

Galveston

Monthly

FEBRUARY 2025
Complimentary



Exploring Your Island Paradise



Whiteside Town Flats first floor living room

THE EVOLVING STORY OF 217 TREMONT

DISCOVER THE STORIED PAST AND ENDURING LEGACY OF THIS ICONIC GALVESTON LANDMARK BUILT IN 1870 KNOWN AS THE WHITESIDE TOWN FLATS

BY KATHLEEN MACA

Generations of history reside in the row of three buildings at 213-217 Tremont Street, located just around the corner from the Tremont House.

The three-story brick structures with Italianate rounded window hoods, double-leaf doors, and cast-iron fronts were constructed by Rice, Baulard & Company in 1870. They were built to replace the firm's earlier building lost in the Moro Castle Fire of December 1869.

Rice, Baulard & Company was a major supplier of paints,

oils, varnish, window glass, wallpaper, and window shades in the 1800s. The enterprise was owned by Connecticut-born Joseph William Rice (1805-1890) and Frenchman Victor Baulard (1828-1889).

Rice, Baulard & Company ground its own pigment to manufacture and sell 10,000 gallons of paint a year. They also carried Averill chemical paints, the first patented ready-mixed paints, available in various colors that could be chosen from swatches.



The second floor living room

Baulard was the second owner of the 1867 Quigg-Baulard Cottage at the corner of 27th Street and Broadway, which now serves as the administrative offices of the Mary Moody Northern Endowment which owns and operates Moody Mansion. He used products from his business to enhance the home, including stained glass, decorative panels, paint, and varnish, which allowed the house to double as a showplace for his wares.

The building at 217 Tremont housed several businesses, including William M. Robinson's book and stationery store in 1880 and 1881. That was followed by the Sunny South Saloon, owned and operated by William Ritter in 1880 and 1881.

The saloonkeeper would later own Ritter's Café on The Strand, which became infamous in the 1900 hurricane story "Isaac's Storm."

Patrick H. Hennessey & Company, manufacturing agents, and Carl Schwartz, Jr.'s wholesale liquor, wine, and cigar businesses were the next to lease space.

The building's long connection with printing and publishing began in 1886 when Confederate veteran William Andrew "Farmer Bill" Shaw (1846-1924) opened a print and stationers shop there. Shaw named his business Wm. A.

Shaw & Co. and they printed the "Texas Farmer's Weekly" newspaper every Wednesday.

A half-brother of future Dallas mayor Louis Blaylock, Shaw would later enter public service as a state legislator.

By 1890, the address on Tremont took a brief respite from the printing business. Under the ownership of Joseph V. White's harness and saddle shop, it sold carriages, hardware, and other equestrian goods.

Robert Clarke (1839-1923), a native of Ireland, was the next main character in the building's story. He opened Clarke & Courts Printers with partner George M. Courts in 1879.

He sold his interest in the firm in 1893 to establish his operation, Robert Clarke & Co., which opened for business at 217 Tremont that year. The company offered stationery supplies, blank books, and printing services.

Just two years later, he was heartbroken by the loss of his 27-year-old son Edward, who had worked in his father's shop. Following the tragedy, Clarke and his wife, Mary Elizabeth Church (1842-1913), relocated to San Antonio.

With the print shop location again available, Ferdinand Joseph Finck (1858-1941) entered the building's history.

Finck's German immigrant father had been a printer in



217 Tremont Street with stairs in front in 1967

New Orleans and later became the publisher of one of the first newspapers in San Antonio. He published the "Semi-Weekly News" in 1861 and later the weekly "San Antonio News."

Finck had begun following in his father's profession by working as a printer with Clarke & Courts in Galveston in 1882. Four years later, he and partner Frank J. DeMeritt (secretary of the Galveston City Railway) established the Finck & DeMeritt print shop on Mechanic Street. DeMeritt left the firm in 1888, and it was renamed F. J. Finck & Co.

After Clarke departed to move to San Antonio, Finck moved his business to 217 Tremont and sold his building on Mechanic.

In addition to printing services, Finck offered high-art stationery, Hartford typewriters, cash registers, Globe Wernicke bookcases, metal filing cabinets, and other office necessities. The business printed numerous small pamphlets on its gas engine press, including informational

pieces about hurricanes and small cardstock signs with motivational quotes.

The firm's general manager, Frederick W. Erhard (1870-1934), took over the business in 1914, naming it F. W. Erhard & Co.

Erhard operated the business through 1923. The marker at his former home, 1320 Ball, shares some history about his family.

In 1928, the Rummage Store used the location to sell railroad and steamship salvage and bankruptcy stock items, but it was gone by 1930.

