



CONLEY:

HOUSE WITH
A PAST AND A FUTURE

Text by KAREN WORLEY Photos by PAT DAIVSON





WORKERS REPAIR the deep bracketed eaves of the Conley House, an Italianate Revival Victorian style home built in the 1860s and located just southwest of Jesse Hall.

DURING THE FIRST historical archaeological dig on Campus, graduate student Geoff Pratt of Columbia uncovered an old English Tipt teaspoon.

ON A BRISK November morning at the archaeological dig behind the Conley House, graduate student Geoff Pratt, AB '85, uncovered an old English Tipt teaspoon, encrusted with mud and green from the weathered copper under its silver plate.

The Saturday before, his partner Andrea Repp of St. Louis had found a late-1800s perfume atomizer, made partly by machine, partly by hand. "The perfume bottle indicates people were upper-middle class," says Earl Lubensky, MA '83, who is crew chief of the first historical archaeological dig on Campus. Students and teachers agree it was an unusual find and a significant clue to the lifestyle of the Sanford F. Conley family, who built the brick home from bricks made on the property from 1867 to 1869.

The University bought the Conley House, a two-story, T-shaped structure at the corner of Conley and Sanford streets just southwest of Jesse Hall, in 1980 for \$90,000. After renovation, the building, named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1973, will become the home of the Honors College and the Missouri Cultural Heritage Center.

Nine undergraduate and graduate students are enrolled in Introduction to Field Research and Historical American Archaeology classes. The course is taught by Robert Bray, MA '55, associate professor of anthropology, and teaching assistant Lubensky.

Bray says the Missouri Cultural Heritage Center, one of the dig's sponsors, is interested in how the findings relate to the house. "We're attempting to extend the history of the entire situation, including family life and architectural structures." Other sponsors are the anthropology department and the American archaeology division.

The class found the foundation of the frame servants' quarters, complete with drain pipes to a sink and a commode. Uncovering a blue stone, probably from a ring, generated excitement among class members. Was it a genuine lapis lazuli stone?

No, a jeweler told Bray, it was imitation. Other jewelry unearthed include parts of a collar stud, a gold locket and a silver ring.

"The jewelry indicated they weren't poverty-stricken people, yet I think we'll see evidence of hard times," Lubensky says.

As the students dug deeper, round-cut nails gave way to square-cut nails, heavily decayed with rust and dating before 1890. Six different kinds of buttons and parts of electric lighting systems and kerosene lamps show technological transitions.

At the lowest levels, 20 to 30 centimeters, students found flint or chert materials, indicating the site probably was occupied by Indians 1000 A.D. or before, Lubensky says.

Midway into the semester, after students had found the building foundation and scatters of glass that marked window locations, a woman who had lived in the house for 23

years visited the site. Katherine Conley Turner of Kansas City, granddaughter of the Conleys, told Bray that the frame building, painted red to resemble brick, had been servants' quarters and it had a sink in the northeast corner.

"Oral history coincides with physical evidence," Bray says. "We were not finding evidence of a brick structure, and we had already found the drain to the sink."

The other major architectural discovery was a brick walk that came from the major house eastward on the south side of servants' quarters.

In excavations next fall, Bray hopes to unearth a privy, cistern and wood shed. Other outside structures were an ice house, barn, brick kiln and well. "Many students today don't know what a cistern and privy are," he chuckles.

The 12-room house is one of the oldest buildings in the city; it served as the Conley family home for more than a century. In 1892, during the fire at the University's Academic Hall, carpets were removed from the home to smother burning debris carried into the yard.

On the outside, the house is constructed in Italianate Revival Victorian style—rare for the area with examples concentrated in St. Louis and Independence. It is characterized by a low-pitched, mansard roof, arched doorway, deep bracketed eaves and pink brickwork. Limestone trims some windows. On the west side, a wooden porch runs the length of the house.

"Many students today don't know what a cistern and privy are," says anthropologist Robert Bray.

