

Unit member rescues historic home from uncertain future, sees a gem where others might not

By Jeff Melvin
908th AW Public Affairs

Six months ago, after nearly two years of negotiations and virtually courting the owner and his family, Maj. Craig Drescher purchased a house that was literally falling down. And he's still so happy about it he can hardly contain himself. So, is the C-130 navigator crazy like a fox or just plain crazy? The answer, like most things in life, lies somewhere in the middle.

Two and a half years ago, Drescher, a former Navy aviator turned Navy recruiter was living in Birmingham. Wanting to be closer to his son who lived in Auburn with his ex-wife, he applied for a position with the 357th Airlift Squadron. Luckily for him the 908th was about to embark on its two-year activation supporting Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom and he not only got a job but he also got a chance to return to flying and continue to serve in the military.

He couldn't have asked for a better deal. So with a full-time job secured, he started thinking about moving to Montgomery. He started house hunting. And his luck got even better.

"I was driving around and I saw this old house. I thought it was vacant. I just stumbled onto it, literally," Drescher said, adding that he's always had a soft spot for old homes.

"Luckily, it was winter time and a lot of the vegetation had dropped their leaves. I could barely make out that there was a house back there. I pulled up and started poking around. I was taken in by it. I said to myself, 'This place really used to be something.' When I saw it, it was completely taken over by nothing short of a jungle – you couldn't see parts of the house because of the overgrowth.

The source of his fancy, or fantasy if you think he's crazy, is Winter Place, built in 1855 by Col. Joseph Samuel Winter and his wife, Mary Elizabeth Winter. One of the country's leading architects of the time, Samuel Sloan of Philadelphia, designed Colonel Winter's first home and it is believed that Sloan, designer of the governor's mansion in Raleigh, N.C.,

designed Winter Place as well. Winter Place is two conjoined homes situated on 3.5 acres. An 1880 census shows the Winter family living in the North House and their daughter, Sally Gindrat Winter Thorington living in the South House with her husband, Robert D. Thorington and family. The South House has been in the Thorington family ever since. The North House was out of the Winter family from 1946-1951 but has been in the Thorington family ever since.

Once one of Montgomery's grandest homes, Winter Place, located in the Cottage Hill District just a few blocks away from the heart of downtown, is long removed from its glory days. The fall 2004 issue of the Alabama Heritage quarterly history magazine listed the structure as one of the state's endangered historic landmarks.

If Major Drescher realizes his dreams, it may not return to show place status but it'll certainly be a place one would be proud to call home. It's a formidable undertaking. He estimates repair and renovation costs reaching \$500,000 on the low end and possibly soaring to \$1 million if his pockets were deeper.

"The purchase was anything but a simple real estate transaction. We have a rehab agreement with a 10-year plan and the Alabama Historical Commission is the third party overseer. Luckily, my vision, the family's vision and the AHC's vision are all lined up," said the major, describing the complicated process that resulted in his acquisition of the historic property.

The purchase also includes a life estate agreement allowing present occupant, 82-year-old Joseph Winter Thorington Jr., to live here as long as he desires.

The lengthy process had a potentially unpleasant outcome -- the North House deteriorated to such an extent that it may be unsalvageable.

Winter Place isn't merely an old home; it's a historically significant one. Listed in the Alabama Registry of Landmarks and Heritage since September 2005, Winter Place was added to the National Register of

Historic Places in mid-June 2006.

National Historic Landmarks are sites and structures considered to be of nationwide importance. This program is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior with participation by the Alabama Historical Commission.

His fascination with old houses is deep seated, lasting as long as he can remember. He never dreamed he'd be in the situation he's in now, however.

"I kinda got this big package deal -- architectural significance and historical significance. This house has history from Civil War to civil rights. This house is part of our history and our fabric. And there's something in our culture that says, 'We should preserve that.'"

He adds that the house is in a troubled neighborhood and that his purchase/project is "but one small log in a large effort to improve this neighborhood.

That effort, he said, is supported by people like himself, current residents who want to improve where they live, people like his neighbor who founded a non-profit community outreach organization, the Jubilee Center, and the City of Montgomery's Weed and Seed program.

He also got help from an unexpected source, the son of a 357th AS co-worker. For his Eagle Scout project, Lt. Col. Marcus Puccini's son, Marcus II, arranged and oversaw the clearing of a 150-year-old, 300-foot wall on the property that had practically disappeared from view, overtaken by unchecked overgrown vegetation. Puccini enlisted the help of 30 other Scouts and completed the project in a day.

When Major Drescher talks about Winter Place, he often says 'we' although he's the sole owner.

That's because he has 'informal' partners. These partners "don't have funding for the project but they lend moral support and expertise."

Among those partners are people like Robert Gamble and Melanie Betz of the Alabama Historic Commission. Gamble, AHC's senior

This Old House Sou



South House Winter Place circa August 2004.

architectural historian, played a major role, telling Drescher all about the house, introducing him to the owner and assisting in the negotiations to acquire the property.

Gamble called Drescher a 'savior' and said he "displayed a tenacious and genuine interest in Winter Place," persevering through circumstances that would have tried the patience of most people. He added that he and others with keen interest in the property feared that all was lost until the major came along.

