Coffee House

Dr. and Mrs. James Thom converted the original kitchen into their dining room.

Thoms make a home out of historic downtown building

The Florence Coffee House is the only known remaining example in downtown Baton Rouge of what was a common 19th-century building arrangement — a business establishment downstairs, family living quarters upstairs and an exterior wing with a kitchen on the first floor and servants' quarters above.

Dr. James Thom removed each brick from the back wall by hand so that a strong, new wall could be built as part of the massive reconstruction, shown in this file photo from Dec. 30, 1974.

By CAROL ANNE BLITZER
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People couldn't believe it when in 1971 Dr. and Mrs. James Thom decided to restore the old Florence Coffee House and move from their home in an upscale neighborhood to Devall Town, a half block from the Mississippi River.

By that time many of the old homes in downtown Baton Rouge had been torn down, abandoned or converted to commercial properties. Former "downtowners" had moved in droves to newer outlying subdivisions.

Evelyn Thom's mission for decades was to save the area's historical buildings. As president of the Foundation for Historical Louisiana from 1965 to 1967, she drove through Baton Rouge "looking around to see what was worth preserving."

On Main Street in the first block from the river was the old coffee house almost totally in ruins.

"This one looked like there was no hope for it, but I kept driving by and seeing that building was still there," Evelyn Thom said.

One day, Dr. Thom suggested that they try to buy the building, then occupied as a residence by two sisters.

"We owned a rather big place in Melrose," she said.

"You would weed the flower beds and then it was time to weed them again." The lawn required constant maintenance. "I decided that I didn't want to do this all of my life," she added.

After some negotiating, the Thom purchased the old building, the only known remaining example in downtown of what was once a common city living arrangement — a business downstairs, family living quarters upstairs and a separate kitchen wing with servants' quarters on the second floor.

"It was a matter of having to strip the home to get it back to the original," Evelyn Thom said. "We decided to make it a place to retire."

With her passion for history, Evelyn Thom carefully documented more than 150 years of the property's past. From public records she discovered that brothers and partners John and Lucas Florence (probably originally..."
Florin, of levignos, Italy, and later of New Orleans, purchased the property from Pierre Baron for $1,350 on May 28, 1848.

"At that time, the river was the main artery of transportation. Travelers would come down the river. When they got off at Baton Rouge, they were looking for a place to get something to eat and drink," Evelyn Thom said. The Florence brothers opened their coffee house a short walk from the river bank.

A year and a half later on Nov. 25, 1849, the building was destroyed by a fire that started near the coffee house. The New Orleans Times Picayune described the fire as "one of the most disastrous conflagrations that ever occurred in the city ... or in the whole South." It quoted an extra of the Baton Rouge Democratic Advocate as saying that the fire started at 4 a.m. and "noble exertions ... were exhibited" before the fire "was subdued.

The fire engine came from the U.S. garrison at the Pentagon and was aided by the local bucket brigade. No one died in the fire, but four citizens were injured.

The Florence brothers were two of only a few burned-out owners with fire insurance. With $1,275 of the $3,000 insurance money they collected, they contracted with master brick mason Nelson Potts to build a brick building two stories high with three chimneys and a kitchen wing adjoining the main building. The coffee house was on the first floor with living quarters on the upper floor. The Florence brothers, who could not read and write, signed their names with "X"s and recorded the contract with Potts at the courthouse. Elizabeth Ripley describes the combination living arrangement in her 1912 book, "Social Life in Old New Orleans." She remembers, all lived over or in the rear of their shops. Very many families lived over shops in those days, not always over their own shops either.

Shortly after the new coffee house opened, the brothers had a parting of the ways. John Florence bought out his brother, Lucas, who opened his own coffee house at Convention and Lafayette. Lucas was later thrown from a horse and died.

John Florence sold the Florence Coffee House building to Matheo Doril (Anglicized to Mathew Dorich) in 1852. Public records indicate a succession of owners including John Toy; Lafayette Caldwell, who purchased it with a woman slave and a child for $350 in 1860; James A. McHatton; banker William Pike; Otto Waldrich; Mary Jorio; Charles A. Schoenbrodt; Burt Albert Layton; Rosalie Pinton; and Clara McCormick. Several of the owners acquired the building as an investment and did not occupy it. Over the years, it was used as a saloon, cobble shop, boarding house and a grocery.

