

LA VILLA BOARDING HOUSE,
TURKISH HAREM
832-834 Houston Street
Jacksonville
Duval County
Florida

HABS NO. FL-346-B

HABS
FLA,
16-JACK,
9B-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HABS
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS No. FL-346-B

La-VILLA HOUSE--832-834 HOUSTON STREET
("The Turkish Harem")

Location: 832-834 Houston Street, Jacksonville, Duval County,
Florida.

USGS Jacksonville Quadrangle, Universal Transverse
Mercator Coordinates: 17. 435720.3352600.

Present Owner: Thomas D. Lee, Jr.

Present Occupant: Varies--apartment/boarding.

Present Use: Multiple family dwelling.

Significance: Houston Street previously known as Ward -- was an
elegant red light district from the late nineteenth to
the mid-twentieth century. This structure is the
oldest of a group of three houses which are the last
remaining examples of the character of the area.
Unified by similar scale and function, the houses were
built as "female boarding houses" between ca. 1895 and
ca. 1905.

PART HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The structure was probably built in 1895 when the first mortgage appears on the parcel; it appears on the Sanborn Insurance map of 1897 and not sooner.
2. Architect: Unknown. The husband of the original owner of the property, one Oscar Neunert was, however, in the construction trade, according to Jacksonville City Directories from the 1880's to 1904.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The boarding house lies on the eastern most forty-two feet of Lot 3, Block 4, LaVilla Subdivision B, as recorded in the LaVilla-Lem Turner Park Deed Book, p. 9, in the Title and Trust Company of Florida, of Jacksonville.

1891 Warranty Deed, April 1, 1891, recorded April 30, 1895, in liber 96 folio 427; the easterly most part of lot 3, block 4; passed from

Fannie Jackson, widow Daniel Hayward and wife Margaret, Sam Hayward and wife Bettie, Cyrus Wright and wife Sarah, James H. Hill and wife Sarah, heirs at law of Lena Jenkins, deceased

to

Fannie Jackson, Daniel Hayward, and Sam Hayward

1895 Warranty Deed, September 19, 1895, recorded September 19, 1895 in liber 98 folio 634; east 42' of lot 3, Block 4; passed from

Fannie Miles, wife of Simon Miles, formerly Jackson, and husband Simon, and Dan Hayward and wife Margaret

to

Rosa Newnert (Neunert), wife of Oscar Newnert

1963 Warranty Deed, August 29, 19630 recorded September 3, 1963, in liber 1972 folio 446; lots 2,3,4, etc., Block 4; passed from

Rosa Neunert

to

City Realty

1963 Warranty Deed, Sepember 12, 1963, recorded November 12, 1963, in liber 2029 folio 215; lots 2,3,4, etc., Block 4; passed from

City Realty

to

J. H. Higbee, Jr., et al

1974 Warranty Deed, March 4, 1974, recorded March 4. 1974, in liber 3676 folio 655; lots 2,3,4, etc., Block 4; passed from

J. H. Higbee, Jr., et al

to

Thomas D. Lee, Jr.

4. Original plans, construction, etc.: There are no construction records available for the building. It was built as a "female boarding house", the euphemism for bawdy house used in the Sanborn Insurance Company notations, by Mrs. Neunert before the great fire of 1901. Business was apparently successful enough to warrant the building of two more houses on either side of this one after the fire (830 and 836 Houston Street. (See HABS No's. F1-346, and 346 C).

- 5 Alterations and additions: The southwest section of the frame and tin extension at the rear of the house is noted on the Sanborn map of 1897, and part of it was stuccoed; the southeastern wing was added by 1913. The first recorded alteration occurred in 1960, when Mrs. Neunert hired J. E. Hutchins of Jacksonville to renovate and convert the house into a duplex. According to the plans filed with the City Building Permit Office, this renovation consisted of: removing and replacing plaster, rewiring, adding new plumbing, replacing worn wood, removing the back interior stair and first floor stair arch, replacing said with a closet door; remodeling and extending the lower porch. The present owner put on a built-up roof and knocked down the crenelations on the parapet in 1974 or spring of 1975.

B. Historical Events and Persons Associated with the Building

History of LaVilla and the Ward (Houston) Street Restricted District: LaVilla is the oldest sub-corporation of Jacksonville (Craig, p.42) and has played a notable and often infamous role in the history of the city.

The bulk of the area presently bounded by Clay Street on the east, the Florida East Coast Rail Yard on Bay Street, on the south, Cleveland Street on the west, and Kings Road on the north was an original Spanish Land Grant acquired by a John Jones in 1801 (Davis, p.41), re-ceded to Isaac Hendricks, holder of vast tracts of land in the Jacksonville area during the founding years of the town (Ibid).

