

Going back to its 1845 roots

Athens couple restoring historic home to its former glory

By Bayne Hughes

The Decatur Daily



Gary Cosby Jr./Decatur Daily

A historic home on Jefferson Street in Athens is getting a facelift to return it to its original historical splendor. Katie Harbin looks to her dad, Wayne Kuykendall, who is helping her and husband, Will Harbin, with the restoration.

ATHENS — Will and Katie Harbin are taking the historic Craig-Hine-Rosenau home on Jefferson Street and making it old again.

The Greek Revival-style house was built in 1845, but updated to Victorian style in 1909.

With the help of her father Wayne Kuykendall, the Harbins are restoring the house to its original style — or at least as close as they can get it — to accommodate their growing family. They are working from a photo of original house, but have no view of its back.



“My mindset is I want it to be historically correct,” Will Harbin said. “I know 1909 is old, but a house built in 1845 is very rare.”

Limestone County Historical Commission member Chris Paysinger said he thinks it’s “fantastic” that the Harbins are willing to take on the restoration. Last year, he restored the nearly 200-year-old Mason-Looney House on Washington Street.

Garlan Gudger Jr., owner of Southern Accents Architectural Antiques in Cullman, said it’s become popular to restore old homes to their original glory. He said most want to mix the old with the modern.

“The new wood is fast growth,” Gudger said. “The old heart pine, oak, walnut and cherry are woods that have been weathered and are more hardy.”

He said it’s unusual for someone to prefer Greek Revival over the popular Victorian style of the late 1800s and early 1900s.

“What they’re doing is pretty extreme,” Gudger said.

The couple bought the house for \$191,000 at auction in August. Katie Harbin learned a month later that she was pregnant. A son is due in June.

It was a quite a shock, especially since the couple plan to live in the house during restoration.

“It’s a little stressful,” Katie Harbin said. “But my mom is proof that you can raise a family in the midst of a renovation.”

Katie Harbin, a Piney Chapel Elementary School teacher, grew up in the 1830s Judge William Walker home on Clinton Street that Kuykendall renovated. He also renovated the Cottonhill house, built in 1824, in Tanner.

Paysinger, a Sparkman High School teacher, said the Harbins will need lots of patience. His family lived in an upstairs bedroom for three months during his project.

“My daughter was 5, and she thought it was a great adventure,” Paysinger said. “But it’s so difficult just juggling everyday life. You have to attend parties, ballgames and birthdays while finding the time to paint trim and refinish floors.”

Will Harbin is handling most of the work, with help from friends on carpentry, electricity and plumbing. He is doing renovations when he’s not working as an instrument mechanic at Brown’s Ferry Nuclear Plant.

“McLean (the baby) will be 18 and able to help on the house before it’s finished,” Kuykendall joked.

They’re starting with the removal of a back section of the house. Then-owner Judge D.L. Rosenau Jr. replaced an original section in 1909. They are planning to replace it with an addition they believe more closely fits the original era.

Rosenau also removed two chimneys, changed the stairs and covered the pine floors. They also plan to return the front porch to its original condition.

“The good bones are there,” Will Harbin said. “We just have to uncover them.”

Gudger bought several items from the Harbins, including a mantle, windows and wood flooring.

“That’s a great way for them to make a little money and go green by recycling items for reuse instead of throwing them into a landfill,” Gudger said.

The Harbins are doing their own reuse from other early 1800s era homes. They got the pine floor out of the Murphy Home, a frame house built in the early 1800s. The house was on the Nucor property in Decatur before it was destroyed by an April 27, 2011, tornado.

They bought windows from a Murfreesboro, Tenn., home built in 1812.

The Harbins aren't going totally rustic. Katie Harbin insists on modern amenities like stainless steel appliances, a walk-in closet, kitchen cabinets and an indoor bathroom.

She said her husband wanted to use antique furniture instead of cabinets in the kitchen.

"I'm all for restoring the house, but it's got to be livable," Katie Harbin said.

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