

## Berrien Street House

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Every house has a story and a life; it has seen our best times and worse and will literally help weather the storm. Preserving these stories and telling them preserves a piece of the past which will enrich the future. Houses have become streamlined, suburbs have become normal and houses have almost completely lost all of their character. This makes preserving older homes even more important. They still carry the story of our lives but the structure itself has less of a story. Homes used to be passed down for generations; they were modified as the family's needs changed. They began to literally tell a story of time passing, of new technology and of people. Even the most simple of houses, such as slave quarters, tell this story. They started out as a simple, single room style house and eventually started to reflect the styles of the time.

The home located at 311 Berrien Street, in Savannah Georgia is one of these homes. It has seen a changing world, survived through generations of families and is still standing. It was built in 1852 as a slave house on one of the many plantations located in the city.<sup>1</sup> Over time the land was slit up and the city eventually grew up around it. The house now stands out and stands proud among a block of the city with modern town homes engulfing the whole block. The home still sits in much of its original state, though it went through a major restoration

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<sup>1</sup> Jessica Porton, (Home Resident), interview by Victoria Bischof, November 01, 2012.

and upgrade in 2005.<sup>2</sup> When the Smith family bought the home, it was in fairly bad shape and needed an almost complete overhaul. The Smiths decided to turn the house into a small B&B which was very successful until they were forced to sell and move across the country. The current owners, the Porter Family, bought the home in 2011 for their daughter to reside in during her time at SCAD.

The house as it stands today has four bedrooms and two bathrooms. In studying the home it is hard to tell what the original layout would have been. It clearly has most of its original materials, but might have been reconfigured over the years. The home style is a central passage entry, with a one and a half pile plan. There is a bedroom on either side of the stair in the entryway. The entryway still contains the original hard wood flooring and the stairs appear to be original as well. They are about two feet wide and well worn, though they are painted black now. The siding on the outside was partially redone during the renovations so it is hard to tell if the second floor was original to the building. Picture evidence provided from the renovations show evidence that it has always been a two story structure; though it could have been added in a previous renovation. (figure two) The back of the house has a narrow kitchen and a bathroom. The upper floor just has two bedrooms and a bathroom connecting

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<sup>2</sup> Jessica Porton, (Home Resident), interview by Victoria Bischof, November 01, 2012.

them. The main bedroom has exposed beams from the original construction and upper attic over half the larger room that is accessed with a collapsible ladder.

(figure nine) This feature appears to have been added during the renovations.

(figure twelve) There is still an old beam original to the house, which shows that there most probably was a full attic at some point, that has been lost to history.

The pictures of the renovations process, provided by the current owners, offer the most insight to the way the house used to look. The exterior siding appears to be the same on most of the sides, though it has been clearly replaced on the front and back of the house. The sides seem to still have the same siding, though the age is unclear. All of the back windows are new to the house, though they are still in the same place. There is a chimney in the kitchen that was kept during the renovation and was closed up, now is a beautiful accent piece for the kitchen. The boards that make up the walls are still original to the house and made up of lumber almost a foot wide. It has been plastered over in a few of the rooms and the others have vertical siding that was added to cover up the boards. Another noticeable addition is the attic in the upper bedroom. There is a picture of the upper bedroom which shows clearly that the attic was added with the renovations, though the exposed beams, original to the home, and maybe an original attic, are clearly evident.

Slave homes were usually built in a very simple fashion, and usually single pen with maybe a loft. They were built in clusters often creating a small community on the plantation for the slaves to reside in, some of the bigger plantations even allowed small markets and gardens in these areas. This home was built as a slave quarter, though it is in a more upscale style. Not much documentation was done on this style of home so there is not much evidence to show if the home was originally built in a simpler style. Observations of the home seem to show that the house you see today is just an updated version of what was built in the original plan. There is no evidence of walls that no longer exist though it would make sense that the upper floor would have been open, not split up into two separate rooms as it looks today.