The Baptist minister James S. Baker purchased the tract in 1851; it was named by his son J. McRobert Baker. One of Jacksonville's earliest schools, the LaVilla Institute, was founded there by the elder Baker and continued to operate until the Civil War.

During the war, LaVilla was the location for the campsite of the Confederate St. John Grays, which became Company G of the Second Florida Infantry Regiment, having been originally mustered out by the prominent Jacksonvillian Jacquelin Daniel (Martin, p. 33).

During the first Federal occupation of Jacksonville, West LaVilla was the site of "the first blood of the war spilled in/the/vicinity" (Davis, p. 121), when Confederates attacked a Union picket, killing four and capturing three, but losing one of their own lieutenants in the process on March 25, 1862 (Ibid).

After the war, West LaVilla garrisoned one of the black guards of the Federal occupying forces (Davis, p. 150); the area was an island at this time, bounded by the courses of two creeks since infilled (Davis, p. 151). At this time the tract was purchased by Francis F. L'Engel, who subdivided it, incorporated the Town of LaVilla, and served as its first mayor (Davis, p. 42). The major development of the area apparently occurred during these tumultuous Reconstruction years. It had mixed land usages and a mixed population. A large portion of the populace was black, reflecting the changing sociological conditions prevalent throughout Jacksonville after the war; but "many prominent whites" had residences there (Craig, p. 43) including the L'Engels (WPA papers), and there was a significant number of Jews residing there as well (Perry interview). The south end of the newly-formed town was given to business concerns, such as the Banes and Washington Lumber Dealership, the El Modelo Cigar factory--Jacksonville's foremost commercial types--the Florida depot of the Bergner and Engel Brewing Company, the Refrigerated Ice Works, carriage works, and beef dressing works (Craig, p. 43).

LaVilla was also the site of a vaccinating center during the smallpox epidemic of 1883 (Martin, p. 142) and of a fumigating station during the yellow fever epidemic which decimated Jacksonville's population in 1888 (Martin, p. 143).

In the 1870's and 1880's, many cheaper residences had begun to have been built (Davis p. 152). By the 1890's the female boarding (bawdy) houses which gave the aura of notoriety with which LaVilla is still associated began to promulgate the exodus of more fashionable families to the suburbs of Springfield and Riverside (Bauman interview).

LaVilla's name was further besmirched by the fact that it was the starting point of the fire of 1901 that destroyed almost all of downtown Jacksonville:

Shortly before 12:30 p.m., May 3, 1901, sparks from a nearby negro shanty ignited particles of fibre laid out to dry on the platform of the Cleaveland Fibre Factory, located in LaVilla, at Beaver and Davis Streets. Watchmen soon noticed the jets of flame and poured bucket after bucket of water on the burning mass, but other fragments of this highly inflammable material took up the flame and carried it into the factory building. The immense room was at once a roaring furnace. In the meantime an alarm had been sent in, at 12:35 p.m., but when the firemen arrived with their horse-drawn apparatus, the building was already

doomed. A fresh west-northwest wind was blowing, and when the roof of the factory fell in, particles of burning fiber were carried away and fell upon neighboring buildings, whose wooden roofs were combustible as tinder, owing to prolonged drought. The fire then spread from house to house seemingly with the rapidity with which a man could walk (Davis, p. 219).

While Jacksonville rebuilt, the prostitution business flourished on Ward, later known as Houston Street, for the white clientele, and to the north for the black. The red light district continued to exist until the Second World War, when Health concerns expressed by the U.S. Navy prevailed (Starrett interview). Soon thereafter the houses were replaced by commercial warehouses which are now virtually the only white holdings in a black residential community.

Three houses, 830, 832-834, and 836 Houston Street, are all that remain of the posh "resorts" lining the south side of that block between Madison and Davis Streets. The middle house, commonly known during the 'teens' as "The Turkish Harem" was built first, probably in 1895 when the first mortgage appears on the property, by Rose or Rosa Laubach Neunert, the wife of a contractor. She also had the second house, 830, "The New York Inn", constructed between 1897 and 1903. These houses were considered to be very elegant, clean establishments up until the 1930's and early 1940's, when prostitution was forced out of districts and houses into private apartments, hotels, and motels during the Second World War (Starrett interview); they always "out classed" the houses on the north side of Ward Street, such as the one run by Lyda DeCamp (Gilkes, 317).

Rosa Neunert apparently never worked or supervised in the houses herself, having maintained a separate residence in LaVilla, Springfield, with her husband Oscar until his death in 1909, and in the fashionable suburb of Ortega until her own death in 1968 at the age of 99 (City Directories and Probate files). She was, however, fully aware of what her properties were being used for; there is every indication that the structures were built for that specific purpose. Each of them has a similar plan: parlors or "ballrooms" in the front with a central corridor giving access to a string of bedrooms on either side. The third house, owned and built between 1903 and 1913 by Rosa as well, 836 Houston Street, has a bit more distinguished architectural detailing, and as such may have been a response by Rosa to her competitor Cora Taylor McNeil, former common law wife of Stephen Crane, whose sumptuous house "The Court" was built by the prominent local architect W. B. Camp on the south west corner of Ward and Davis Streets between 1902 and 1904.

