

EVANS HHS NEWSLETTER

Bringing Back the Evans House



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Advised by the historic preservation consulting firm of Naylor Wellman, architects at Robert P. Madison International, Inc. have developed plans for the rehabilitation of the Wilson Bruce Evans House in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.

A Walk Through the Wilson Bruce Evans House

By Karen Schaefer

If old houses could speak, what would they tell us? The answer is, a lot.

Especially if the house in question is the home of master carpenter Wilson Bruce Evans, an Oberlin abolitionist and Underground Railroad operative in the years before the Civil War.

When retired Oberlin College professor Carol Lasser first volunteered to take on the job of managing the Wilson Bruce Evans Home Historical Society, she knew it was going to be a labor of love.

"This is a really amazing property. It was one of the very few homes that we know was actually built by an African American abolitionist," says Lasser.

What Lasser didn't know when she began seeking grants to rehabilitate the National Historic Landmark property was that the earliest part of the house was not the Italianate brick structure facing East Vine Street, but the wooden "kitchen wing" behind it.



View of the east side of the Evans house showing the wooden "kitchen wing" behind the brick structure facing the street. Photo by Karen Schaefer.

"We didn't understand at first that this back section was the original house. We were going to take it down and replace it with a purpose-built 21st-century structure with all of the amenities, which would have been a lot less expensive [laughs] than the kind of rehabilitation, literally from the ground up, that we will have to do to make this a visitors' space," says Lasser. That discovery has pushed back the date when the house will likely be open for tours as well as driven up the cost. "But we feel we need to be true to the space, we need to be true to the recreation of the home that Wilson Bruce Evans inhabited when he made some truly courageous abolitionist decisions," explains Lasser. "We want people to be able to stand here and have a sense of what it meant to make those choices."

It will now likely be the fall of 2024 before portions of the house will be open to the general public. So Lasser agreed to show us the house in its current empty, but history-telling state.



Front entrance of the Evans house with a portion of the 1927 porch ceiling removed to show evidence of an earlier porch roof and arched header over transom window. Photo courtesy of Naylor Wellman..

"What I am pointing to here is a hole that we have made in the 1927 ceiling of the porch, so that you can see the original backboard of an earlier porch, an 1887 porch, that we think was the first porch on this house," says Lasser.

She adds that the 1927 porch will be removed and replaced by a more historically appropriate porch, pending approval by the the National Park Service.

Once through the double front doors overhung by a transom window, the beauty of this brick portion of the house becomes apparent. Wide wooden floor boards, never painted, are flanked by a steep wooden staircase to the second floor with a meticulously carved bannister. In the entryway, you can look ahead towards the dining room or left, into the front parlor.



Staircase leading from front entryway to second floor.
Photo by Carol Lasser.

"One of the wonderful things about this house was that its owners were well aware that they were keepers of a historical property and they were excellent stewards of what comes to us today--a house first built in the 1850s and then expanded in the 1870s," says Lasser. "And it just has that sense of elegance."

Behind the front parlor, with its floor to high ceiling windows, is a second parlor with two sets of arched

double doors: one pair connects the front and back parlors; the other pair links the back parlor to the dining room, all made by hand by Wilson Bruce Evans. Original windows everywhere let in light.



Front parlor looking toward street on a sunny day.
Photo by Carol Lasser.

Lasser especially loves the light in the dining room.

"This room is one of my favorites because of its sense of airiness, and because, even on a very dark day, there is incredible ambient light, just really beautiful."



View of dining room with door to the front hall on the left and archway to back parlor on the right. Photo by Carol Lasser.

Behind the dining room, we enter the original wooden structure of the house, with much lower ceilings. Lasser points to an exposed ax-hewn beam,

carved from a single tree, that runs across the width of this part of the building.



Ax-hewn beam discovered in ceiling of the kitchen wing.
Photo by Carol Lasser.

"This was one the things that revealed that we were dealing here with the oldest portion of the house. You can see on this wall that there was an original piece of what is known as split lathe, lathe that would have been put in water to get split apart," says Lasser. "So we think that this room was the main room of the house in 1854-56."

In the very back of the older part of the house, Lasser points to more split lathe and two wooden beams that support a loft above, one of which still has its original bark. These features will likely not be visible once the house is restored.



Log support of loft over the rear of the kitchen wing.
Photo by Karen Schaefer.

As we return to the front entryway and the staircase to the upper floor, Lasser pauses before a small pile of old cut nails from the original roof and some bits and pieces of old furniture that were found in the loft, where Evans may have stored some of his carpentry work.

"These are some of the springs from a settee," says Lasser. She suspects it was a piece crafted by Wilson Bruce Evans himself in the Eastlake Victorian style.

"We have a lot more Eastlake style in storage and we think much of it was made by Wilson Bruce Evans."

Lasser says the furniture will be returned to the house in the final phase of its rehabilitation, along with restored family portraits, photographs and paintings.

Upstairs, past a beautiful hand-cut wooden frieze along the steep staircase, there are four bedrooms.

Lasser's favorite is a bedroom that faces onto Plum Creek and is adorned with beautiful built-in cupboards. Lasser speculates this might have been a room Wilson Bruce Evans rented to young Black men attending Oberlin College who had a hard time finding housing elsewhere.

"Oberlin, for all its much vaunted racial enlightenment, was not good about housing Black students in regular student housing," says Lasser. "African Americans were admitted but did not have access to everything."

