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**The I-House at
1311 Clay Street
Bowling Green, Kentucky**

**Joseph Metzger
Amy Y. Taylor
December 4, 1990**

**For Dr. Michael Ann Williams
Vernacular Architecture**

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INTRODUCTION

When driving down Clay Street in Bowling Green, Kentucky, it is difficult not to notice the structure at 1311. There sandwiched among rows of one-story suburban houses is a large two-story century old house readily identifiable to students of vernacular architecture as an I-House.

Upon first viewing the house, we were immediately struck by its physical condition. The house stands in defiance of the mistreatment leveled upon it by humans and natural forces. During preliminary research we found the house significant because of its relationship with the Bowling Green community and its historical reflection of cultural influences which determined its structure, construction, and uses. This paper addresses these relationships and cultural reflections by presenting the historical and structural significance of this I-House.

CULTURAL DIFFUSION OF THE I-HOUSE

The term I-House refers to a two story center passage single pile house with the rooms on either side of the center passage being of near or equal size. The symmetry of the floor plan and the facade is indicative of the Georgian mind-set which influenced housing trends in the United States as early as the mid 18th century (St. George).

The word I-House was coined by Fred Kniffen in 1936 during his travels in the midwest. Kniffen chose the term I-House after observing that the builders of this house type in Louisiana came from Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa (Kniffen, 553). The I-House of the Mid-Atlantic source area followed the routes of cultural diffusion into the Upland South (Figures 1.1 and 1.2). I-Houses with interior end chimneys show the direct influence of the Mid-Atlantic region on the I-House forms in the Upland South. As taken from Southern, the I-House has:

...been identified as the dominant folk house type throughout the Upland South from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century, and as the symbol of economic achievement and social respectability in a democratic agrarian society. Its popularity has been attributed to the fact that it presents to the viewer on the road the largest, most impressive facade possible for a house of only four rooms. In addition, its good ventilation properties make it especially suitable for a hot, humid Southern climate (Southern).

In these ways, the I-House offered a distinguishing set of social and environmental functions to the more well to do farmer in the Upland South. Additionally, the floor plan may have

provided a social lock by separating the living spaces from the front entrance by virtue of the center passage (Herman).

I-Houses in rural areas often indicate that the owners were agrarian based but had city or town connections. The construction of this particular I-House on farm land near the edge of Bowling Green in the Civil War period is in accordance with these architectural and social constructs. It was during this period that many I-Houses were built in the Warren County area. In fact, the oldest surviving building in Bowling Green, the Mariah Moore house, was originally built with an I-House plan (Beard, 17).

