Stately Louisiana Scandals house being razed

By ADRIAN ANGELETTE

For 60 years, residents and visitors at the Caldwell House on Highland Road were treated to spectacular views of lush gardens and lavish interior decorations stolen from LSU.

A former LSU buildings supervisor, "Big George" Caldwell, built the house with materials he stole from the university. That landed him in a federal prison in Atlanta and played a prominent role in the Louisiana Scandals of 1939.

There's a rich history to the stately house at 6015 Highland Road. But by the end of this week, the house itself will be history.

Baton Rouge attorney Steve Hicks, who bought the house in February, said he plans to subdivide the three-acre lot into five lots, two fronting Highland Road and the other three on Sunset Avenue. Hicks said it would have cost double the roughly $650,000 he paid for the house to correct its structural problems.

The plan to demolish the historic house was met with fiery opposition at a community meeting in December.

A concrete fountain and crepe myrtles stood in front of the stately Caldwell House until recently. The trees are gone and the house will be razed by Friday. The owner of the house, Baton Rouge attorney Steve Hicks, plans to develop five lots on the property.

"It would have been poetic justice for something stolen from the LSU to go back to the university," Hicks said. "We worked hard to try and make it work with LSU."

"We would have been much happier with that."

LSU officials considered the place as an official residence for the chancellor. The residence could also double as a place for important university functions, such as visits from foreign dignitaries, Hicks said.

In a letter to Hicks, LSU's attorney, John W. Barton Jr., said Chancellor William Jenkins thought the university's money would be better spent on things "more beneficial to LSU, its facility and student body."

Nearby homeowners groups and the Foundation for Historical Louisiana also urged Hicks to find a way to salvage the house.

"Highland Road is disappearing," said one area resident, Bob Dillemuth. "In another 10 or 15 years, we're going to drive down Highland Road and wonder 'Where did it go'?"

Carolyn Bennett, executive director for the Foundation for Historical Louisiana, said the "unique combination of heritage, beauty and infamy" qualify the Caldwell House for eligibility on the National Register of Historic Places.

Caldwell played a large part in the Louisiana Scandals, a particularly corrupt time in Louisiana politics that led to the resignation of Gov. Richard W. Leche and other prominent state officials of the period.

Lauren Pierson McArdle said she will remember the house for its place in history because of its link to the Louisiana Scandals. McArdle also harbors strong personal memories of the house because that's where she grew up.
“My parents raised five children in that home,” McArdle said on Monday. “It was a beautiful and wonderful home.”

She said her family would have loved someone to restore the home.

McArdle, a Realtor, said her family holds no hard feelings toward Hicks for tearing down the house. She said Hicks has been “gracious” and allowed the family to collect some items of sentimental value before demolition began.

“It’s certainly nice to know it’s going to be taken down and replaced with very nice housing,” McArdle said. “His development should be beneficial to property values in the area.”

Although the house had to go, Hicks said he thinks he is saving the property along Highland Road.

Hicks said no live trees will be lost when the property is subdivided. Some trees will be moved, though, to make sure all five property owners get a fair share of them.

Hicks also said he has a waiting list of people who want to buy a lot. An architecture review committee will review all construction plans before any work begins, he said.
By 1840, business at the prison was booming. Among the operations were cloth manufacturing, tailoring, turning, manufacturing of sidesaddles, carpentry, cabinet-making, joinery, painting, forge work and gun and watch repairs. Local merchants were furious that the state could operate competing businesses with free prison labor and demanded that the businesses be halted.

In 1844, the Louisiana legislature succumbed to pressure from local merchants and prohibited the sale of convict-manufactured goods that competed directly with goods manufactured outside the prison. This put an end to much of the industry which was supporting the prison. Legislators had to come up with another way to help finance the prison.

In October 1844, the state leased the prison facility and all of the prisoners to James A. McHatton and William Pratt for $25,000. McHatton and Pratt made their money on the lease by hiring out the prisoners to construct levees along the Mississippi River.

Industries which did not compete with local merchants continued at the prison, and business continued at the prison store. Those prisoners not engaged in work on the levees worked in the prison weaving room, shoe and tailor shops, carpentry shop, cooperage, foundry, brick manufacturing and blacksmith's shop.

Later lessees, J.M. Hart and W.S. Pike entered into different arrangements with the state with profits being split between lessees and the state.

In April of 1862 during the Civil War, Hart and Pike gave up their lease and returned the prison facility and the inmates to the state. The prisoners were shipped back to the old New Orleans Parish Prison and much of the equipment in the facility was moved to Clinton for storage.

