

Bunn-Sankey House restored by law firm

By **AMANDA REAVY**

Posted Apr 27, 2010 at 12:01 AM

Updated Apr 27, 2010 at 8:41 PM

One hundred and twenty-five years had taken its toll on the Bunn-Sankey House when Springfield attorney Bruce Beeman purchased the property two years ago.

One hundred and twenty-five years had taken their toll on the Bunn-Sankey House when Springfield attorney Bruce Beeman purchased the property two years ago.

The five-bedroom structure — once one of the stately mansions in Springfield's posh Aristocracy Hill neighborhood — was structurally sound, but its wooden siding was rotting.

The porch with Ionic columns needed to be reinforced, and the roof had started to leak in spots.

"The house hadn't been heated in a few years, and the radiator exploded and did some damage," Beeman recalled. "It needed all new plumbing, electrical, HVAC."

After a year and a half of renovation, the house at 1001 S. Sixth St. is home to Beeman's law firm, Wolter, Beeman & Lynch.

A sunroom and an upstairs screened-in "sleeping room" where former residents slept during the hot summer months are now conference rooms. The bedrooms and housekeeper's quarters were stripped of wall coverings and old carpet and are now offices. The dining room and living room also are now used for office space.

But the original character of the house has been preserved. Light fixtures were replaced with 1880s reproduction chandeliers, the grand oak staircase was refurbished, wooden ceilings were uncovered and stained, and dormers that had been added on were removed.

And just off the foyer sits a desk from Abraham Lincoln's era.

"There's only one other desk like this I know of in Springfield, and it's at the Old State Capitol," Beeman, a history buff, said proudly.

Paid \$5,800 for it

Beeman bought the Bunn-Sankey House, less than a block north of Springfield Clinic, in March 2008 from the Heritage Foundation of Downtown Springfield Inc. The foundation accepts donated buildings that cannot be sold and resells them on the condition they will be renovated.

John W. Bunn, whose family founded Bunn Capitol Co., Bunn-O-Matic Corp. and the original Marine Bank of Springfield, built the Bunn-Sankey home in 1883.

The house had been vacant for at least two years before former owner Gene Gerber donated it to the Heritage Foundation.

Beeman paid \$5,800, which was the amount owed for taxes.

“A lot of people thought I was totally crazy, and some still do,” he said with a laugh.

Beeman has experience restoring other historic buildings, including his law firm’s previous office in an 1860s-era home on Seventh Street across from the Lincoln Home site.

“You run into things you don’t anticipate in every (restoration). I’m not able to do any work myself. I have no skill or time, but luckily, I know people that do,” he said.

He has never disclosed how much money he has invested in the Bunn-Sankey project but emphasizes, “Not one penny of taxpayer dollars went into the renovation of this house.”

“My office is here. This is where we do our business. So that’s (the cost is) not as big a consideration as if I was building a house, because this is the income generation,” Beeman added.

His team for the Bunn-Sankey House included restoration contractor Tom Bundy and architect Bruce Ferry.

“It was a big undertaking and labor intensive. It was just kind of re-creating and duplicating elements,” said Bundy, who has completed 13 restoration projects involving homes on the National Register of Historic Places.

Original elements restored

One of the biggest issues when they started was the exterior.

“The first thing you always want to do is to restore what you can. That’s always the first objective, but the wood on the outside was just gone. It was rotten, so we tore it off and then replaced it with more modern products,” Beeman said.

The new exterior siding is fiber cement board, a recycled product that doesn’t rot, he said. The trim on the outside of the house is also made out of recycled materials.

On the interior, “we ended up cleaning all the walls and repairing all the cracks and skim-coating with plaster over the entire surfaces of the interior. That’s part of that whole facelift thing,” he said.

They also discovered that, at some point, a false wall had gone up at the top of the home’s oak staircase. The wall was removed, and Bundy said they found the spindles for the original railing at the top of the staircase in the attic. Bundy also was able to re-create one of the railing’s posts that had been removed.

“It’s just bringing back the original elements,” he said.

Bundy said it’s hard to say how much longer the home could have lasted if Beeman hadn’t bought it.

“The roof was starting to leak in spots, and water starts taking its toll. It’s amazing how much (damage) water can do,” he said.

Beeman and his partners were able to move into the house last September.

Some minor work remains to be done, such as repairing a tilting back fence, but overall the restoration is complete.