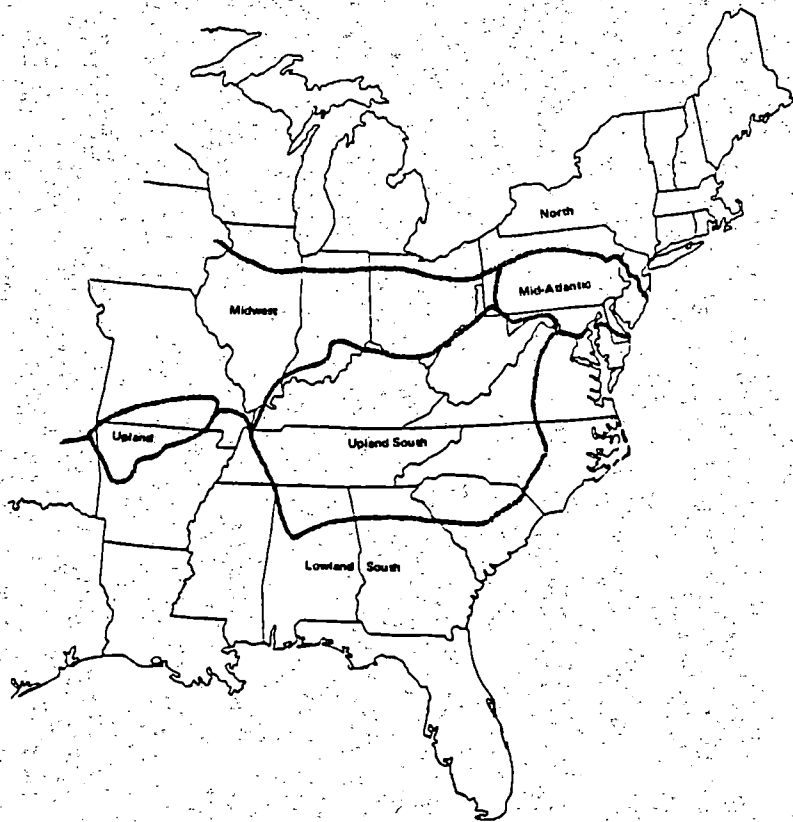


Fig. 1.1 from Glassie, pp.39.

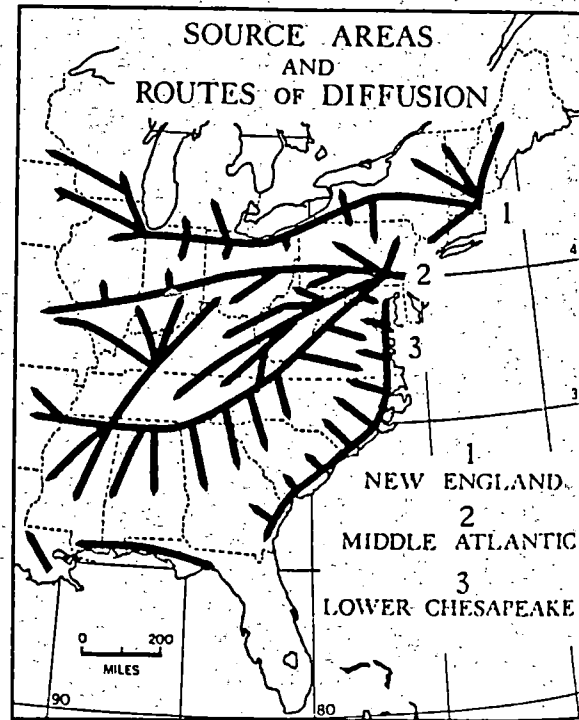


Fig. 1.2 from Kniffen, pp. 13.

THE HISTORY OF OWNERSHIP

The Clay Street I-House has a fascinating, though greatly puzzling history. Records of the construction of the house do not exist. What does exist is a set of deeds and wills painting a picture of the historical change of ownership of the house. The house changed from a singular farmhouse on the outskirts of Civil War period Bowling Green to a neighborhood house as Bowling Green expanded around it.

We have reason to believe that the I-House was built during the Civil War period. Although an exact date of construction could not be found, several clues have been helpful in determining a time frame for construction. In 1855, the land on which the I-House is now situated was sold by William Houseley to Harmon B. Elrod. Nowhere in the deed is there a mention of any form of structure (Appendix A, DB 26, 650). In 1859 Elrod bought more land from John Grider (Appendix A, DB 29, 45). Elrod died in 1879. His will left his "entire estate of every kind and description" to his wife, Jane Elrod (Appendix A, WB 4, 267). Although no buildings are explicitly mentioned, the implication is strong that by 1879 the Elrods were living on the land they bought in 1855 and 1859. In 1880 when Jane Elrod died, James Mitchell, as executor to Harmon Elrod's will, sold the land to Mary J. Jenkins. The land is referred to as a "farm and its appurtenances." (Appendix A, DB 52, 10). This leaves a twenty year period in which the building of the house probably occurred.

We have uncovered evidence to possibly suggest that the house was constructed before the Civil War. This cannot be proven. In an interview conducted with Marian Frances Oakes, wife of John Edward Oakes, she relates a story of the battle of Bowling Green, in which a cannonball fired at Vinegar Hill, where Western Kentucky University now stands, rolled down the hill into the front yard. Also of interest is the telling by Mrs. Oakes of the house originally being built in a diagonal stance to the corner of Clay and Tuttle (now 13th) Streets (Oakes). On the D. G. Beers Map of 1877 the I-House, with ell addition, is shown facing Clay Street (Appendix B, Beers).