The home is built in a central passageway style.<sup>3</sup> This style originated in the mid to late 1700's. The two homes surrounding the entry way were generally the formal parlor and the dining room, with the private family sleeping areas in the upper floor.<sup>4</sup> The rooms would be seemingly identical except one would be more decorated than the other, and that would be the parlor, the show room of the house. This style of building was very popular in the 1850's when this home was built. It was eventually adapted into other, more high style forms that

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<sup>3</sup> Gabrielle M. Lanier, and Bernard L. Herman, *Everyday architecture of the Mid-Atlantic: Looking at Buildings and Landscapes*, (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). 16

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 17

became popular, such as the Georgian and Italianate style. Since this style was popular at the time in that the home was built, it makes sense that even a simple home tried to emulate a more high style home. This style of home has developed over the years from a simpler style; Originally from a single pen structure and then a hall parlor style. 311 Berrien Street is a prime example of a vernacular building. It was built for a simple purpose, to shelter a people, who at the time were considered a second class people. Even with this, the home had style, and a life. The residents made it their own and had a life there.

Every house has a story, a life; whether through the building itself or through the people who lived there. This home is a beautiful example of this. It was a single family home, which was turned into a profitable business and has now been turned back into a home. It has changed over time but still retains its defining characteristics. Home style has evolved over time as technology changes and as fashions of building advance and merge. Homes today tend to try to emulate the styles before. This ideal has never changed, though the attitude towards the home has. They have become streamlined, suburbia has take over our day to day lives, and although homes still try to have style they don't contain the same characteristics and life that a home that has been in a family for generations has.

