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# James G. Seawell Home

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In 1997, more than a century after it was originally constructed, the 1886 James G. Seawell Cottage at 1814 Avenue K had fallen into disrepair. Like some other small houses in the city's Lost Bayou Historic District south of Broadway, this gable-front Gulf Coast cottage appeared bleak and almost beyond rehabilitation. The current homeowners recognized the potential of this small house and purchased it at a city tax foreclosure auction thus giving it a new life and the neighborhood a renewed asset. More than a year and a half later, the formerly threatened Seawell Home is a bright testament to the vision and hard work of its new owners.



rehabilitation program. The house needed to be leveled, and an eight-foot hole in the roof and everything in between had to be repaired. All of the attic joists and rafters were rotted along with the sheathing and roofing shingles. The owners themselves hammered, sanded, painted and patiently cared for the fragile historic house.

Being savvy old house lovers, the owners salvaged as much of the original materials as possible. The front door and most of the interior doors are from the 1886 house. With careful handling and preservation, they collected the interior wood trim from throughout the house using it as windows and doors surrounds and as the chair railing

James G. Seawell, an attorney and notary public, built the house in 1886, one year after Galveston's devastating Great Fire. According to insurance records and the Sanborn Insurance Maps, the 30-foot-by 30-foot, four-room house included a central hallway and oil lights. In 1897, the owners raised the house to accommodate an eight-foot enclosed basement and a 16-foot-by 9-foot kitchen. It is quite possible that the builders of the house salvaged materials from the ruins of burned properties in the fire. Several clues suggest this including the elegant newel post and balustrade installed in the parlor and the various multi-light windows used throughout. During the rehabilitation work, the owners also discovered charred paint on some of the interior lumber.

above the wainscot in the den. The beaded wood wainscoting, sometimes referred to as "boxcar siding," came from a full height wall in a central hall on the original first floor.

The central hall on the second floor is original, supported with solid wood 1-1/4-inch tongue-and-groove planks from floor to ceiling. These walls and much of the structural and trim wood are long-leaf yellow pine. The clapboard siding and doors are made of cypress, making them highly durable to the Gulf coast climate. Cypress was the preferred material for many 19th century houses because of its durability to the elements and its resistance to wood-eating insects.

Seawell, nicknamed "Judge" by family members appears to have built this cottage for a Josephine Ayers. Ayers and Seawell had several children together, but apparently were never married. One of the daughters Cordelia taught school at St. Augustine Parochial School at 2127 Broadway. When she later married longshoreman Lee Gamble, the house became their property. In 1898, Seawell died and was buried at Galveston's Episcopal Cemetery.

Some of the material used in the rehabilitation came from Galveston Historical Foundation's Salvage Warehouse at 2010 Mechanic Street. The warehouse is stocked with old windows, doors, shutters, and miscellaneous hardware donated by people renovating old houses. Material is donated with the understanding that homeowners in Galveston will purchase it to rehabilitate island houses.

Since their purchase of the house, the homeowners have added an oversized garage with board and batten siding similar to their first-floor exterior material. They were careful to design a garage that is compatible with the house and its neighboring properties.

In 1987, taxing entities foreclosed on the property. The house sat vacant, deteriorating at an every-increasing rate during the following 11 years while the city tried repeatedly to take the property to auction. After acquiring the property, the owners, experienced from previous old house work, initiated a full

The owners completed the exterior renovation in 1998 and have recently finished the interior work. As is common with new house construction, all new wiring, plumbing, heating, cooling, television cable, telephone and security systems were incorporated into the house. In many ways, the house provides the comforts of a new residence but the charm of an old one.