The Beers map has become a crucial instrument for tracing the origin of the house. It is the first positive identification of the house, showing the house with addition as early as 1877. It also places the house on the outskirts of town. The building itself appears to be within the 1877 city limits, while the farm land accompanying it is outside. This is reinforced by the 1880 deed describing the land as "lying partly within and partly without the corporate boundary of the City of Bowling Green." (Appendix A, DB 52, 10)

Due to records too difficult to follow, we have not been able to fully determine the line of ownership from 1880 to 1882. On August 3, 1880, Mary J. Jenkins was granted title to the building and land from James A. Mitchell, the executor to the Elrod estate (Appendix A, DB 52, 10). On June 30, 1882, just 18 days before the earlier mentioned transaction, Albert Mitchell

bought property from D.B. Campbell, which we believe to be the Clay Street I-House property (Appendix A, DB 54, 94). D.B. Campbell purchased the property on November 11, 1880. He purchased it from the Warren Circuit Court Clerk James Hines at a public auction (Appendix A, DB 52, 422). We have not been able to find any connections between the August 3, 1880 sale to Mary J. Jenkins and the November 11, 1880 sale by Circuit Clerk Hines.

When the McGinnis sisters took possession of the property in 1882, they were both unmarried. By 1892 they were married, and both families lived in the house. Mattie McGinnis married John Noakes and Vitula McGinnis married E.J. Oakes. They sold all of the property to L.R. Porter in 1892 (Appendix A, DB 77, 136-137). That same day (September 28), Porter sold back to the families the house and parcel of land on which the house now rests. This land is described as:

A certain lot of ground situated in Bowling Green, Warren County Ky. known & designated as lot no. 25 on the plan of said city known as "Fort Valley" addition to the city of Bowling Green. Said lot fronts 70 feet more or less on Clay Street & runs back there from 170 feet more or less to an alley & fronts 70 feet more or less on said alley. (Appendix A, DB 77, 137-138)

The house remained in the possession of the sisters until the death of Vitula Oakes. This gave full ownership to Mattie Noakes. When Mattie died in 1914, she willed the property to the three children of Vitula. They were Ben T., Callie Lue, and John Edward Oakes (Appendix A, WB 6, 224). Mattie had no children of her own. In 1921, Ben T. and Callie Lue granted full ownership of the property to John Edward (Appendix A, DB 143, 89). It

remained in his name until his death in March of 1974. He willed everything that he owned to his wife Marian Frances (Appendix A, WB 17, 520). She maintained possession of the property as its sole owner until September 25, 1987, when she sold it to Dallas G. Runner (Appendix A, DB 586, 268). From 1987 until 1990 the house was leased to Mr. Dennis Miller, who then subleased the property. During this period, the house fell into its current state of disrepair. On September 8, 1990, Mr. B.C. Wimpee bought the property, with the intention of converting the I-House into a triplex. As of this report, Mr. Wimpee's restorations have yet to occur.

The house, probably built during the ownership of Harmon Elrod, spent many years under the ownership of the McGinnis (Oakes/Noakes) family. From 1892 until 1987 the house developed a sense of family charm evidenced by Oakes family photographs, oral history interviews with family members, and chats with the neighbors--including the mailman. This charm gave the house a sense of distinction now gone, but not forgotten.

STRUCTURAL PROGRESSION

Many changes have occurred with the Clay Street I-House. The structure was originally built as a farmhouse on a large piece of farm property. As time progressed, Bowling Green grew around the structure. While this was occurring, the house was also undergoing structural changes.