The interior of the house is best described in research done by Kelly Madden, AB '82, for a Material Culture class and for her stepmother, Elsie McCloud Fellows Madden, great-granddaughter of the Conley who built the home. Newspaper accounts of the 1903 wedding reception of the Conley's only daughter, Helen Singleton Conley, describe some of the house's interior. Palms graced the front drawing room; red roses and ferns decorated the library; mantels were banked with green; and ropes of smilax and white bunting covered the walnut woodwork and dark hardwood floors.

George Miller, AB '39, fondly remembers his grandmother, Kate Singleton Conley. "Grandmother's claim to fame on the piano was that she could play 'Dixie' with one hand and 'Yankee Doodle Dandy' with the other."

When company came to call, the double doors between the living room and front parlor were opened to provide room to dance the Virginia Reel. The Columbia lawyer has childhood memories of servants carrying hot water upstairs for Saturday-night baths. Servants included a yard man, a cook and a handyman.

"The assumption is that my grandfather bought mail-order plans for the house," Miller says, which explains the home's fancy exterior and relatively plain interior. The

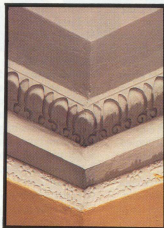
exterior speaks of an "above-average house for a well-off businessman," says Dr. Howard Marshall, AB '70, director of the Missouri Cultural Heritage Center and professor of art history. Two false windows on the north side "square up and balance out the facade." Inside, the walnut stairway and mantels, front hall and curved upstairs walls are unique, but not fancy. In her research, Madden calls it a "Georgian side hall house." Marshall agrees. "It's a vernacular floor plan, a folk house in its interior." For his family of

five children, Sanford Conley, the original occupant, just "dressed it up in those fancy Victorian clothes."

When Conley died in 1890 at age 52, his family was left with little money to maintain the house. Kate took in boarders. The original five-acre lot was divided into parcels and sold. Miller recalls that Uncle John Conley, a well-to-do bachelor, left each child \$20,000 when he died in 1898. The children fared well in the fields of banking, law and medicine. Meanwhile, the servants' quarters,



ORIGINAL egg-and-dart molding, right, trims the front parlor that will be restored to a late-1800s period interior. Visitors walking through the arched front door will see a walnut staircase and fireplace with mirrored mantel. The 12-room historic building will be put to contemporary use as home of the Honors College and the Missouri Cultural Heritage Center.



barn and ice house were torn down. A kitchen, sunrooms and bedrooms were added, and the house eventually was turned into a duplex in the late 1930s.

In the 1960s, during rapid expansion, the University indicated interest in buying the property. The family, however, feared officials would tear the house down and build a parking lot. When the University's business manager saw a 1960s appraisal for \$270,000, "He threw it up in the air," Miller recalls. "He wasn't interested." The house was reappraised after Miller's mother died in 1976, this time for a much lower figure.

In the meantime, Miller watched the work being done on the Chancellor's Residence, built in the same era as the Conley House. "I had seen Barbara Uehling's interest in renovation." He offered to sell the property to the University for \$90,000.

Marshall agrees that the University's mood has changed. "We're at a crossroads in our history," he says, noting the formation of a four-campus preservation committee that assesses the value of cultural property as part of the facilities-planning process. "It's nice to see the University accept and take advantage of this cultural responsibility," adds Dr. Osmund Overby, professor of art history who is a member of the preservation committee. "Buildings are important historical documents."

Extensive research, down to details as small as door hinges, has gone into the restoration/renovation planning process. James Darrough, a Columbian known for his work with historical buildings, was chosen as the supervising architect.

The exterior and grounds will look much like they did in the 1880s, the period deemed most appropriate to depict, with exception of a new back door and walkway for everyday traffic. Two or three colors of

"The assumption is that my grandfather bought mail-order plans for the house," says George Miller, AB '39.

paint will dramatize the details of Victorian-era wood craftsmanship. Overby can envision splashes of blooming spirea in the yard. He also hopes dig results will be worked into the landscape "to help visitors understand the site when it was the house of one of the prosperous families of Columbia."

The Conley House also fits into the Campus master plan. It is an integral part of the green space for the south side of Jesse Hall, which ultimately will become a large quadrangle like that north of Jesse, says

Duane Stucky, vice chancellor for administrative services.