Knapp Brothers reestablished the printing tradition at this address starting in 1934, with Lawrence F. Knapp (1868-1951) as manager. It operated there longer than any other company. The community recognized Knapp for printing the "Union Review," local club and church newsletters and magazines, and fulfilling orders from large firms.

Lawrence's niece, Florence L. Ganter (1907-1972), was the last family member to own the building, which was sold after her passing in 1972.

Emily Whiteside, a pioneer of historic preservation in Galveston and executive director of the Galveston County Cultural Arts Council, purchased 217 Tremont and hired architects Ford, Powell, and Carson to rehabilitate the property.

It became the first privately restored building near The Strand. In 1974 and 1975, the firm restored the exterior and adapted the interior to offer a ground-floor retail space and one two-bedroom apartment on each floor. A three-story atrium was added in the center of the building, and a private garden was added in the back.

Mindful of repurposing materials, Whiteside opened the back wall of the ground floor to create a 20 x 25-foot living and dining area floored with repurposed wood. Repurposed windows from a demolished building at the University of Texas were installed to enhance the natural light.

The building became known as the Whiteside Town Flats and was featured on the local homes tour in 1975 and "Southern Living Magazine" in 1977.

From 1986 to 1988, Sweet Seductions occupied the ground-floor retail space, advertising that a "basket of chocolates was a gift for all seasons."

In 1992, Deborah Conrad opened the Conrad Gallery, which featured contemporary works by local and internationally recognized artists.

Deborah, a jewelry artist, and her husband Terry, a metal sculptor, were part of an early surge of creatives who committed to working on the island and supporting the community simultaneously. Deborah was also one of the most active ArtWalk organizing committee members. The couple lived upstairs from the gallery.

The same year they opened, Conrad Gallery became the drop-off location for artwork entries vying to become the official Mardi Gras Galveston poster.

The current owners of the building are Brian and Joanna Yates. Brian's mother, Carol Frederickson Yates, was born in Galveston and is the granddaughter of immigrants. Though





Joanna and Brian Yates

September 2008.

"This thing filled up with water like a bathtub and then drained down and sat in the heat for two weeks," Brian remembers.

When the family next visited the property, they had to shovel an entrance into the front door due to the remaining silt. Brian's parents, who were building a new home in Fredericksburg, decided the situation was beyond what they wanted to handle.

Brian approached his father about purchasing the building for a weekend getaway, with rental units on the upper floors. The sale was completed in the following year.

"It was gutted when we bought it with exposed stone and brick. We restored electrical service for the upper units and initially used the building for storage," shares Brian. "It was right after the storm, and we tackled what we could."

Fur downs were removed to restore the 12-foot ceiling height, and carpet and laminates were removed to reveal the original heart pine floors.

"After we took out the carpeting, half an inch of dirt... there were the original 1870 floors," shares Brian. "It's just amazing."

The couple did much of the work, including sanding wood and cleaning. Among the challenges were dust from sand mortar, water leaks, and past damage that had been covered rather than repaired by previous owners.

"We've put in a lot of love and blood, sweat, and tears. Quite literally," states Joanna. "But she's worth it, you know."

The Yates appreciate details of the building that tell



A third floor bedroom

she and her husband had moved to Dickinson, they retained a strong connection with the island and visited every weekend, eventually purchasing the Whiteside Town Flats in 1997.

It became a family tradition for three generations to gather there for Dickens on the Strand and entertain family and friends at the building. After years of enjoying the building, a natural disaster intervened.

A high-water marker on the wall of the front vestibule reminds visitors of the damage caused by Hurricane Ike in



The second floor living room

stories of its past. Brian chose to retain the original wood surrounding a second-floor fireplace marked with burns from embers of a long-ago fire.

Another section of the floor seems stained with black ink, which the couple surmise dates back to when a printed press was bolted to the boards.

Even brick from a demolished first-floor fireplace was repurposed on the back patio.

"I'm always looking for square nails in the walls. There were plenty of them," Joanna smiles. She utilizes them to hang a sizable collection of artwork on every floor, preferring to employ them rather than inflicting new holes in historic brickwork.

In a nod to island history, Brian built the upper floors' bookshelves and mantles from wood salvaged from the Ursuline Academy.

As the couple spent more time on the island for Dickens, Mardi Gras, and weekends, they moved here permanently in 2017.

"It's the greatest move we've ever made," says Joanna as she stands in the atrium, which she calls "the heart of the building."

She feels it is essential to preserve the history of the building. "I would love to give this girl her due. It's absorbed the vibrations of thousands of people."

The couple plans to sell the building soon and they are currently involved in another downtown renovation on Market Street.

"Of course," clarifies Joanna, "we'll be very careful who we would let have her." 



Brian Yates showing high-water marker from Hurricane Ike in September 2008