The I-House and ell addition are constructed of yellow poplar, with studs placed 17 inches apart. All interior and exterior walls are 6 inches thick. The interior surfaces of the walls are lath and plaster. The main house contains two brick interior end chimneys. The ell addition contains one chimney once servicing two fireplaces between the middle and back rooms. The front and back windows of the I-House are of equal dimensions with panes 2 over 2 (Appendix C), and black shutters. The current shutters are reproductions of the original wooden shutters now stored in the attic of the ell (Oakes).

Questions remain about not only when the house was built, but what the original form was. As previously mentioned, only a time frame of construction can be studied. There are indications that the I-House was built first with the ell addition to follow. There are also indications that some form of ell addition was built in concurrence with the I-House. As researchers, we believe that the objective presentation of uncovered evidence surpasses any judgements that could be made, without the proof needed for positive verification. The house now stands with a

two story center passage four room I-House and a three room ell addition connected to the back right side of the main structure. The four room I-House we believe to be original. We cannot be so confident with the addition.

There is physical evidence to suggest that both structures were built together. Both structures are built of yellow poplar and show no marked sign of age variation, and both have the same types of nails. The nails were described by Mrs. Oakes as being handmade (Oakes). The exposed lath and mortar in both sections of the house appear to be consistent.

Physical inconsistencies are great. From the interior, there is a nine inch difference between the I-House floor and the ell addition floor (Appendix E, photo 31). Also of great importance is the center passage back door, now leading into the bathroom (Appendix E, photo 9). Studying the outside of the building, there appears to be very poorly constructed connections between the ell and the I-House (Appendix E, photos 3 and 6).

There is documentary evidence which suggests both patterns of building (Figure 3.1). The earliest sketch of the house is on the 1877 D. G. Beers Map. This shows the inclusion of an ell addition. The addition is centered against the back portion of the house. Taken literally, the sketch disproves any theories that the right side ell addition was original. Since there are windows built around the center passage back door, this indicates that a centered ell addition would not have been built concurrently with I-House.

Taken as a rough sketch of the building, the Beers map shows that some form of ell addition did exist, narrowing the possible time difference between the construction of the house and the ell. We do not believe that the sketch is an accurate scaled sketch of the house for two reasons. First, the purpose of the map is not to show definitive drawings of the buildings in Bowling Green, but to give the map reader a sense of what family or company owned what building. Second, if the ell had been centered, it would have covered one of the back windows, all of which we believe to be original. It is our belief that the importance of the Beers map lies in its acknowledgement of the I-House with some form of connected ell.

The next sketch of the building occurred in 1914, when it first appeared on the Sanborn Insurance Maps. Until 1914, the Sanborn Insurance Company did not draw maps of the Bowling Green area in which the I-House is situated. By 1914 the Clay Street area had fully developed into a neighborhood community, warranting Sanborn Insurance to include it in their maps. This is the first documented appearance of the right side ell (Appendix B, Sanborn 1914). In her interview, Mrs. Oakes described the ell as containing five rooms (Oakes). Of interest is the drawing of the right side of the ell jutting out from the I-House. Also of interest is the lack of symmetry. By studying the sketch as an accurate scaled drawing of the house, evidence emerges that could suggest the possibility that I-House and ell were constructed concurrently.

The back porch is placed in a fashion that would have made access between the back of the center hall and the outside possible. Therefore, windows on the back center passage door would have been appropriate. The back room of this ell was described by Mrs. Oakes as being a summer kitchen, which would have been in accordance to the building patterns of mid 19th century I-House construction. Also, there appears to be no evidence of the existence of the two back windows in the upstairs right room of the main house (Appendix E, photos 6 and 15). This would indicate that there would have been a structure built at the same time as I-House construction which would have blocked those windows.

In the 1932 Sanborn Map, the structure is similar to what now exists. The ell is composed of three rooms, with the side walls being of identical length. Although the right side of the ell has been changed, there is no indication of change for the left side (Appendix B, Sanborn 1932).