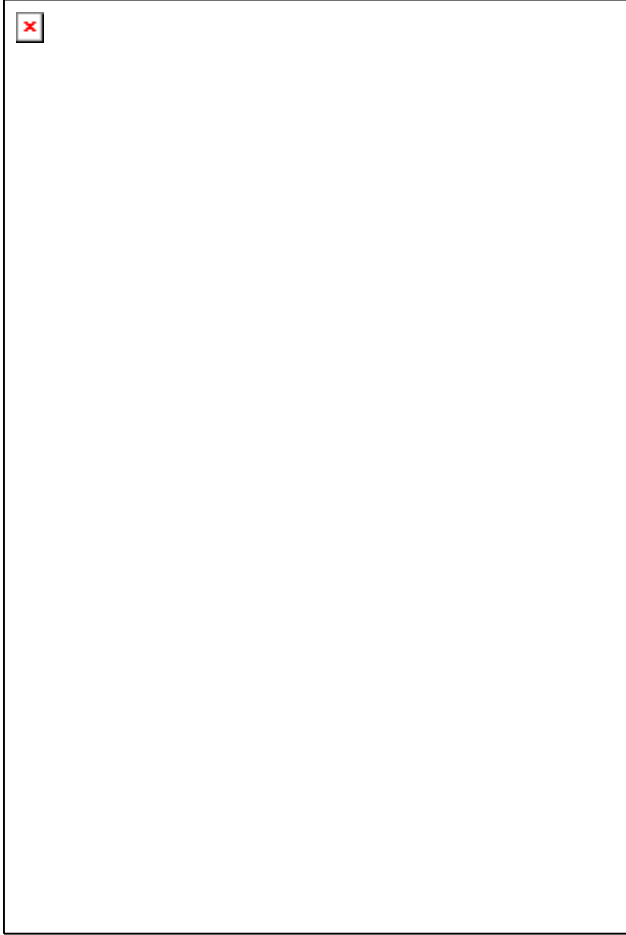


Figure One  
The house as it stands today



Figure Two  
The home in 2005 before the renovation

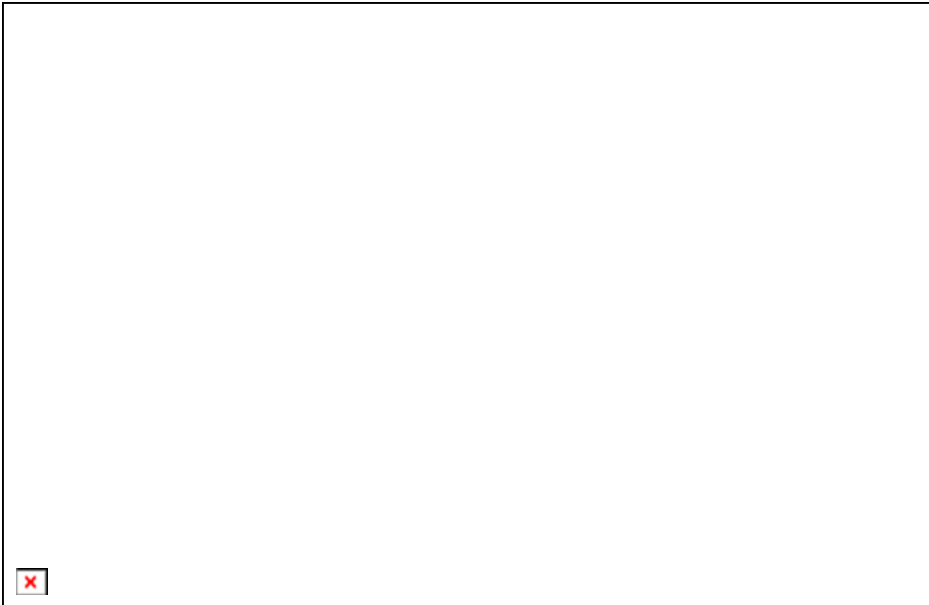


Figure Three  
The home in 2005 before the renovation



Figure Four



The home in 2005 before the renovation



Figure Five  
The home in 2005 before the renovation



Figure Six  
The home in 2005 before the renovation

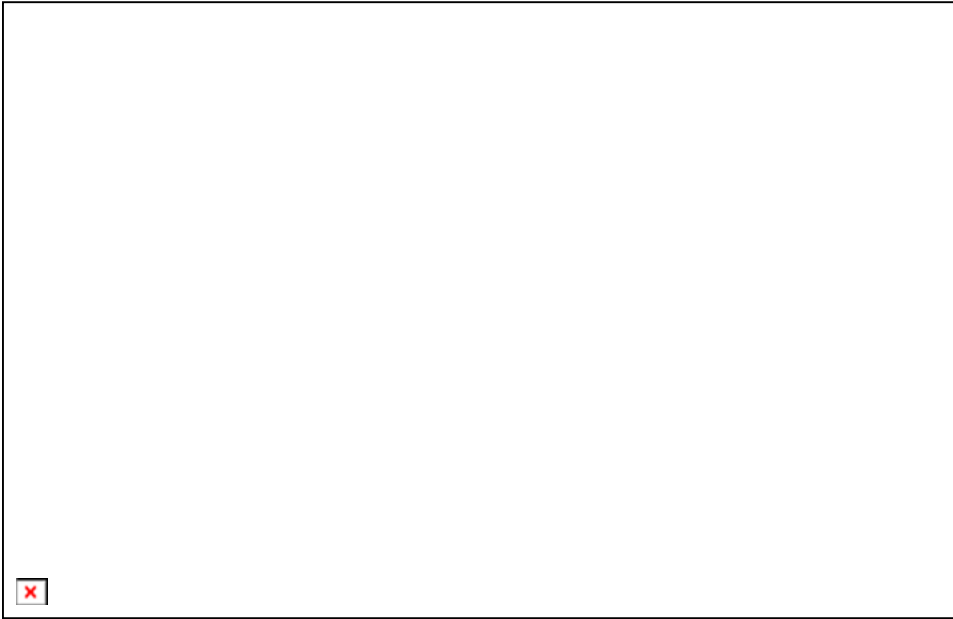


