



Exterior of the Wilson Bruce Evans Home in its current form. Preservation plans call for removing the 1927 porch addition and replacing it with something from the period of significance to align with the c. 1870 Italianate architectural features.

All photos courtesy of the Wilson Bruce Evans Home Historical Society



The Wilson Bruce Evans Home in Oberlin, Ohio

By Carol Lasser

Houses tell stories. The Wilson Bruce Evans Home Historical Society thought we knew the story of 33 East Vine Street, Oberlin. Built by African American abolitionist and Underground Railroad operative Wilson Bruce Evans after he moved his family from North Carolina in 1854, the house sheltered freedom seekers and antislavery activists in a town famous for its advocacy of emancipation and racial equality.

Evans graced his house with decorative flourishes—arched double doors, graceful newel posts on the stairway with its striking walnut banister and delicate detailed molding, tall parlor windows framed in oak that bring in light and a stylish transom window above an elegant front door, all demonstrating the carpentry skills he had learned from his older brother Henry. The two brothers had joined together, both bringing their immediate families, more distant kin, and friends in their journey to Oberlin to escape from their home state as conditions there deteriorated for free people of color. In Oberlin, the Evans brothers thrived. They opened a furniture making business, and they took their place in Oberlin's tumultuous resistance to slavery. In 1858, in defiance of the notorious Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, they—and their brother-in-law Lewis Sheridan Leary and their nephew John Copeland—participated in the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue, freeing John Price from bounty hunters who claimed they would return him to bondage. For their actions, the Evans brothers and 18 others spent 83 days in the Cuyahoga County Jail. In 1859, Evans' kin Leary and Copeland became martyrs for their parts in John Brown's uprising at Harpers Ferry.

Evans's house still stands in Oberlin, now overlooking a city park with monuments to the Oberlin-Wellington Rescuers and to the martyrs of Harpers Ferry. In 1976, the City of Oberlin first recognized the house's historical significance, and in 1980 it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1997, because of Evans's associations with the Underground Railroad, the abolitionist movement in Ohio, and particularly the work of African American activists, the Evans house became a National Historic Landmark, one of very few in the United States primarily associated with the Black experience.

The narratives of these successful nominations told a story curated by Dorothy Inborden Miller, the granddaughter of Wilson Bruce Evans. Born at 33 East Vine Street in 1898, she inherited the house in 1941 on the death of her uncle Cornelius. In her accounts, passed on to the official records, her grandfather built the two-story Italianate with remarkable details and character when he first arrived. Later, after the Civil War, he added the rear section, a kitchen wing with loft. In this narrative, Uncle Cornelius constructed a new porch for the house in 1927. When she took possession, Ms. Miller safeguarded the house, its contents including furniture made by the Evans brothers, and its stories until her death in 1996.

Then the house stood vacant. In 2021, its owners, all direct descendants of Wilson Bruce Evans, came together with history enthusiasts in the city to form the Wilson Bruce Evans Home Historical Society, which



Historic image of Wilson Bruce Evans, n.d. Evans was an active abolitionist and a talented carpenter who left his mark in Oberlin both at the house and in his fight for emancipation and equal rights.



now owns the structure. Dedicated to the rehabilitation of 33 East Vine Street as a museum and educational center telling the story of the Evans family and the long struggle for racial justice in Oberlin and beyond, the Society has made great strides, garnering support from local sources including the Nord Family Foundation, the Nordson Corporation Foundation, Oberlin's Bill Long Foundation, and the Ohio History Fund. Today, the house has a new synthetic cedar shake roof to recreate the original look; electricity, gas and water have been reconnected, and a safety system installed.

Last year, with the help of architects Sandra Madison and Zeinab Abdi of Robert P. Madison International, and historic preservation consultants Wendy Naylor and Diana Wellman, the Evans Home Historical Society successfully applied for a prestigious National Park Service "Save America's Treasures" award. The proposal envisioned: replacement of the badly deteriorating rear wing with a purpose-built room of the same profile and footprint, restoration of the distinctive two-story brick-Italianate front portion; and replacement of the current porch, dating to 1927, with a period-appropriate entry.

