Over 100 years old...
Almost two centuries old, this house, in rural Abbeville was built by slave labor, of cypress, cut from trees growing on the same property, and of clay bricks fired in homemade kilns which still remain on the property now owned by Mr. and Mrs. H.L. Harkins.

but look at it now!
Recent renovations have been made by H.L. Harkins, who completed the restoration alone with the exception of a few hours of contracted labor. (Meridional photos by Meecal Hollier Smith).

House built by slave labor may stand another century

By Meecal Hollier Smith

Have you ever wondered what it was like living in the south 175 years ago? Would life in the Abbeville area have been better than it is today? Did the days seem longer, and the temperature cooler, way back then? These questions and many more raced through my mind one day last year, and again one day this July as I stood before a house in rural Abbeville which is almost 175 years old.

A year ago, the house belonging to Beverly Harkins, located on the Abbeville-Henry Highway, just a few miles from town, was an eyesore. Those who do not appreciate the historical significance, would have seen a ramshackle, weatherbeaten, monstrosity. One might think to himself that good lumber was in the old house—very good cypress, but the only value would be in the tearing down of such a building, and using the lumber for a more modern structure.

H.L. Harkins, father of the owner, who owns the property adjacent to the old home, was told as much, and in almost those same words. Harkins, who had plans to renovate the old house, was told that the cost of repair and reconstruction would not be worth the money or the effort.

The walls were crumbling, and the floor was so badly warped and sunken in various spots, that it would seem impossible to make the house livable again.

Harkins, with the encouragement of his wife, decided to disregard all advice against renovating the old home, and began the undertaking with “full speed ahead.”

As I was taken on a tour through each room in the house before reconstruction began, strangely enough, I began to visualize life in the days of slavery, and became hypnotized by the explanation of how the structure was assembled back in the days before the Civil War. Harkins showed me the hand-constructed chimneys of several fireplaces within the old house. He also pointed out the exact location of an old brick kiln, where bricks for the walls of the house were fired right on the property, after having been scooped from the clay banks near the homestead. Cypress for beams and ceilings were cut down from somewhere on the wide expanse of grounds surrounding the house.

I began to realize why the preservation of the old home was so important to the man, who planned to do every bit of the work himself. It was a tribute or a memorial to another century—a life and another time.

A year has passed, since that day, and several weeks ago, one hot dry day in early July, I was called back to the site of the rambling old house. What stood there now was a freshly painted white house with cool green shutters. Flowers were blooming around the front and side porches, and gleaming enameled rocking chairs, as well as an old fashioned swing inviting one to stop and spend time reminiscing under the stately green oaks. The historical landmark had been preserved, hopefully for another century.

As if to complete the fantasy of another century taking place in the present, outdoors, under the shade of the spreading oaks, a cool breeze belied the fact that this was one of the warmest of Julys that one can recall. The volume of time seemed to turn back its pages, and one could almost imagine hearing “darkies” singing as they went about their work in the cane fields. The realization that once, long ago, in our grandfather’s and our great-grandfather’s day, in a comforting and relaxing era, the feeling must have been the same as it felt now. The same cool breezes wafted between the same old oaks surrounding a house which could tell historical tales—stories that will forever remain within its nearly two centuries-old walls.