The Sanborn maps are instrumental in telling more than just clues to the structure. The maps also help with the identification of other property features. Both maps identify an outbuilding on the back left corner of the property. Mrs. Oakes stated that was the coal shed (Oakes). A search of the area revealed many pieces of coal (Appendix G). The maps also show the porch additions to the main structure. In the 1914 sketch the house has a one story front porch over the front door and a back porch that wraps around the left and back sides of the ell. In 1932

the front and ell wrap around porches remained intact, with the addition of another ell porch, this time on the right.

In 1990 with our survey comes the addition of the bathroom to the back of the I-House. This disconnects the back center passage door from the outside. The front porch still remains. The back porch no longer extends to the back of the ell, nor does it wrap around. The right side porch has been converted into a carport. The gabled front porch that now stands is not original to the house. Mrs. Oakes said that there had been a flat topped porch before the gabled roof (Oakes). We could find no information to prove or disprove that the flat topped porch was original.

CHANGING USAGE

The many structural changes undergone throughout the history of the house reflect the changing needs of the people who dwelled within it. In the early history of the house, we know more about how the land surrounding the house was used than we do about the functions of the rooms within the house. As previously mentioned, the I-House was built on what was originally farm acreage near the edge of Bowling Green. By 1877, the house, while probably retaining its function as a farm house, fell within the city limits of Bowling Green (Appendix B, Beers). Between 1892 and 1914, the house and its ell addition were used to house two families. The families were those of sisters Martha Temple (Mattie) McGinnis and Vitula Elizabeth (Tula) McGinnis, who by 1892, were married to railroad employees. The 1905 Bowling Green Bowling Green City Directory lists Mattie and John H. Noakes, railroader, and Tula and Edward J. Oakes, conductor. The address of the house is listed as 814 Clay Street (Appendix D, 1905). Additionally, Tula and Edward Noakes were raising three children in the house: Ben T., Callie Lue, and John Edward.

This transition is significant. It signals the change from farmhouse to city residence, exemplifies the influence of the railroad on the development of this area, and depicts the adaptation of the house and ell to the needs of an extended family.

By 1914, the house had been assigned its current address of 1311 Clay Street. While still listed in the 1914 Bowling Green

City Directory as being inhabited by Mattie and John Noakes, engineer, it was in this year that Mattie Noakes deeded her share of the property to the children of Vitula and Edward Oakes (Appendix D, 1914). It was also in 1914 that the house first appears on Sanborn Insurance Maps of Bowling Green. The map shows an ell configuration much different than what is present today. The ell of 1914 extended past the wall of the right side of the I-House and appears to have had two additional rooms. Also of notable difference is a porch which begins at the back of the I-House on the left side of the ell and extends back the entire length of the ell, wrapping around the back to meet an end room which no longer exists (Appendix B, Sanborn 1914). In an interview with Marian Oakes, she relayed...

Originally, my sister-in-law tells me, there were two more rooms at the end of the house. It had a summer kitchen and a whatever. And they had a place they called the trunk room somewhere. So, there were more rooms to the house than there are now...But when we lived there it was more or less--except we'd taken away the porches...The porches were nothing but something to sweep constantly...but they used to have on this one, on the left side of the house, white grapes, pink grapes and purple grapes going all down the length of this big porch (Oakes).

In 1921, Ben and Callie Oakes deeded their share of the property to their brother John, making him sole proprietor:

The older brother and sister deeded the house to him. So at fourteen he owned it but didn't know it...He didn't know it for years.

John Oakes did not reside permanently in the house until 1935, and until that year it was rented to several occupants.

The City Directory of Bowling Green in 1922 lists occupants a Nettie and Squire McGrew, oil driller; Ada and George Bell, garage; and Idelle and Claude R. Shanks, coal deliverer (Appendix D, 1922). These three couples shared the kitchen as a common area. The bathroom which is present now was not as yet built at this time, and it is unknown whether or not a bathroom existed elsewhere in the house.