Area stabilized

Beeman credits Springfield Clinic's major expansion on Sixth Street with providing incentive to restore the home.

"This house might have fallen in disrepair if it hadn't been for Springfield Clinic putting a lot of money and presence in this neighborhood, including security, which really has helped the neighborhood," Beeman said.

"It's a shame we had to lose a house or two," he said, "but if they hadn't expanded and done what they did, I think the neighborhood might have continued to go down."

He also says the fact that his son, Brent Beeman, works at the law firm made him want to create a beautiful office in a historic structure that will last.

"They'll carry me out of here," he said.

Carolyn Oxtoby, chair of the Heritage Foundation, said she's pleased with the result.

"I was absolutely flabbergasted with pleasure with what he's done with it," Oxtoby said. "It's just gorgeous and just a very thorough renovation. It was badly needed."

Beeman agrees.

"This needed to be done. The Bunn family, after Abraham Lincoln's family, you'd be hard-pressed to think of another family that has the influence on Springfield they've had," he said.

He also said he thinks more people are starting to appreciate the architectural jewels in the old Aristocracy Hill area.

"The houses from Aristocracy Hill that remain, I don't think they're going anywhere," Beeman said, pointing to others nearby that are owned by attorneys or house other professional offices.

"I'd be surprised if any more of the mansions of Aristocracy Hill are lost, because I think the neighborhood's been stabilized somewhat by the clinic and the people that have bought them now."

For now, Beeman is satisfied with the Bunn-Sankey project.

When asked if any other restoration projects are in the immediate future, he laughs and says, "My wife tells me 'no.'"

Amanda Reavy can be reached at 788-1525.

Bunn-Sankey House has 125 years of history

The Bunn-Sankey House was built in 1883 for Sarah Bunn Jones and her husband, attorney Frank Hatch Jones.

Sarah was the third of six children of Springfield industrial pioneer Jacob Bunn and his wife, Ada Richardson Bunn. The house is the only surviving home in Springfield from the first-generation Bunn family.

The family is possibly best known for the Bunn commercial and residential coffee brewers. Other Bunn family businesses have included the J. Bunn Grocery Co., Springfield Marine Bank, Illinois Watch Co., Springfield Iron Co. and Sangamo Electric Co.

In 1892, Sarah left the home to care for her widowed and ailing father. The home then became the residence of her brother and fifth Bunn child, George W. Bunn.

George Bunn served as president and chairman of Springfield Marine Bank, president of Bunn Capital Grocery and as a member of the board of directors of the Illinois Watch Co.

In 1948, John Edward Sankey and his wife, Kate Chatterton Sankey, bought the home. Kate Chatterton Sankey was the granddaughter of George Chatterton, who owned Chatterton's jewelry store and sold Abraham Lincoln his engagement ring for Mary Todd Lincoln.

John Sankey owned and operated Sankey Brothers road construction business for many years. He lived in the house until his death in 1982.

Since then, the house has been a restaurant, a bed-and-breakfast and a gift shop.

In 1996, the house was placed on a city list of historic landmarks.

Source: A history of the home compiled for the Wolter, Beeman & Lynch website and State Journal-Register archives

Foundation looks for more donations

The Heritage Foundation, a historic preservation group, is seeking more buildings to save.

"We are looking for more donations. We haven't taken any more since the Bunn-Sankey (House)," said Carolyn Oxtoby, the not-for-profit organization's chair.

The foundation was formed in 1999 as an arm of Downtown Springfield Inc. to encourage property owners to donate homes or buildings that might otherwise be abandoned or demolished.

In return for the donations, the owners get federal tax write-offs.

In addition to the Bunn-Sankey House restoration, the foundation played a key role in preserving the former Maisenbacher House.

Once the foundation accepts a building, Oxtoby said, the group seeks a new owner who wants to invest in the site and won't turn around and sell the property.

"We sell it to the person who not makes the highest bid, but the person we feel who has not only the financial ability to do it but will do the renovation," she said.

"Our focus is downtown, but we've redone quite a few buildings in the Lincoln's Home area right next to downtown," Oxtoby added. "We don't do this all over town. It's in a focused area. But that's not to say we wouldn't listen if somebody has a house or building in another area. I think we could be talked into it."

Anyone interested in donating a property can call Oxtoby at 523-3868.

— Amanda Reavy