The existence of the LaVilla "resorts", as they were dubbed by the newspapers around the turn of the century, was well-known and generally accepted without much moral indignation. They were frequented, after all, up until the 1940's by the most prominent city citizens and members of municipal and county government (Starrett interview). There were a few exceptions.

The district was established in LaVilla as an indirect result of the municipal elections of 1887. Democrat John Q. Burbridge prevailed over ex-mayor Davey, and when he took office in April, "he chased most of Jacksonville's prostitutes over the city line to the suburb of LaVilla and urged the people to make their town more attractive for business and the development of new industry" (Martin, p. 187). Burbridge's effort was to be thwarted within two months, when LaVilla became incorporated into the city on May 31, 1887, when the last mayor of LaVilla J.E.T. Bowden began bringing the resorts into the news. Bowden had many real estate holdings in the area besides from his own impressive home and garden (Craig, p. 43), one of which was the Coliseum, consisting of a swimming pool and turkish bath (Ibid), and he had long been involved in local civic concerns:

The temperance movement came to a head as a series of scandals erupted in LaVilla in which the little town's mayor,...Bowden fought an outrageously corrupt City Council, personally raided houses of prostitution, and tried to close one of the most notorious bistros along the LaVilla section of Bay Street,..."The Store", owned by Colonel Sam Houston...The police force, controlled by the alderman, also refused to cooperate, and at one point Bowden personally arrested two of them when he raided a house of prostitution and caught them "in the arms of two women" instead of patrolling their beats. At the height of his trouble Mayor Bowden minced no words, calling La Villa's aldermen "drunkards and bar-room pimps...who have not the least regard for their oaths of office, and for a drink of whiskey...will sell their votes for any purpose" (Martin, p. 187, citing Florida Times-Union, October 23, 24, 27, 1887).

At least one of Rosa's houses was visited by Carrie Nation in another Temperance campaign in 1908. While ill-received at Cora Taylor's Court, she was admitted, graciously into the "The New York Inn" and delivered a remorse-and-tear evoking sermon to the girls which lasted a quarter of an hour (Florida Times-Union, 2//14/08, p. 2), the net result of which seems to have been negligible.

In the fall of 1913, the H. R. Finn Realty Company, agents for the Flagler Hotel, brought a series of Bills of Complaint against the Ward Street madames and their landlady. Madames Grace and Helen Darst or Dawson or Darcy of the Inn and Edith Paret of the Harem and owner Rosa Neunert admitted that they were supervising or knowingly consenting to the commission of acts of prostitution on the properties and agreed to cease the operation on January 1, 1914, forever (County Clerk's Minute Books 12-4, 11/17/13). The allegations in the complaints that "drunken, disorderly, and disreputable persons" with a "boisterous and obscene" manner frequented the houses do not correspond to the image of Rosa's houses as remembered by a man who pimped in the area during the First World War, or to their image in later years as remembered by members of the F.B.I., U. S. Attorney's Office, or City Vice Squad (Berry, Buol, Madsen, and Starrett interviews); the allegations may have been tied to Finn's efforts to gain more property in the area for an addition to the hotel, then situated on the northwest corner of Davis and Adams Streets. A Florida Times-Union article dated the day after the Complaints were sworn out noted that J.E.T. Bowden would be erecting an addition to the Flagler on property acquired by Finn in anticipation of increased tourist trade coming with the new railroad terminal building (FTU 11/18/13, p. 22).

The motion by the City's mayor, seconded by the City Council, to close down the district in 1914 (Davis, p. 247) seems to have been prompted more by this concern about putting-off some of the Yankee tourist trade than with moral outrage over the business itself.

For, in spite of these legal actions, the area remained active as a red light district for several decades. Rosa's houses were still handsomely kept during the 1930's and early 1940's; even as an old woman Rosa collected the rent money in person, full cash payment being due on rent day, upon pain of immediate eviction (Buol, ex-madame X interview). The area began to decline during the late 1940's, when the officials at the Navy Yard worried about health problems--needlessly in the case of the Rosa's houses, for whom a doctor was maintained (Starrett) girls--and had Mayor Haydon Burns really close down the area. Since then, Ward, now called Houston Street, formerly a twentieth century reminder of Jacksonville's colorful boom years after Reconstruction, has steadily declined into a blighted area consisting of a handful of delapidated black family boarding houses, rusting railroad tracks, and warehouses.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Views: A detail of the north facade, showing the crenelated parapet before it was removed and dated 1962 is in the Jacksonville Historical Society Collection at Jacksonville University.

