

Hampton-Pinckney's historic homes given new lease on life

Posted Sunday, April 25, 2004 - 12:05 am

Greenville Online

Like a tide, the life they'd known receded. Neighbors moved away or died.

Children went off to college or jobs, and never came back, except to visit.

By the early 1970s, only a dwindling number of elderly original residents hung on, aging members of families who bought on Pinckney Street and Hampton Avenue when the big old houses were new.

People like Miss Helen Ragsdale, born in 1893. Her family was the first to live in the house on Hampton Avenue that her father bought in 1907.

In the decades after World War II, people forgot about city neighborhoods. They moved to the suburbs. Many of the old houses along Pinckney and Hampton, built with chimneys and high ceilings in the late 1800s and early 1900s, were divided into apartments or rooms to rent. The owners lived elsewhere.

Hampton-Pinckney became a neighborhood of transients and elderly widows.

"Some of the tenants might put a car up on blocks in the driveway or park in the front yard," Jack Grady remembers. "If they kicked a rail out of the front porch banister, it stayed out."

Certain pockets of the area became "somewhat a haven for winos."

It wasn't a neighborhood new families moved into.

Grady's mother was an owner of the Briggs House on Hampton Avenue. As other owners had done, "we had turned it into apartments," he says.

Compounding the district's uncertain future, he remembers, was a transportation plan showing "the equivalent of I-85" right through its heart.

In fact, according to Grady, "the equivalent of I-85" was supposed to go directly through 326 Hampton Avenue, the 15-room Prairie-style house that Henry Briggs built about 1905.

Briggs married a granddaughter of Vardry McBee (pronounced MAC-bee), "the father of Greenville." Briggs was a mayor of the town.

McBee is Grady's great-great-great-grandfather.

Maybe to some back in the 1970s, a halfway house seemed a reasonable last use for the Briggs place.

But Miss Ragsdale and her widowed neighbors were alarmed. They pled with City Council.

In a hall outside the public meeting, Grady heard a man involved in the halfway-house project dismissively inform one of the widows there was nothing she could do to stop it.

"The next morning, I was at the bank when it opened," he recalls. He went to the trust officer. "I said the house is not for sale to them."

Grady wrote out a check as a binder to buy it himself. Then he hurried off to borrow the money to cover his check.

"Two or three days later, I got up the nerve to tell my wife what I'd done." They'd only been married about a year. When he took her by to see the house and its overgrown yard, "she cried."

But soon she fell in love with it.

They fixed it up. And one by one, Grady bought, cleaned up and resold other houses nearby. He was trying to restore the neighborhood.

"I didn't do it alone," he says. Others were working on that same goal.

The Hampton-Pinckney Property Owners Association was formed in 1973.

Two years later, the Hampton-Pinckney Historic District was included in the National Register of Historic Places.

Miss Ragsdale lived to see her neighborhood come back. She died in 1999 at the age of 105, having lived in her house 92 years.

See for yourself how things have turned out. Six Hampton-Pinckney homes are open from 2 to 5 p.m. today.

Tickets for the tour are \$35 and can be bought at 308 Hampton Ave. The money goes to the History Museum of Upcountry South Carolina.

Jeanne Brooks' column appears on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday. She can be reached at (864) 298-4261.