In 1927, the Bowling Green City Directory lists occupants as Laura and Ross Dodson, L & N railroad, Jennie and Arch. Dodson, quarry; and Beatrice Dodson, cashier at McElroys, making the I-House home once again to an extended family (Appendix D, 1927).

During the oil boom, it was rented, and it was rented for years. My husband was away at school and the house was rented for years. But during the oil boom I think they had people in every room. You know, it was rented to them, and then they'd rent it out anybody anywhere. And the whole house was full of people during the short time they had the boom...Daddy Oakes said they had someone in practically every room...[but] it never was a boarding house (Oakes).

When John and Marian Oakes moved from New York state to 1311 Clay Street in Bowling Green in 1935, Sam Miller was renting and living in the house and using it as storage for his antique store. John and Marian lived upstairs until Mr. Miller was ready to leave (Oakes). The first available city directory listing John and Marian Oakes as residents at 1311 Clay Street is in 1941. John is listed as being a radio repairman at Biggs Furniture Company (Appendix D, 1941-1942).

Sanborn Insurance Maps of 1932, the year John and Marian Oakes were married, indicate the configuration of the ell to be

the same as it is today, excepting the addition of the bathroom off the rear door of the center passage. Porches are shown to wrap completely around the ell. After the Oakes moved into the house in 1935, they made several changes to the property such as removing the coal house and garage:

There also was a garage...but all those buildings were torn down after we were there because we had gas heat (Oakes).

The Oakes also changed the roof of the front porch. The original roof of this porch was square and flat. The roof was replaced with the pitched roof which is still present today. A problem with drainage seems to be the primary reason for the change. Marian Oakes also mentions a spring from which bubbling water would appear. She describes the spring as being opposite the carport on property now belonging to the adjacent lot. This spring was rocked up and diverted (Oakes).

As mentioned previously, John and Marian Oakes removed the long porches surrounding the ell addition. Although shown to wrap entirely around the ell in 1932 (Appendix B, Sanborn 1932), Marian Oakes states that when she moved into the house in 1935, there were only porches on the sides. After these porches were removed, a carport was added to the right side of the ell. The original wooden shutters, painted black, were also removed and replaced with replicas made of plastic. The original shutters are stored in the attic portion of the ell (Oakes).

Structural changes within the house were less pronounced. Aside from modernizing the kitchen and adding a bathroom off the back door of the center hall, very little was changed. What did change significantly was the use of the rooms in the house. Mrs. Oakes described the way in which her family used the rooms of the house and contrasted it to the way the rooms were used by the previous generation of Oakes:

The upstairs is two bedrooms and this large hall. And downstairs, you know, the main structure, was this big room about eighteen by eighteen and that was my sister-in-laws room [left room on first floor] all those years. And then across the hall was the living room and then the kitchen/dining area combined. But those two rooms are different because those two rooms we modernized. Because we took off the porches and we had to, you know--we were having problems with the floor buckling. So we changed those two rooms. But the back room is the original structure. And you have these two rooms in between: a small bedroom...and a kitchen/dining room, and then the living room (Oakes).

Marian Oakes reference to this "back room" was clarified later in the interview:

Well, you go to the living room [right room on first floor, refer to Map Appendix], and then what was the kitchen dining area, and then a bedroom, and then a large bedroom at the back [the back room] (Oakes).

She also relayed that the left room had been used as a parlor by her husband's family:

Before [it was Callie's bedroom], it had been the parlor. The older generation used it as a parlor (Oakes).

The room to the right had been the bedroom of Tula Oakes, referred to as "Mama Oakes' bedroom:"

She [Callie Oakes] was born in the house. So was my husband. Not in the hospital, but in this room to the right

as you came in the front door...That was Mama's bedroom (Oakes).

Marian Oakes used the second room of the ell addition as her bedroom. She describes this room as having once been the summer kitchen:

We had in the upstairs room to the left...there's a fireplace up there. And downstairs in this front bedroom I told you used to be the parlor and then was my sister-in-law's bedroom, there's a grate there. There were four fireplaces. And the one in the second room from the back, which we converted into a bedroom, they had this huge old fireplace where you cooked there with your black pots (Oakes).

