

DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

A pioneer in the rejuvenation of Springfield recalls how he happened upon his dream home.

Words by Michael C. Hall | Photos by Bradley Stookey

IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY EVENING. The rain was falling particularly hard that night, collecting in narrow streams that rushed along the curved bumpers and gratings of the streets. Intermittent lightning was the only illumination at the late hour, as thick clouds gave no headway to stars or a moon. Amidst this storm, a lone man, traversing the streets of a blighted neighborhood, stepped from his car and into the howling, wet wind. There, in the foreground, it stood. As the man gulped, and stepped forward to enter the broken, swinging doors of the struc-

ture, he knew then that it was now or never.

Sounds like the opening lines to a pulp horror novel. The elements were all there, but this was an actual event that occurred in the spring of 1992, and for one Jacksonville resident, proved to be an evening that would change his life forever. While most homebuyers spend weeks or months searching for their dream home, Mike Trautmann, owner of Trautmann and Company, a local real estate firm, found his in the midst of a deluge.

"I was driving down the road in the middle of Springfield one evening," Trautmann recalls. "It



Trautmann, Murphy and Peanut





The home's lack of right angles on the walls is most noticeable in rooms like the kitchen and living room (below). Rufus, Trautmann's pomeranian, lounges in his favorite spot in the sunroom (opposite).

was storming that night, and it was hard to see. As I came back from checking on the restoration progress of one of the properties I owned on North Market Street, I came across a bum on West Fifth Street. He was standing in front of a gigantic structure and flickering a lighter in the midst of the rain. With his brief respite of illumination, I saw it. I stepped out of the car to take a closer look. The doors to it were swinging open and I could see that it was abandoned. It was an eerie sight. As I entered the house and looked around, I knew then and there that this was it: I had found my dream home, my diamond in the rough."

During the following weeks, Trautmann returned to the house multiple times. Never hesitating to fulfill his dreams of restoring it to its original beauty, he began to plan for its new and renovated look. No stranger to restoring Springfield homes, as he had been in the business of renovation since he first acquired property there in 1986, Trautmann looked at this challenge with an eager eye. The task, however, proved more daunting than originally supposed.

"It was difficult," he recounts. "The house was condemned and due for demolition when I first found it, and no bank was willing to give me the time of day. It took over a year before I finally found one that was willing to loan me the money on the property; but before I could get it, I had to convince them that I was planning to get the city to tear it down."

Of course, this was a fib and not at all what Trautmann had in mind. But what the bank didn't know, wouldn't hurt it, right? After receiving the loan, Trautmann immediately went to work on restoring the house. He sold his ocean-front home in Jacksonville Beach and began to examine the structure of the new house. Calling in a friend from Georgia Tech, Trautmann was assured that the structure was not only sound and solid, but was one of the most outstanding examples of engineering work in the neighborhood. With these reassurances, Trautmann then set about hiring a restoration coordinator. It was during this time that he made a startling discovery. "We were in the process of cleaning out the attic when we came across a series of telegrams. Examining them closely, we saw that these were no ordinary, old papers; they were signed by President Woodrow Wilson."

This unusual find led Trautmann into a deeper search into the history and builder of the house. With help from a friend's granddaughter, an expert in Jacksonville history, he discovered that the house was constructed in 1917 by Arthur D. Stevens of Bangor, Maine, one of the original founders of the Merrill-Stevens Shipbuilding





Though not a slave to history, the owner did want the interior to retain much of the home's historical character. The backyard (opposite) is now a casual oasis complete with pool and covered areas for entertaining.

Co., the oldest continuing operating company in the state of Florida. Owning more than six houses in Jacksonville, along with one of the largest companies in Florida, Stevens was easily one of Jacksonville's wealthiest residents. A philanthropist at heart, he was very involved with the local Boy Scouts Association, as well as the Unitarian Church of Jacksonville, of which he was a founder. His heart, however, lay in the construction of ships. He had patented a special type of cement mixed with steel that became known as ferrous cement. This cement became the backbone for his shipbuilding firm and was so strong that he constructed his Springfield residence with the mixture.

During World War I, Stevens worked very closely with Woodrow Wilson in the coordination

and construction of warships, and it was for these reasons that Wilson remained in close contact with him during the remainder of his presidency. These telegrams, in which Wilson is shown to be thanking Stevens for his efforts in the War, are still in Trautmann's possession. Following the War, Stevens became ill and eventually died in his Springfield home in 1931. His death was greatly mourned by the Jacksonville community.

Survived by his wife, Ellen L. Stevens, the house passed down to numerous owners until its last owners finally abandoned it in the latter part of the 1980s. It sat there abandoned and unkempt until Trautmann took up residence in 1993.