"He's got a lot of work to do but we're really excited. He's a hero in our eyes," Gamble continued.

Betz, who wrote the Alabama Heritage magazine article highlighting the plight of the historic home, also prepared the application requesting its placement on the National Register.

And then there's the mayor's office and Landmarks Foundation, the organization that runs Old Alabama Town. Their help has proved invaluable because contrary to popular opinion there's little funding available for renovation of historic properties, especially

by private owners.

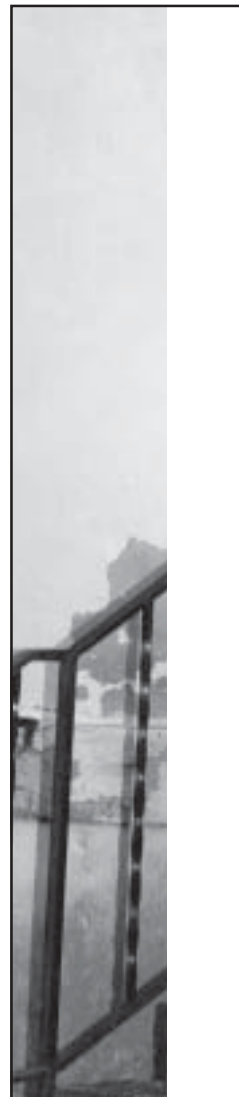
It's his home but he doesn't intend to wall himself off, the major said.

"I don't want to build walls or fences around the project and say, 'This is all mine and you can't come in and look at it.' Part of my vision for the project is to have it somewhat accessible to the public. Now, I'm going to live here, so I'm not going to have it open all the time, but I don't intend to close it off."

So is Drescher crazy like a fox or just plain crazy? Did he stumble on a gold mine or a money pit? That depends on your point of view. If the C-130 navigator has any doubts, they're hard to find. He's all smiles these days.

"I'm 55 miles away from my son, four miles away from a great work opportunity with the 357th Airlift Squadron and I got this house. Things just lined up; I couldn't have envisioned this," he beamed.

If you run into Major Drescher, ask him about his project. Chances are he'll invite you over for a walk around.

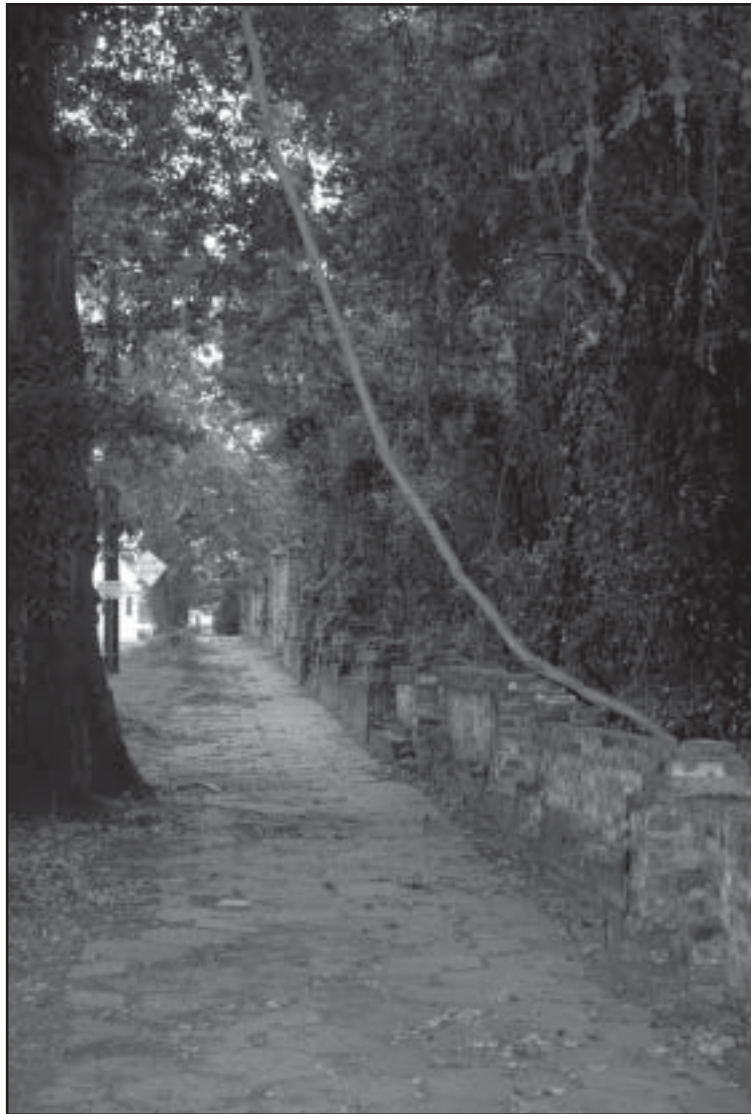


Already recognized by Winter Place was ad

e South



Photo by Maj. Craig Drescher



Thanks to Eagle Scout Marcus Puccini II Winter Place's 150-year-old 300-foot wall is visible again



Drescher shows off an interior room



...ready recognized by the city and state as a historic building, last month Winter Place was added to the National Register.



Winter Place late-June 2006

Photos by Jeff Melvin