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- About Us
- Advertise
- Subscribe
- Archives
- Photo Gallery
- Special Sections
- CNI Newspapers
- Living in Macon

News Sports Events Happenings Obituaries Social School Viewpoint Classifieds/Legals



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Living In Macon

Historic home saved from the brink

By Barbara McRae



Press photo/Barbara McRae

The William Baty Dean house as it stands today.

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Diana Bellgowan and her husband Charles Wallin signed the deed to a charming old country place on Queens Branch, in the Oak Grove community, on Jan. 23, 2008.

And then their adventures began.

The couple fully expected to restore the historic home, which was built by William Baty Dean sometime after the Civil War. But, once they began work, they discovered the house was about to collapse.

The building inspector advised them to strike a match to it, Bellgowan said.

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Historic home
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She and her husband faced some hard decisions. They had bought the property through Preservation North Carolina (PNC), which holds restrictive covenants on the house. The Land Trust for the Little Tennessee, PNC's partner in this preservation project, had acquired the property from Duke Energy. LTLT holds a conservation easement on about half the 8.2-acre tract.

"It's a special property," explained Paul Carlson, executive director of LTLT. "It's part of the greater Needmore tract and an example of the way our cultural heritage is intertwined with our natural heritage." The Bellgowan/Wallin property lies across the road from property the Land Trust owns on Queen Branch.

PNC worked hard to find a preservation buyer for the site, Carlson said.

Bellgowan and Wallin were perfect in that role. Bellgowan is an architect with a solo practice in Asheville. Wallin worked as a carpenter before taking his present position as a web design teacher at AB Tech. The two had already restored the historic 1920s-era home where they live in Asheville, and clearly possessed the skills as well as the heart for this task.

Carlson calls them "historic preservation pioneers in the valley."

Bellgowan, who is a member of the Western North Carolina Green Building Council is also strongly committed to energy-efficient and environmentally-sensitive construction. As work on the Queens Branch home progressed, she would find herself strongly conflicted between the need to maintain the historical values of the house and her desire to create a livable space that meets green-built standards.

Because so much of the house had to be redone, the building inspector required them to bring the whole structure up to code. That created additional challenges.

Dating the house

William Baty Dean (1832-1906), who built the house on Queens Branch, was the son of Julius and Nancy Wood Dean. Julius arrived in Macon County during the pioneer period and amassed a huge amount of property, which was divided among the four Dean sons after his death in 1866.

The family gave their name to several local places, including Dean Falls and Dean Island.

After Julius died, his widow went to live with Baty and his wife Margaret. A photo showing the three of them standing in front of the house was likely taken between 1866, when Julius died, and 1880, by which time Nancy was also dead.

The photo also provides another clue. Bellgowan said she couldn't figure out what kind of roof the house had in that picture, but one of the contractors she worked with said it was oiled canvas, a material that was used for roofing after the Civil War when metal was hard to come by.

Coming up with a construction date is complicated by the fact that Baty's son Silas, who inherited the house, made extensive modifications, installing such features as the windows and flooring - and the bathroom. That first renovation took place about 1920.

In the historic photo, the living room has a single front window. Silas put in another.

"That's one thing about a plank house," Bellgowan said. "You can just cut out a new window if you want one. You don't have to worry about finding the studs."

Box or plank houses

After sawmills came into operation in the county, some people shifted from building with logs to using sawn timber in a method called "boxed" or "plank" construction. This type of building became popular in the mountains in the early 20th century.

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In her book, Homeplace, Michael Ann Williams writes, "Box construction differs from frame in that it has little internal framing. Instead, the vertical plank walls provide support for the structure."

Though it was a common type of construction in the region, few plank buildings survive today, making examples such as the 1,500-square-foot, seven-room Queens Branch plank house rare and important.

Because they lacked framing, Bellgowan said, "Many fell over."

When she and her husband bought the house, it, too, was ready to fall over. To hold the structure up, they had to install framing inside the walls. As one of the carpenters said, "It's like building a house inside of a house."

"That opened the door to making it more energy efficient," Bellgowan said, because it allowed them to insulate.

It also created a dilemma.

Bellgowan had hoped to have the property listed on the National Register of Historic Places, which would qualify the owners for tax credits. But framing the house would mean it was no longer plank construction, and could not qualify, according to the state preservationist she consulted.

In other words, the alterations that would save the house would also destroy its qualifying historic value.

Bellgowan had no choice. She saved the house.

Termites

The restrictive covenants in their deed required Bellgowan and Wallin to restore the house and preserve such features as the exterior appearance, windows, the stairs, the beadboard walls upstairs and as much of the floor as they could.

Termites made complying with the requirements almost impossible. The insects had damaged two-thirds of the beams and almost all the flooring.

"We kept what we could," Bellgowan said. The only original and intact flooring in the restored house is in the hallway. All the rest had deteriorated beyond repair.

But, you can't tell it today. "We found a salvage guy who had wood from a 1930s bungalow," she said. The flooring matches the surviving boards.

An even bigger problem the new owners faced concerned the foundation.

"It was the hardest thing to figure out," Bellgowan said. The original structure stood on stacked stones. The building inspector ruled them out.