Figure Seven  
The home in 2005 before the renovation

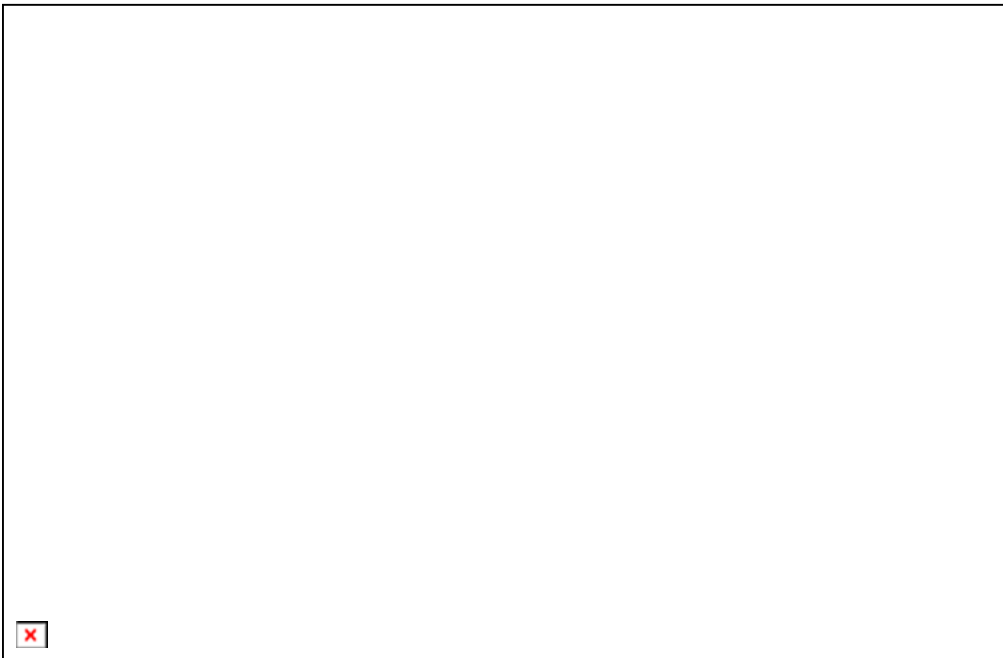


Figure Eight  
The home in 2005 before the renovation

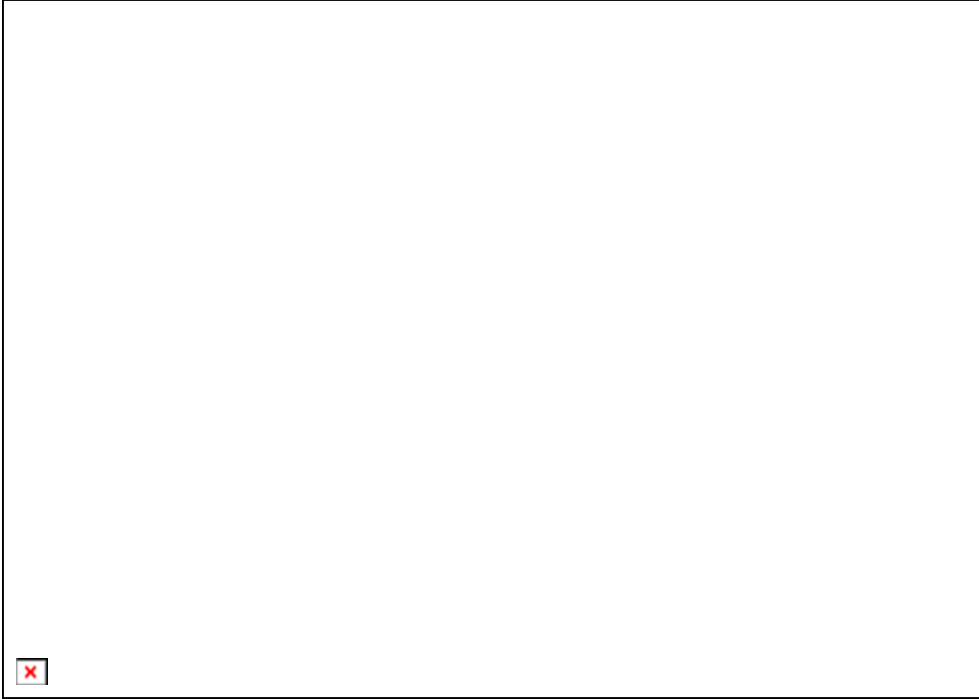


Figure Nine  
The home in 2005 before the renovation, the large upstairs bedroom

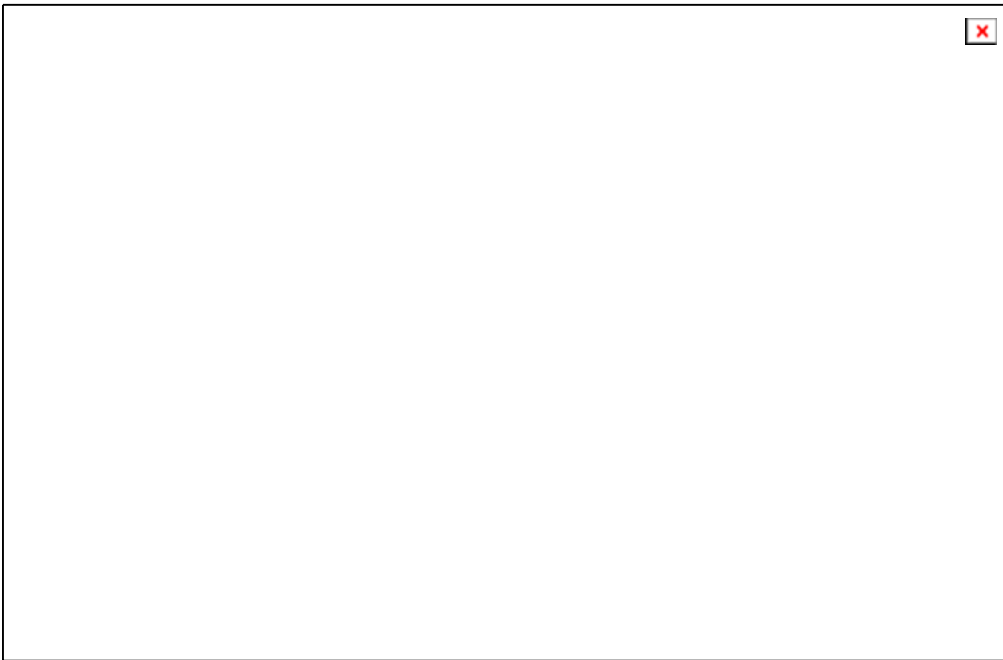


Figure Ten  
The home as it stands today



Figure Eleven  
The home as it stands today



Figure Twelve  