"Stevens' personal history as a shipbuilder answers a lot of questions about the home's construction," says Trautmann. "For instance, it's a fact that there are no right angles." As Trautmann explains, the masonry house is indeed unique. Composed of both brick and ferrous cement on its exterior, the interior is made up of a similar mixture and contains only curved corners on its walls.







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In addition to this material, the house contains a plethora of unique, original fixtures that go along with its shipbuilding theme. This extends to everything from solid nickel bath fixtures, shipyard boilers in the basement, a solid mahogany breakfront from the steamship *Osceola*, which is actually built into the dining room, and a standard ship chart, located upstairs. This last piece is one of the most interesting features of the house, explains Trautmann. “When I first moved in here, I thought it was just an old chest or closet. It had a nice set of drawers, but the whole thing tilted downwards. It wasn’t until later that I found out that it was a ship chart and tilted downwards at an angle, so that the captain could read his maps and charts without having to bend over.”

Additional features inside the house include an original bathtub, which is bolted to the middle of the bathroom floor in the fashion of a captain’s quarters, as well as two American Standard steamship tubes from 1905.

“All of the home’s original features come from shipyards, even the tile and fireplaces,” says Trautmann. “The house even had a primitive form of air conditioning and was once the most electronically advanced home in the entire state of Florida.” Now, fully restored to its former glory, the approximately 3,950-square-foot home stands as a testament to Trautmann’s unyielding renovation efforts.

“I never thought I would be living here. The ridiculous notion that this house was deemed by the city to be “opened, abandoned and unsafe” makes me laugh aloud. Even the fact that my friends once taunted me for buying a house in this neighborhood makes me laugh. Now, with Springfield crime rates less than that of Riverside and property values equivalent and often surpassing those of Avondale, who’s laughing now? An individual lot of land here used to sell for \$200; now they can go for as high as \$80,000.”

Considering the amount of capital that his house has accumulated over the years, Trautmann really can laugh—all the way to the bank, that is. Purchased for \$40,000 in 1992, the renovated house has now been appraised at \$1 million. This isn’t Trautmann’s only success story, however, as he has seen dramatic increases over the years on all of his company’s 29 properties in Springfield.

“It [the neighborhood] reminds me a lot of Hyde Park in Tampa,” Trautmann says. “You simply can’t find this type of architecture anywhere. Look at Avondale or Riverside, they look pretty similar; then look at San Jose and San Marco, and they’re almost identical. They’re not unique. You can’t say that about Springfield. This neighborhood is anything but ordinary. In fact, throughout my travels, I can’t find a neighborhood that remotely resembles Springfield in the state of Florida.”

Featured on HGTV's *If These Walls Could Talk* in April of 2002, the house and the neighborhood were also profiled on the *Lynette Jennings Show* during a documentary about historical Florida. "She was very impressed with the house and area," recalls Trautmann. "I acted as her cohort and showed her around."

Now, with the major renovation work completed, Trautmann is continuing to add more to his house. Already completing a deck and pool in the backyard, he has begun construction of a 2,100-square-foot structure that is set to include a three-car garage, a sauna and guest quarters. He hopes to be done with these improvements in February of next year. In addition, Trautmann has plans to also construct a 1,900-square-foot studio in the back of his house, so that he can move his office out of the house and convert the area into a library.

"It only made sense that my business partner, Adam Halstead, and I should move our operations into this neighborhood. Most of our properties are here. I can just wake up in the morning and go downstairs. It's as simple as that."

Mike's favorite rooms are the living room and sunroom, as both represent a more casually elegant aspect to the formal house. Though these rooms are eye-catchers, the first thing one notes when walking through the doors is the charming staircase. This is flanked to the left by original hardwood and tile floors that lead to the open and spacious kitchen. Along the other side of the house one finds the sunroom and formal living room, backing up to a dining room and office. From the office, one can step outside and onto the deck. It's all very open and airy and gives one the sense of walking through the doors of an Italian villa.

Outside and in front of the house, the first thing one notes is the imposing nature of the structure. Sitting high above the street, it is accented with a gray, wrought-iron gate. Behind the gate lies a neatly landscaped yard, with a picturesque, four-foot fountain. A red-tiled roof and unusual architectural accents add to the home's one-of-a-kind appearance. Continuing into the back yard, visitors come across a tropical retreat complete with palm trees, gently arching over a Mediterranean-style pool. The covered deck provides a cool respite from the sun, and was no doubt designed with entertainment in mind.

Whether for entertaining guests or not, the home certainly is a true show-stopper and is considered one of the grandest homes in the historic neighborhood. "I'm quite involved with a lot of the action going on in the neighborhood. I've been here a long time. I can still remember a time when all that sat behind me on Silver Street were boarding houses. A lot has certainly changed and I like to think in some small ways, that I made a difference." 📍

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