In May, the Louisiana State Penitentiary was occupied by the 7th Vermont Regiment. These and other Union troops in the area caused much destruction to the complex. The buildings were also damaged during the Battle of Baton Rouge on Aug. 5, 1862.

After the Civil War, state prisoners were moved back to the prison where they were used to make needed repairs. Major Samuel L. James leased the prison from 1870 until his death in 1894. He continued to use the prisoners for levee work as well as to conduct the manufacturing business.

In 1901, the state purchased the 8,000-acre Angola Plantation and 2,800-acre Hope Plantation and began moving prison operations out of the old penitentiary. The old facilities continued to be used as a receiving station, hospital, clothing and shoe factory and location of executions until the prison was finally closed in 1917.

Between 1901 and 1917, the prison was dismantled and buildings were constructed. The city of Baton Rouge paid $45,000 to purchase the main part of the prison from the state in 1916.

In 1919, the city purchased the old prison yard and created Victory Park with a pergola, bandstand, memorial fountain dedicated by the Elks, swimming pool, bathhouse and a towering flagpole erected by the Order of the Eagles in honor of its members who fought in World War I.

After the prison was abolished, the Warden's House, the one remaining building of the penitentiary, was used to house prison officials. Prison warden William H. Reynaud and his family lived in the home from 1912 to 1917.

Moore's father, longtime warden of the state penitentiaries of Louisiana Alexander Dunn Bryan, lived with his family within "The Walls" until the warden's house on the prison grounds was torn down.

"When I lived there, I was living in the penitentiary," Moore said. The family moved into the present Warden's House in 1917.

"We had just one room downstairs," she said in describing the Warden's House. "Upstairs, there were enormous rooms and a big hallway with a big central bath in the front." In the yard of the Warden's House was a large playground, made for Moore by one of the prisoners.

Moore remembers at least one room in the house with bars. "They would bring prisoners over sometimes," she said. "We called it the little jail."

Among the families that Moore remembers in the neighborhood were the Fentons, Ligons, Virgets and the Amisses.

The children in the neighborhood often put on little plays. In one performance, Moore danced in a costume with wings. She was the talk of the neighborhood when she donned her costume wings and attempted to fly off the garage facing the Ligons' house.

Victory Park with its swimming pool was Moore's playground. Her mother never let her swim alone. "I used to watch from the porch to see when somebody was in the pool," she said.

After the Bryans moved from the house in 1925, it was leased for commercial purposes. In 1944, the Warden's House, which by then was called "the old wreck" by local residents, was sold to the American Legion, Nicholson Post No. 38.

Architect A. Hays Town designed and supervised renovations to the building retaining much of the original materials including the wide plank flooring, fan-shaped louvers in half-circle windows and the original old brick.

The restored building became Draft Board headquarters. "An awful lot of people got their orders for World War II from this building," said architect John Desmond, present owner of the Warden's House.

The building was later leased to the Louisiana Board of Health for a center for Crippled Children's Services.

In 1966, preservationist Lois Bannor Called Desmond to warn him that the Warden's House was threatened with demolition. Desmond-Miremont-Burks Architects bid on the building and purchased it in October of 1966. "It suited our space needs and gave us a chance to save an old building," Desmond said.

The building is constructed of the finest materials. It has native brick, a slate roof and red heart cypress," Desmond said. "The detailing of the windows shows a sophisticated architectural hand. There is some rumor that a famous South Carolina architect had done this building."

Desmond says that most of the windows and doors, including the large front door, are original to the building. At the top of each window is a cypress lintel.

Desmond's architectural group attempted to preserve as much of the original structure as was practical. They exposed the brick and the red cypress beams in Desmond's present offices, located on the upper floor. They retained the original fireplaces.

The architects did remove the original stairs and designed a contemporary stair hall with modern steel stairs. Even though they added some bathtubs, they retained much of the building's original layout.

Desmond leases the first floor of the building to Hebert and Spencer, a law firm of A. Leon Hebert, Charles L. Spencer, Vincent Charles Cusimano and Mark W. Fry.

Connected to the building on the east side is the original dining room and kitchen wing with its front gallery and original kitchen chimney. Spencer uses the lower floor of the wing for his offices. Upstairs is a drafting room used by Desmond's son and daughter-in-law, architects J. Michael Desmond and Marsha Cuddick.

In January of 1975, the Warden's House was listed on the National Register of Historic Places by the Department of Interior.

Moore says that the Warden's House and the neighborhood bring back many memories. She retired in 1977 after serving under seven governors as Register of State Lands, a position she was first elected to in 1952. "She was a woman ahead of her time," said her niece Bryan Post.

Moore loves to drive her 1982 Oldsmobile through the downtown area. "The old house looks much different to me now," she said, "and much better."