The building survived the Civil War even though records do not indicate what happened to the coffee house during that time. Admiral David Farragut docked his fleet a half block away, and Federal troops controlled the Pentagon Barracks and the town.

In 1920, the property was sold to Joe Michelli (sometimes written Michelle), who ran a grocery store in the building for more than 20 years and with his wife, Josephine, reared 10 children there.

In an article in the State Times, Evelyn Thom described some revisions made to the building during the 50 years that the Michelli family owned the property. The front balcony was removed, a store front with plate glass was installed, a door was cut into the main house on both floors from the kitchen wing and the first floor was raised and cemented in place.

Two Michelli daughters, Josephine and Rosa, sold the building to the Thombs in November 1971. In recent years, the building had been occupied only as a residence.

"It took four years for us to restore the home — a year and a half to clear out the house, one year to make plans with the architect and a year or so for the reconstruction," Evelyn Thom said. Bill Broucky was the architect on the project.

"While Pete Martin was a contractor,

The Thombs had no bathrooms, only two privies. "There was no way we could live without bathrooms. They had a funnel on the porch to catch water," Evelyn Thom said.

The Thombs removed a partition which separated the front rooms of the two floors from the back rooms. This gave them space to install bathrooms and closets.

The Thombs also raised the first floor 6 inches and replaced it with brick. The property is actually below the level of the levee, which was not raised until after the flood of 1910. Before then, the property frequently flooded, and the building was a cement border at the door way to help keep water out.

In the same State Times article, it was reported that the Thombs could not understand why the upstairs ceiling was 12 feet high while the first floor ceiling was only 9 feet. The mystery was later solved by the contractor and a neighbor who said that because of frequent floods in the town, the floor had to be raised periodically. Since the floor has been built up so many times, the downstairs fireplace was 3 feet underground when the Thombs purchased the property.

They converted the first floor of the kitchen wing to their dining room and made a bedroom out of the servants' quarters above the original kitchen. Between the large front living room and the dining room, they built a modern kitchen. "When we bought the house, the attic was sealed," Evelyn Thom said. They opened up the area and cut a window facing the river. "If there is anything spectacular on the river, we come up to the attic floor to see it," she said. The attic is now one big room used for storage with closets which hold the air conditioning equipment and the hot water tank.

When the Thombs bought the home, the back wall was weak and bowed, so Dr. Thom removed it himself brick by brick. "I was still practicing medicine then," he said. "I spent four to six hours every evening working on the building.

When the wall was rebuilt as part of the restoration, the architect created off-street parking, then required by law, on the west side of the first floor. Behind the parking area is a small courtyard which overlooks the kitchen, dining room and old servants' quarters.

Today the bottom floor contains only three main rooms — the living room, kitchen and dining room. Upstairs are two bedrooms side by side at the front of the house, a library behind the west bedroom and a landing. Above the back wing is the third bedroom.

Bill Jensen, who owns Nelson Potts' home on North Street, located a mantel at Helvetia Plantation for the Thombs' living room. The mantel is similar to an original mantel on the second floor.

Thirty-one-foot beams, which span the width of the building, have been left exposed. The home contains two original 7-foot doors as well as the original second-floor heart pine floors. On the landing, the floors are slightly blackened, evidence of a fire years ago. "We kept it as it was. It is part of the history of the building," Evelyn Thom said.

The house is furnished with items inherited by the Thombs from their parents. "This is a plain home with furnishings to reflect this. I don't have much new," she said.

In 1986, the Florence Coffee House was added to the National Register of Historic Places. The Thombs later bought the old Three Coins building, located directly east of the property. They raised the building and constructed a guest house, which complements their home.

Evelyn Thom says she loves the sounds of downtown — the church bells, street traffic, trains, fog horns, boats on the river and even the noises across the street at the Advocate building, where the day begins at 3 a.m.

Today downtown Baton Rouge is experiencing a renaissance. "All over the downtown are buildings that may not have been as old as this but they have potential," she said. "We have to bring people back down here."