The home as it stands today, the large bedroom with the half attic space shown

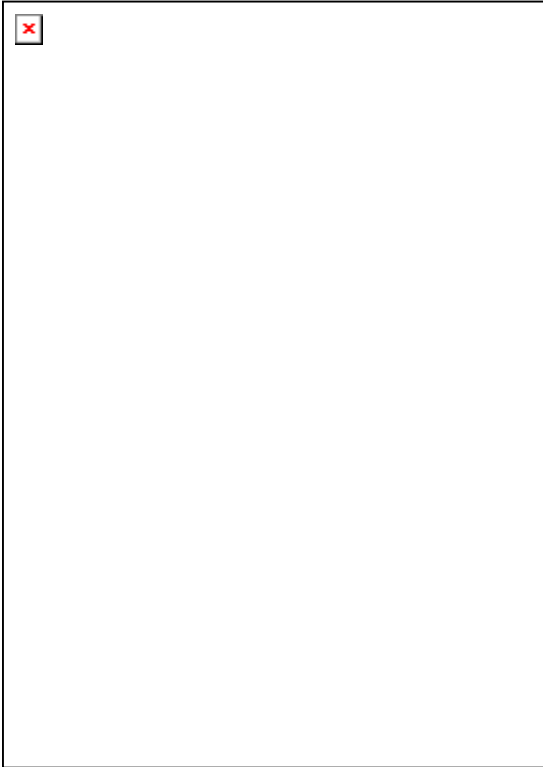


Figure Thirteen  
The home as it stands today

#### Works Cited

Lanier, Gabrielle M., and Bernard L. Herman. *Everyday architecture of the Mid-*

*Atlantic: Looking at Buildings and Landscapes.* Baltimore and London:  
The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

Porton, Jessica. by Victoria Bischof. November 01, 2012.