In 1983, exterior work costing \$22,000 included tuckpointing and roof repair. Reinhardt Construction Co. of Centralia got the \$343,391 bid for current work. At least \$75,000 of that will come from private donations, including a \$50,000 sum from unrestricted development funds. Another \$55,678 comes from state maintenance and repair money with the balance coming from campus funds and additional private donations.

Interior work will include restoration of selected rooms, including the second Victorian hallway and the front parlor.

Planning is under way to furnish the parlor as a period interior of the 1880s and 1890s, says Susan Elledge, interior designer. From samples of the room's eight layers of wallpaper, she's suggesting a Victorian-style paper in beige with some mauve accents, more geometric than floral. Furniture will come from the Acena, Robert and Jenny Booth estate and family of Helen Tracy, granddaughter of Sanford F. Conley. Lace curtains will cover the windows and rugs on the hardwood floor will be either a large floral pattern or Oriental. Old gas fixtures will be wired for electricity. Other decorative elements might include parlor palms, large mirrors, family pictures or hair weavings.

"We're being fairly selective now," Elledge says. As she develops a shopping list, she hopes for donations, since needs will exceed her budget. Research done by a graduate student in housing and interior design, Toni Prawl, for a Historic Preservation class has been helpful for the interior design.

Some concessions to restoration have been made. For instance, the house's brittle knob-and-tube wiring was replaced to support modern-day office equipment, Darrough says. Room radiators and the steam boiler in the basement were replaced with central heating and air conditioning, complete with heat pumps.

For the next level of rehabilitation, Marshall says, "We're practicing adaptive reuse in the living room and dining room. This is rehabilitation for modern purposes, but we're retaining the historic personality of the structure." Upstairs, the big front bedroom will be a gallery for Missouri Cultural Heritage Center-produced exhibits. The gallery will feature tackable walls and track lighting, yet will echo the colors of the restored portion of the house.

In the additions that were built later, complete rehabilitation is under way for computerized offices and a classroom. "Even in the totally converted space, we'll try to convey a sense of history," Marshall says. For instance, "Since no closets exist, we'll use old wardrobes for storage."

Preserving the Conley House clearly shows people that the University cares about

the heritage of Missouri, he says.

In the living room, next to the fireplace, a bookshelf containing rare books about Missouri's history or great works of Homer, Plato and Virgil will be available for Honors College students "in a setting that will encourage their use," says Ed Kaiser, director of the Honors College and professor of chemistry.

The Honors College, celebrating its 25th year, attracts outstanding students to

Sanford Conley "dressed it up in those fancy Victorian clothes," says Howard Marshall of the cultural heritage center.

the University. It works best in a non-institutional environment, Kaiser says. He hopes the Conley House will be ready to move into by early next summer, in time for Summer Welcome. "It will help with student recruitment. It's a building that prospective students and their parents can see and identify with."

Being chosen as a Conley House tenant is concrete proof that the University wants to have good students, Kaiser says. Alumni programs, such as the National Merit/National Achievement Scholars and Alumni Scholars, support that notion, too.

It will be a culturally rich environment for 1,400 students each semester, he says. The living room will be perfect for small-group discussions, and a classroom in the eastern part of the house will seat 15 to 20 students.

Kaiser's also pleased with his upstairs neighbor. Both the Honors College, a program for undergraduates, and the Missouri Cultural Heritage Center, a research center of the Graduate School, are small centers doing a lot on small budgets.

"We exist to pay attention to our own cultural heritage," says Marshall, the center's director. Among future goals are interdisciplinary courses and internships in cultural heritage studies, a gallery that highlights common citizens in Missouri and the establishment of a friends' group to help with special projects and activities.

The Missouri Cultural Heritage Center and the Conley House, Marshall says, are "a good fit. That building embodies our mood here. We're interested in Missouri's history, past and present, high and low culture. It's all echoed in the Conley House.

"Though small, the Conley House renovation is a significant effort. If we do it right, we can be proud that we've done a nice job on an important historic building." □