

## 1702 Church

# Mrs. Jens Moller Home

1895



The original owner of this massive Victorian home with Queen Anne influences may have been Galveston's first woman real estate developer—she owned property all over the neighborhood, and built this house to rent to someone else.

Lots 8 and 9 in City Block 437 were purchased by Maude Moller in 1895 from Alphonse Kennison. In that same year, Mrs. Moller had this unique late-Victorian house built as a rental property. The first tenant, according to insurance records and the City Directory for 1896-97, was Walter S. Keenan, a general passenger agent for the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railroad.

Mrs. Moller apparently owned several properties, which was unusual for a woman of her time. All of the lots had houses built on them from 1895 to 1897, including 513 17th Street, 1706 Church, 1827 Ball and 810 19th Street. The Moller family home at 1814 Sealy, which was shown on the 1982 Annual Homes Tour, was listed in her name as well.

Very little else is known about Maude Moller, except that she was a wife and mother. Her husband, Jens, a prominent Galvestonian, had formed his own shipping agency in 1879 called J. Moller & Co., whose offices were at 2102 Strand.

J. Moller was a ship broker whose sail and steamship trade was mainly between Galveston and Liverpool England. Their main export was cotton, and their main import coal. Moller was also a civic leader who served on the state legislature and the disaster relief committee after the 1900 storm, and he was at one time U.S. Consul to Denmark and Russia.

The Mollers continued to live in the house on Sealy until 1902, when Mr. Moller retired and they moved to 513 17th Street, just around the corner from this house. The house became property of Frank T. Rennie in 1921. Maude Moller died in 1924 and Jens passed way in 1930.

The present occupants purchased the Moller house in January, 1984. Hurricane Alicia had severely damaged the house—about a third of the roof was gone and three-fourths of the windows were shattered. On one inspection of the house before its purchase, it rained so hard that water poured down the main stairway, making access to the upstairs impossible.

Why restore such a disaster? Because of the beauty of the home, and especially its fine wood work, the occupant answered.

"It's such a grand old house," he added. "We love the idea of historic preservation."

The restoration took eight months, and the occupants did all of the work themselves. The most difficult aspects, they said, were replacement of the roof, the massive job of stripping over 90 years of paint off the house, and renovation of the main staircase area.

The original slate roof would have been too costly to replace with original materials, so the new roof was made to look like slate. Most of the painted areas, such as the porches,

had to be stripped with torches to remove old paint a fourth of an inch thick in some places. The main staircase had to be scaffolded all the way up, and the intricate wainscoting was stripped by hand with a "pecan picker" to reach into each groove.

The wood of the entry porch is original, as is all the lumber in the house. The entry hallway is inviting, with the walls painted a neutral color. The wainscoting with its ripple and plank effect is quite unusual and is seen throughout the house. Looking back to the door, note the slots where a bar once was placed to keep the double doors closed during storms. The Queen Anne table belonged to the mother of one of the occupants, while the brass chandelier may be original to the house.

The living room is an elegant area. All pictures here and throughout the house are hung from the picture moulding which remains from the days when walls were made of plaster. The mantle of the coal-burning fireplace had been painted black, giving the appearance of iron, but further investigation revealed the lovely tile beneath.

In the main staircase area, the refinished wainscoting shows its natural beauty. Under the stairs are a coat closet and an entry to the basement, which may have been the servants' quarters. Even though this was a rental property, the tenants would have needed servants in such a large house.

The formal dining area contains another coal-burning fireplace and a mantle depicting birds and berries. The room also has a built-in china cabinet, which is original, though the glass shelves have been added.

The kitchen is the occupants' favorite area. The island in the center gives extra counter space, while the vent over the stove leads to one of the old chimneys. A servants' bell near the entrance is connected to a push-button upstairs. In the windows is a collection of stained glass panels crafted by the occupants. A breezeway off the kitchen connects the entrance to the basement and the stairs.

This breakfast-kitchen area may have been closed off from the main house so the servants would not pass through the more formal areas of the

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## Moller Home (continued)

house during their daily chores. A servants' stairway leads to the main entrance.

At the top of the stairs is the button to the servants' bell in the kitchen. Notice the similarity of the balusters of the stairway to those of the porches outside. This is also a good location to view the "beaded board" ceilings which are used throughout the upstairs.

The front bedrooms open to a long veranda with an overhang projecting from the dormer. The view of the East End of the Island here is striking. Each of these bedrooms contains interesting "corner pieces" which eliminate sharp projecting corners, particularly around the old chimneys. Double doors lead from the east bedroom to the upstairs sitting room, a comfortable place to watch the large-screen TV or listen to the stereo hidden in an old phonograph cabinet.

The upstairs bath also has the ripple-and-plank wainscoting and an old-fashioned pedestal bathtub. The modern corner shower was added for convenience. The lighting in this room carries through the theme of the lighting of the ceiling fans in the upstairs rooms. The lights above the mirror are water lillies, complete with lily pads. The ceiling lights in this bathroom are similar to the globes on the fans.

The back bedroom features a private breezeway that draws air into this area of the upstairs. The old steamer trunk belonged to the parents of one of the occupants and the iron bed was a gift from the mother of the other. In this end of the upstairs hallway, the fancy wood fretwork matches a similar piece downstairs near the kitchen entry.

Old photographs reveal that the landscaping for this property had palm trees inside the gate and oak trees closer to the street. The occupants have replanted the palms and the oaks in their respective locations, further demonstrating their attention to detail and interest in historic preservation. They have succeeded in their goals with this lovely and comfortable home on Church Street.



