

Preservation News

A PUBLICATION OF THE LEE TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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LEE TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION, INC.

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THE MISSION OF LEE TRUST IS TO PROMOTE HISTORIC PRESERVATION THROUGH EDUCATION, ADVOCACY AND ACQUISITION.

HOTEL INDIGO: Where Stylish Design meets Historic Location

The Hotel Indigo will open its doors to the public in early March of this year. The downtown merchants and River District patrons have watched with anticipation as this architectural beauty has taken shape. The façade of the building is the first indicator that the owner, Phil Hugh of Doc Corporation, wanted to compliment the style of his historic neighbors. The Corinthian columns that hug the building on all sides make it clear that their intent was to flatter the existing buildings in the neighborhood, and in this way, tip their hat to the community and businesses that have come before.

The main entrance to this boutique inn is through the Historic Post Office/Collier Arcade (c.1925), originally designed by George R. Sims, a New York City Advertising Executive. The far wall of the Arcade housed the metal post office boxes of the residents and businesses of the original River District and was later used as a bus station. The Arcades most famous tenant was The Snack House Diner which first began serving the courthouse community in the late 1940's. Now occupying their space will be Vino De Notte. This is the Hotel Indigo's signature

restaurant. “Vino” as Executive Chef Rocco Pisera refers to it, is “traditional Italian fare served in a modern and eclectic venue.” Though contemporary and chic at every turn, the restaurant pays its respects to its predecessor with an imposing black and white wall mural of a Snack House counter scene taken in its hay-day. On an adjacent wall, there is a photo of Front Street (now known as First Street) with rows of Model -T Fords lined up outside the businesses of the day.

Another attempt to preserve the original design is the painstaking effort that has been made to replicate the original broken-tile mosaic flooring that graces the entrance of the Arcade leading up to the Hotel. This creates a striking contrast to the hip, upbeat vibe one gets when entering the hotel's lobby. Sleek fashionable furniture, bright contemporary artwork and warm, engaging service are the first impressions the Hotel Indigo wants to convey. Every nuance in the hotel has been designed and created exclusively by renowned Interior Design and Fine Furnishing group, Robb & Stucky with mega-talented decorator, Mr. Terry Hall at the helm. The colors are compliment-

ing blue tones, rich dark woods and splashes of vivacious color. Accommodations include 67 hotel rooms and 7 residential-style suites. The guest room art work is vintage postcard reprints of Fort Myers from the 1930's to the 1950's, (compliments of Space 39 Gallery.) One can almost imagine a note on the back from a vacationer telling of the unspoiled beauty and lush tropical flora and fauna found in this quiet little town of Fort Myers.

Other features of the hotel include Phi, a lobby bar and restaurant offering “fresh, gourmet take away”. Guests can dine in the lobby area or Arcade as there will be ample seating in both areas. The “Piece De Resistance” undoubtedly is the Hotel's rooftop. It offers Phi in the Sky, an open-air bar and eatery, as well as a beckoning crystal pool and contemporary fitness center. The view? Compliments of The Caloosahatchee River and McGregor Boulevard.

No doubt about it, this boutique inn lets you know the Hotel Indigo loves its neighborhood and every hotel guest and local patron is going to feel pretty special when they walk in and out of its doors.

THE HIBISCUS HOUSE, Preserved And Recycled Many Times

By Gerri Reaves

Leslie and Bill Seiden bought a piece of Fort Myers history when they came from Long Island, New York in December 2003, looking for what Leslie calls “old Florida.” With 30 years of professional hospitality experience on land and sea, they enthusiastically took on the challenge of remodeling and running an historic bed and breakfast in downtown Fort Myers. They rechristened their charming home and business on the southeast corner of McGregor Boulevard and Clifford Street the Hibiscus Inn.

“We fell in love with the vision of what we could do with it,” Leslie says, “We've always been attracted to old properties.” The couple had planned to take at least a month to redecorate; however, they found out at the December 15 closing on the house that Christmas guests would be arriving soon. They immediately “went into over-drive,” as Leslie puts it, to tackle the most in need of a décor make-over. In the process, they uncovered layers of wallpaper going back to the 1920s, as well as other traces of the past. Bill did the work himself, and in record time—only two weeks.

The house was built of strong Florida heart-pine in 1912 by William H. Dowling, who ran the WP Dowling-Camp Lumber Company in Slater,

just across the Caloosahatchee River. That successful company operated for decades, closing in 1944. Dowling's widow, Hallie, moved the house to its current location, but not without drama. The house was sawed in half, loaded onto two barges, sank in the river, and eventually—days later—was freed by the rising tide.