The use of the hall and two rooms on the second floor of the I-House also changed over the years. John and Marian's son Edward once used the entire floor as his artist studio. The hall contained a roll-away couch and drawing table, with the two rooms serving as storage for his artwork. He cleaned his brushes in the sink in the room on the right. These rooms were also rented out to single women for a short period of time.

Other changes mentioned by Marian Oakes include the addition of quarter-round to the base boards on the first floor, and the replacement of the mantle in the left room of the first floor when the conversation was made from coal to gas.

Marian Oakes treated the front, side, and back yards of the house as extended rooms of the house. Her skill and love of gardening is evident from old photographs she shared with us and from comments about the landscape by her next door neighbors. At one time, a formal privet hedge surrounded the front yard. Other

plants included a snowball bush at the front left corner of the house, a callacanthus bush that belonged to Vitula Oakes, a white poplar sent to Marian Oakes by her sister to remind her of New York, a willow tree, a maple tree, mimosa trees, shrub roses, climbing roses, an annual garden, and numerous bulbs. She indicated that something was always blooming during every month of the growing season. These outdoor spaces were defined by the privet hedge marking the front boundaries of the house, and rows of shrub roses in the back. John Oakes built a brick path leading from the sidewalk to a white picket gate at the back left corner of the I-House (Oakes).

From the time I moved there, I'd rather be outside than inside....I was planting things and everyone else was putting in asphalt....I knew every [inaudible], every tree, every shrub, because most of them I had set out with the help of John's father....The whole place was surrounded by hedge. Daddy Oakes had set it out and I continued to keep it and he taught me how to cut it...how to garden, how to putty windows. I puttied every window in that house....We had yellow roses, pink roses, red roses and whit roses that covered the entire old garage at one time (Oakes).

Mrs. Oakes summed up her feelings about her experiences in the house in this way:

People loved to come to that house. And after I first moved there...they said 'Oh, I was married there in that front room,' or they knew somebody who'd lived there and I heard this all the time....Nothing tragic has ever happened in that home that I know of. Never in the history of that house has there been any tragic thing happen (Oakes).

Unable to care for the house any longer, Marian Oakes sold the property to Dallas Runner in 1987. It has since been leased

and rented at various times to various individuals. Mr. Runner sold the house in September of 1990 to Mr. B. C. Wimpee. Mr. Wimpee plans to add a second story to the ell and convert the entire structure into a triplex.

CONCLUSION

The landscape today is stark in comparison to it's beauty of a decade ago. The roses, mimosas, the maple tree, shrubbery, and spring bulbs are gone. All that remains of the privet hedge is a row eighteen inches tall along the left side of the property. Used furniture, mattresses, tires, and debris are scattered throughout the back yard.

The exterior and interior of the house are in no better condition than the landscape. The sill is rapidly rotting away, eaten by termites. Marian Oakes related a story told to her that tells of the house once being diagonal on the property. When it was moved, earth was mounded up to the sill, which caused it to rot away. The current owner, Mr. B. C. Wimpee, claims that rain water runs towards the house and settles underneath, providing the environment for termites and rot. The sill under the center of the house had decayed more rapidly than the sill at the ends of the house, resulting in a sloping and sinking of the house inward towards the center hall.

This is the latest set of changes that have occurred since the house was first built during the Civil War period. When Marian Oakes sold the house, she kept the lock and skeleton key which once unlocked the center passage door. To her, these artifacts are symbols of not only a house, but a home. In response to Callie Oakes' unhappiness at the selling of the house, Marian Oakes related:

But I said, 'Home is not home anymore because I'm not there either' (Oakes).

The 1311 Clay Street I-House, once a prosperous farm house, now sits in a state of decay in an urbanized area. Despite its condition, it remains an artifact of the vernacular architecture of mid nineteenth century Upland South.

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