Bellgowan and Wallin considered digging a crawl space, which would have given them room for an HVAC system. She was concerned about dampness and eventually decided to use pier footings and insulate everything underneath the house.

While they were working on this part of the restoration, Bellgowan discovered a "groundhog kingdom" under the deteriorating joists of the dining room.

Building technology

"We had a discussion about putting solar panels on a historic home," Bellgowan said. That idea nixed, the new owners went all-electric.

Getting an efficient heating/air conditioning system into the old place wasn't easy.

The seven-foot (or less) ceilings made installing ductwork a challenge.

In designing the HVAC system, Bellgowan consulted building technology expert Amy Musser of VandeMusser Design in Asheville.

They mapped the joists of the two-story building to figure out how to place the ductwork. The ducts are mostly hidden and the vents are placed in the ceilings. The job may have resembled working an intricate jigsaw puzzle, but their painstaking labors paid off.

"The air conditioning and heating are as good as in any new home," Bellgowan said.

The air handler, along with the hot water heater and a hot water heat pump are installed in a utility closet built into the kitchen. The hot water heat pump was recommended by Musser; it reduces the cost of heating water, and the cool air is blown onto the refrigerator coils to make it work more efficiently.

The plumbing also had to be modernized.

The house had indoor plumbing when Bellgowan and Wallin bought it, but it wasn't without its problems. Water was piped in from a spring, which had enough flow to wash the dishes, but not enough for a shower. Also, waste was straight-piped to the branch, so a septic tank was in order.

Bellgowan hired a dowser to locate water. He found a site for their well, and also showed her how an underground stream ran from that spot toward the corner of the house and under the maple tree in the front yard.

Comfort and compromise

"Everyone wants high ceilings today," Bellgowan said, but staying in the old house has given her a new perspective. Despite the low ceilings, the rooms have an open, sunny feeling. She said she has been amazed at how quickly they can be heated or cooled.

The original beadboard in the upper rooms adds warmth and comfort. The boards don't all mix, but as Bellgowan notes, "They used what they had" - with results that can be intriguing.

As was typical in the time, none of the bedrooms have closets, but Bellgowan has already bought some armoires.

The original, steep staircase does not meet code, but Bellgowan successfully argued with the inspections department to keep it. "There isn't any other way to reach the second floor," she said.

When she and her husband bought the house, they had a blower-door analysis done to see just how "airy" it was. The result was an incredible 11,000+ cubic feet per minute. Essentially, it was open to the outdoors.

Their work got the air infiltration down to 1,397 cfm. The most recent analysis revealed a few areas that could still use caulking. Now that she's taken care of those, Bellgowan plans to have another analysis done.

Former tenants of the house told her about the massive annual invasion of ladybugs they had to contend with. That is no longer a problem. Bellgowan is proud of the fact that her efforts to insulate and tighten up "conquered the ladybugs." The house is now too tight for them to find a way in.

Even though the house has the original 1920s, single-pane windows - which the restrictive covenants require to be kept in place - the house is now energy-star rated.

Bellgowan emphasizes the importance of caulking around window frames and in any

cracks or places where walls meet. "We went through a case of caulking on this house," she said. That was one of the cheapest, and most effective, of her energy-efficiency efforts.

The building has a new asphalt roof, but Bellgowan decided to replace the old tin over the top of it because she loved the patina of the metal, and because it adds to the traditional appearance of the house.

"People have really good memories of the house," she said. "It's part of our cultural heritage. Places start facing into the ground, and they're gone."

It was a close call with the Dean house, but now people driving by on Highway 28 can get a feeling for the way things used to be, here in Oak Grove.

"The look of the place reminds us, 'This is what people did.'" Bellgowan said.

She points out features that show how much those earlier people understood about building - the way the house faces south, sheltered in the east-west cove, and built high enough not to flood.

"They did so many things that are the best things to do."

In the course of restoring this old house, Bellgowan has gotten to know descendants of the original owners as well as others who lived in the house as tenants. She has collected stories about the house and the way it was used. She knows who planted the trees in the yard, and she can tell you a good bit about the genealogy of the Deans.

The place still holds its mysteries. For example, why was the root cellar built from terra cotta tile? And, which part of the house was built first?

Last spring, Bellgowan, her husband and their son Rennie, 8, spent their first night in the house that she had come to know so intimately. They are still "camping out" inside, with bedding on the floor and a few pieces of furniture she found through Craigslist.

What does she think about the project now? Was it worth all the investment of time and trouble?

"We've talked about it," Bellgowan admits. "We come out here and watch the sun go down, watch the fireflies in the meadow. And, yes, it's worth it.

The Land Trust - the former owner - couldn't be more pleased. Director Carlson said, "Their investment in the revitalization of this historic structure adds to the rural character and beauty of our area, and it demonstrates an environmentally friendly way to create new housing."

The Dean house is one of two Macon County homes to be included in the 2009 Solar and Green Home Tour, sponsored by the WNC Green Building Council on Oct. 10. For more information, see www.wncgbc.org/events/calendar.php.

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[Back to Index](#)

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