In the last six decades, the house has changed hands and uses many times. Owned by Sadie Ware Lewis of New York City in the late 1940s, it was sold in 1953 to Carroll McLean (later known as Mrs. Ralph Wadlow), and was known as Carroll's Apartments. It was renamed Heritage House Apartments in the early 1960s. At one point, it was Rebecca Scheall's The Wedding Place. In the late 1970s, James and Shirley Drum ran the house as The Drum House Inn, also using it as a realty office. Many Fort Myers residents will remember the house's stint as The LI-Inn Sleeps Inn, starting in 1998.

Having a house built of sturdy Florida pine has its advantages. The 97-year-old house has endured not only a capsizing in the river but weathered countless storms.

“Hurricane Charley was really the test for us,” says Leslie. “That was our first year here in business, and we had no damage whatsoever—

just foliage. The integrity of the houses built then is very different from (those built) now.”

She knows that her guests appreciate the uniqueness and authenticity of the accommodations on an historic boulevard known for many beautiful non-generic homes.

The Hibiscus Inn welcomes guests from all over the world to Fort Myers historic river district. The five-guest-room historic inn offers a distinctive, gracious experience. And for area residents, it's perfect for an “in-town” getaway or romantic weekend.

The Hibiscus House Bed & Breakfast is located at 2135 McGregor Boulevard. Contact Leslie and Bill at 332-2651 or at www.TheHibiscusHouse.net.

Sources: “House Hung Up on Sand Bar” by Marian Godown, the archives of the Southwest Historical Society, and Leslie Seiden.

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Lee Trust For Historic Preservation Donates 1920 Steinway Grand Piano To Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center

On Feb 24, 2009 The Lee Trust for Historic Preservation donated a vintage Steinway grand piano, worth about \$35,000, to the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center. World-renowned performers visiting the Art Center will use the piano during upcoming concerts.

"The Lee Trust is delighted to have donated to the Sidney and Berne Davis Art Center. We know it will be loved and cared for properly there," said Gina Taylor, director of the Lee Trust for Historic Preservation.

Acclaimed New York City based pianist and vocalist Brenda Earle became the first performer at the Art Center to use the piano last Friday during the Wycliffe Gordon Jazz Quartet concert.

Next month acclaimed musicians Wendy Chen and Brandt Fredriksen will perform on the piano. Chen has earned numerous awards for her talent; at age 17, she won first prize in the National Chopin Competition. She later received first prize in the Washington International Competition and was named Presidential Scholar by the National Foundation for the Arts. Fredriksen, a frequent performer at the Art Center, has played at Carnegie Hall and around the world. He teaches at the Manhattan School of Music and is a member of the American Virtuosi Chamber Players.

"We are so pleased at the generous gift of this beautiful Steinway concert grand piano. We will treasure it always and look forward to bringing the world's finest concert pianists to the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center to perform on it," said Jim Griffith, executive director of the Art Center.

Mound Key

A few residents on Mound Key in Estero Bay are digging up an historical controversy over land use rights between state and private owners.

Currently, eight Spanish goats inhabit approximately 9 acres of fenced-in property. The parcel has been owned by the McGee family since 1914 and is managed by brothers Ted, Tim and Todd, according to Todd McGee.

"We are farming our property," replied Todd McGee when asked why his family has placed goats on their property.

The majority of Mound Key's more than 100 acres was donated to the state by the Koreshan Unity in 1961. The state managed to purchase all but the McGee acreage in the 1990s.

Since development threatens this environmental and archaeological habitat, Lee County has taken measures to purchase the parcel in question for \$500,000, almost twice the land's appraisal worth. The McGees made a counter offer for \$5 million.

"It's outrageous," said Bill Grace, president of Lee Trust for Historic Preservation. "Conservation 2020 (Lee County's land acquisition agency) tried to buy the land and (the McGees) came back with an unreasonable price."

Grace is also concerned about the clearing of native vegetation which was done before the fence was erected. The county was notified and a stop work order was issued, according to Mound House director Theresa Schober.

Further investigation determined that there had been no violation and the order was lifted. Lee County planners met with the land owners and are monitoring the situation, Schober added.

"The goats are not natural and consume huge amounts of vegetation," said Grace. "What happens if they get loose? If (the McGees) have long-term interest in Mound Key, they should respect that."

Spanish goats, considered very hardy animals, are able to survive under adverse agro-climatic conditions. They are brush-clearing meat goats typically not considered suitable for milk or mohair production.

Another unsettled issue is that some of the clearing may have been done on state land instead of the privately owned land. But, since there hasn't been a recent property survey on the island, the matter is still active and under investigation, according to Lee County officials.