But the work of preservation never quite runs smoothly. As preparation for construction proceeded, Wendy and Diana remained troubled by disconnections between the narratives about the house and the actual physical structure, pointing out that the mid-1850s would have been very early to erect a hip-roofed brick Italianate. Carefully scrutinizing early Sanborn maps and an 1868 Birdseye View of Oberlin, they asked how to explain the difference between the house standing today and the shapes and positionings of the house on the lot in earlier times. These profiles did not seem to correspond.

Evans Home Historical Society continued the search for evidence. Trustee Gary Kornblith investigated the tax history of the house. Then Andrew Clark of RW Clark Construction volunteered to undertake some exploratory demolition in the rear wing. The discovery of its hand-hewn beams supporting the roof in the kitchen and timber limbs holding up the kitchen's loft area, along with split lath beneath some plaster walls suggested that it was a very old structure, constructed along the lines of a Western Reserve barn. On close inspection, the wall between the kitchen wing and the brick core revealed that the brick was attached onto an



existing structure. As the evidence piled up, the Society realized that, despite the received wisdom, the structure itself revealed that the rear wing was the original house in which the Evans family lived before the Civil War, with the brick Italianate added in the 1870s.

These findings enrich and complicate the story of the Evans House. Revised plans now call for rehabilitation rather than replacement of the rear wing and the addition of a small annex to provide ADA restroom and entrance facilities. The Society still intends to restore the sturdy, graceful brick two-story structure highlighting its superb features in window framing, doorways, and entry hall, including the stairway details and the giant curved oak doors, the tall parlor windows that bring in light even on the gloomiest Ohio day, and the careful carpentry around the transom window above the double entrance doors. Visitors will see how the brick Italianate testifies to Evans's sense of accomplishment and stability in the years after he returned from his service in the Union army. The house made a determined claim on his standing in Oberlin. Here, Wilson Bruce Evans and Sarah Jane Leary raised daughters, both of whom graduated from Oberlin

A) A look at the dining room with its lovely wide arch opening leading into a parlor. All of the arched openings on the first floor retain their large wood double doors.

B) A view of the front hall with elegant banister and Italianate style front door with curved transom.

C) This image is taken from the rear of the home. Once thought an addition, selective demolition has revealed this to be the original part of the home. Preservation plans call for this section of the house to be rehabilitated. A new welcome center for visitors will be constructed and a glass connector will link the center to this historic 1850s wing.

D) The Evans descendants gathered at the graves of the Inborden family members in 2021. Evans family members remain an active part of the Evans Home Historical Society today.

College—Julia in 1880 and Sarah Jane in 1890—as well as son Cornelius. Here, they boarded African American students attending Oberlin College, including Thomas Sewell Inborden, who married Sarah Jane in 1891 before the two became school founders in the South. Here, they welcomed their adult children and grandchildren, who inherited the house and its narratives, so that subsequent generations of Evans descendants can



continue to tell the story of the family and its commitment to emancipation, education, and racial justice.

The Evans Home Historical Society looks forward to the next chapter in the narrative of the house: opening it to the public, perhaps in late 2024. And it hopes to add an important epilogue in which rehabilitation of 33 East Vine Street becomes a model and an anchor for development of a Black historic neighborhood in Oberlin's southeast quadrant, a community rich with sites telling more stories about the African American experience in significant locations including: Martin Luther King, Jr. Park with its multiple monuments to Black achievement; the area's historically significant African American churches; the home of pioneering African American lawyer John Mercer Langston; the WPA-era Phillis Wheatley Center; and the prospective City of Oberlin Underground Railroad Center. Taken together, these locations can tell a fuller story to all, and become a Black historic tourist destination with narratives for visitors from near and far. ❖



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E) A hand-hewn beam found in the kitchen of the home; evidence that this wing was the original building on site.

F) The impressive timber rafter holding up the loft still looks very much like it did the day the tree was felled.

G) Members of the Wilson Bruce Evans Home Historical Society celebrate their prestigious Save America's Treasures grant with the installation of a sign in the front yard. Included in the group is a life-size poster of Wilson Bruce Evans, and Manager of the Evans Home Historical Society, Carol Lasser (far right).