilford, window restoration and painting

Talley's Roofing, standing seam roof specialists

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