Schober said the state has been contacted by Lee County in regards to a possible violation on state land.

There are also concerns to preserve the historical significance of the island.

Mound Key is believed to be the ceremonial center of the Calusa Indians when the Spaniards first attempted to colonize Southwest Florida in 1566, Schober said. It is also known as the location of the first Jesuit mission in North America between 1567 and 1569.

"Mound Key is probably the most significant archaeological site in Southwest Florida," said Schober. "It hasn't been modified dramatically by agriculture or anything else in the past 100 years or so. It represents a tremendous opportunity to learn additional information about the past."

But the goat farmers are not budging since a majority of their land is zoned for agricultural use.

"At this point, the land owner is utilizing their land for a perfectly valid purpose," said Schober. "They could have the intention of attempting to develop the property, but until we know what the land owner's intent is, it's impossible to talk about potential impact."

McCollum Hall

McCollum Hall is located at the northeast corner of Cranford Avenue and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, in the historic Dunbar community. It was built circa 1938 by African-American businessman and entrepreneur Clifford McCollum Sr. and his wife Gertrude. The building filled a void in the community by providing much needed meeting, commercial, and recreational space. Community socials and celebrations were held at McCollum Hall and it became a significant meeting place for the community. McCollum Hall also served as the USO for African-American servicemen stationed at Page and Buckingham Air Fields. The second floor housed the renowned "dance hall", and for almost two decades was a popular entertainment location for many famous African-American musicians and entertainers including Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, and B.B. King. McCollum Hall was a stop on the "Chitlin Circuit", a name commonly used to refer to the places across the country where African-American entertainers performed.



The second-floor dance hall continued in operation until the late 1970's catering more to the teenagers of the community. In the mid 1980's, the second-floor dance hall was converted into a rooming/boarding house. In 1994 when The Florida Department of Transportation explored widening Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard to four lanes an application was submitted to determine if McCollum Hall would be eligible to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. An affirmative response was given, but the application was not pursued by the property owner. In December 1998 the City of Fort Myers City Council recognized and designated McCollum Hall as a local historic landmark. Most recently, in January of this year, the Community Redevelopment Agency, the current owner, hired a consultant to update and resubmit the application to have McCollum Hall listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The CRA is seeking a development team to restore McCollum Hall. This would include adding buildings to create a mini-town center that would bring jobs and services to the community. For additional information regarding this project please contact Michele Hylton with the Fort Myers Redevelopment Agency at 239-321-7097.

2009 History Maker of the Year Award Announced

Fort Myers, Florida - The Southwest Florida Museum of History Foundation and Oswald Trippe & Company, Inc. are pleased to announce the History Maker of the Year Award. In 2009, Florida native and Fort Myers grand dame, Mrs. Berne Davis will be the first recipient of this distinguished award.

Southwest Florida is rich in history and people who have helped to make this area a wonderful place to live, work and raise a family. They have fostered community spirit through their work and personal passion for the community. These unique individuals will be distinguished as 'History Makers'.

History Makers are citizens of Lee County who have made significant contributions in their specific field, serving the SWFL community. They have had a hand in shaping Southwest Florida history through their actions and will be talked about, researched and written about by Historians 100 years from now.

Mrs. Berne Davis epitomizes the History Maker of the Year Award.

Bernese Barfield graduated from Fort Myers High School in 1933 and worked for the Chamber of Commerce. Good friend, Mina Edison, hosted Berne's bridal shower before her marriage in 1939 to Sydney Davis, a local haberdashery owner.

Mrs. Davis quickly became involved in local civic organizations. As a former Queen of Edisonia (1939), she was involved in the Edison Festival of Light for years. As the first president of the Fort Myers Women's Golf Association, she initiated the beautification of the grounds at Fort Myers Country Club. Mrs. Davis has been a member of the Lee Memorial Health Systems Pink Ladies for years and has helped raise funds for the hospital's buildings. Both she and her husband have served on the hospital board at different times.

In 2006, Berne Davis endowed the Bernese B & Sidney R. Davis Chair for Landscape Design, Horticultural Education and Research at FGCU. Also, in 2006, she bestowed a gift of \$1,000,000 in her late husband's name to the Florida Arts Cultural Center whose name has been changed to the Sydney & Berne Davis Arts Center.

Mrs. Berne Davis has been a driving force in local philanthropic endeavors for over 60 years. Mayor Jim Humphrey has been quoted as saying "I consider Berne to be the First Lady of Fort Myers."

The History Maker of the Year ceremony honoring Mrs. Davis took place on Wednesday, February 11th at The Veranda by invitation. An Open House followed at the Southwest Florida Museum of History.



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