Back on the front porch, Carol Lasser stops to explain why rehabilitating a mid 19th-century house is so time-consuming and costly. As one example, she points to the old brick exterior, from which the mortar is chipping.

"In order to get the masonry repairs done, we need to get a mortar analysis so we can match our mortar in color, texture and composition," says Lasser. "Once the mortar analysis is completed, we will need a professional assessment of the scope of the work required."

"After that," she continues, "we need to have our plans approved by the National Park Service. Once the plans are approved, we will send out requests for proposals to multiple vendors. Then, after a period of time, we can make our choice of masons. Finally we can begin work."



The masonry requires repair, a complicated process.
Photo by Karen Schaefer.

In the meantime, the costs are mounting. Having already raised more than \$600,000, Lasser now estimates that total rehabilitation could cost as much as \$1.4 million.

"So we hope to continue to raise funds as we move along," Lasser says. "I'll continue to write grant applications, I'll continue to welcome contributions large and small, member involvement, member solicitation. Please, we want everybody's help."

Save the Date

The Wilson Bruce Evans Home Historical Society will hold its Third Annual Meeting on Saturday, Sept. 9, 2023, beginning at 11 am in Martin Luther King, Jr. Park in Oberlin.

A Conversation with Doris Hughes-Moore, Great-Great-Granddaughter of Wilson Bruce Evans and Sarah Jane Leary Evans

By Karen Schaefer

Doris Hughes-Moore comes from a long line of remarkable people.

Her parents, grandparents and great-grandparents were educators, academic administrators, and education missionaries who set up schools to educate freed African Americans in the years following the Civil War. Hughes-Moore is herself a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine and Director of Veterinary Services at Howard University.

But perhaps her most famous ancestor was a free-born carpenter from North Carolina who came with his family to Oberlin in 1854.

"I'm a great-great granddaughter of Wilson Bruce Evans and Sarah Jane Leary Evans," says Dr. Hughes-Moore, with evident pride.

Wilson Bruce Evans was an African American abolitionist and an Underground Railroad operative. In 1858 Wilson, along with his brother Henry and many other Black and white residents from Oberlin and vicinity, set out to rescue the freedom seeker John Price from slave catchers who were preparing to send Price back to slavery in the South. The Rescuers succeeded, but 37 of the them were subsequently indicted under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Most were jailed awaiting trial, the Evans brothers among them. Ultimately, two Rescuers were tried and convicted. Charges against the others, including Wilson Bruce Evans, were dropped.

Doris Hughes-Moore grew up hearing that story. "Oberlin was a mecca," she says. "It was an extraordinary place in his life[time]. And if you think about the Oberlin-

Wellington Rescue to save John Price, it was amazing that so many people gathered together, an interracial group of majority whites and some Blacks as well, who put their lives and livelihoods on the line to save fugitive slaves."

Dr. Hughes-Moore also grew up hearing family stories about Wilson Bruce Evans hiding freedom seekers in the basement of his home at 33 Vine Street.

"There are some residents in Oberlin who are saying that there was a tunnel," she says. "So now there is going to be an archaeological-style assessment on the property that will determine if there actually was a tunnel."

The Wilson Bruce Evans Home Historical Society will be conducting a geophysical survey of the property this summer. And while that may not turn up a tunnel, it will likely reveal more about the footprint of the house that Dr. Hughes-Moore and her family have long pledged to protect. She says she and her mother and siblings used to spend time in the Wilson Bruce Evans House every summer during the years her aunt, Dorothy Inborden Miller, was the owner.

"And now that I think back on it, she was grooming us for this preservation project," says Dr. Hughes-Moore. "Because she had embraced it and did her best to maintain the house and ensure that it would survive into the future."

And survive it has. But Dr. Hughes-Moore says it was touch and go in the years after Aunt Dorothy died, followed by the death of her own mother, which made her matriarch of the family legacy. She and her children and nieces and nephews managed to pay property taxes and repaint the house. But then, things went awry.

"The pipes burst, and we got that repaired," says Dr. Hughes-Moore. "And then we had another situation where another of the pipes burst and we got a bill in the mail for \$10,000. So we put together the money to deal with that."

Dr. Hughes-Moore says that she and her relatives were elated to hear from Oberlin residents interested turning



Dr. Doris Hughes-Moore sitting for an interview with Karen Schaefer on April 13, 2023. Photo by Karen Schaefer.

the house into a local African American history center. Discussions began over Zoom in the fall of 2020. The family transferred ownership of the building and land at 33 East Vine Street to the newly formed Wilson Bruce Evans Home Historical Society in early 2021.

"You know, you learn from history, you don't learn if it doesn't exist. So we were so grateful," says Dr. Hughes-Moore.

She is interested in much more than just saving her ancestors' house. She wants the 167-year-old homestead to become a place for learning about past struggles for Black rights and social justice. "Those who are trying to ban history, that's my biggest concern," says Dr. Hughes-Moore. "People are trying to erase history and you can't erase history. You learn from it. You can't do that if you hide it and pretend it never happened."

Doris Hughes-Moore, who serves as president of the Wilson Bruce Evans Home Historical Society, sees the house as a means to educate future generations. "We have always said that Oberlin was like dropping a pebble in a pond and then having it radiate out," she says. "That's maybe the challenge, to find ways to reach children so they will learn to be fair and equal minded."