2. Primary and unpublished sources:

Title and Trust Company of Florida, County Clerk's Minute Books and Deed Books; 200 East Forsyth Street, Jacksonville, Florida.

Interviews:

Mrs. Katherine M. Bauman (age 85), Searing Terrace, Jacksonville, 7/10/75: (former census taker in LaVilla during the 1930's) concerning conditions in red light district.

Mr. Frederick W. Buol, (age 70), F.B.I. headquarters, U.S. Post Office Building, Jacksonville, 7/9/75; (investigator in white slavery cases in 1930's-50's) inter-locutor for interview with Mrs. X, most successful madame in Duval County during the 1940's and Madame in Rosa Neunert's Ward Street Houses during the early 1940's, reminiscing about district conditions.

Mr. Mellen Greeley (age 95), on Houston Street, site, 7/21/75; (prominent local architect who worked in J.H.W. Hawkins' office from 1901-1905); concerning Hawkins' familiarity with the area and his style and detailing being evident in the house at 836 Houston.

Mr. Thomas D. Lee, Jr., (age 51), Lee and Cates Glass Company, 142 Madison Street, Jacksonville, 6/16/75; (present owner) concerning changes made to buildings and district conditions in the 1930's.

Mr. E. Coleman Madsen, (age 60), Office of Madsen, Gelman, Figur, and Funk, Florida Bank Building, Jacksonville, 7/9/75; principal in firm of Madsen and Briggs, settlers of Rosa Neunert's estate) concerning personal reminiscences of Rosa Neunert and of prostitution in the city during his tenure as prosecutor for the U. S. Attorney's Office for white slave cases in Florida in the 1940's and 1950's.

Mr. Lawrence Perry (age 95), near Emmett Walker's Grocery Store, 900 Block West Monroe Street, Jacksonville, 7/2/75; (former pimp during WWI), reminiscing about "the sporting life" in LaVilla during the 'teens and 1920's and the character of the black residential neighborhood.

Mr. Robert Starrett (age 65), Office of the Director of Safety and Security, Jacksonville Port Authority, 2701 Talleyrand Avenue, Jacksonville, 7/1/75 (former head of City Police Vice Squad), concerning the calibre and interior furnishings of Ward Street houses raided during the 1940's.

3. Manuscripts:

Bigelow, Lee. History of Jacksonville (WPA), 1939. Floridian Collection, Haydon Burns Library, Jacksonville.

"Corse Files" - WPA Papers-Interviews of Local Residents, 1939-40. Floridian Collection, Haydon Burns Library.

4. Newspapers:

Anon., "Carrie Nation Paid Visit to Resorts", Florida Times-Union, 2/14/08, p. 2.

Anon., "New Hotel Unit to be Added to Flagler Group", Florida Times-Union, 11/18/13, p. 22.

5. Secondary Sources:

Brown, S. Paul, The Book of Jacksonville. Poughkeepsie, New York: A.V. Haight, 1895.

Craig, James C. The Jacksonville Historical Society Paper, Vol. III. Jacksonville: The Jacksonville Historical Society, 1954.

Davis, T. Frederick. History of Jacksonville, Florida and Vicinity: 1513 to 1924. St. Augustine: The Record Company and the Florida Historical Society, 1925.

Esgate, James. Jacksonville: The Metropolis of Florida. Boston: William Perry, 1888.

Gilkes, Lillian. Cora Crane: A Biography of Mrs. Stephen Crane. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1960.

Gold, Pleasant Daniel. History of Duval County. St. Augustine: The Record Company, 1929.

Rohrabacher, C. A. (publisher). Live Towns and Progressive Men of Florida. Jacksonville: C. A. Rohrabacher, 1887.

Prepared by: Carolyn J. Hamm
Field Historian
Historic American
Buildings Survey
Jacksonville, Florida
July, 1975

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Medieval castle style "female boarding house" ca. 1895 with individual rooms opening from an access hall, the structure is notable for details such as crenelated parapet and bastion, rather than craftsmanship.
2. Condition of fabric: Poor - poor original construction, now deteriorated.
3. Overall dimensions: 40'-4" x 55'-10 3/4" (plus 26'-11 3/4" shed). Number of bays, 5 (facade). 2 stories. Rectangular shape, irregular projections.
4. Foundations: Brick.

5. Wall construction, finish and color: Brick veneer, painted white. Brick crenelations at parapet, corbelled and machicolated. Projecting water table course.
6. Structural system, framing: Wooden frame.
7. Porches, stoops, bulkheads, etc.: Enclosed entrance porch with marble floor and arched entry.
8. Chimneys: Three.
9. Openings: Doorways and doors: Semicircular arch over entry, alternately projecting voussoirs in lower course of arch, plain header course, and upper course of projecting headers.
10. Porches, stoops, bulkheads, etc: Enclosed entrance porch with marble floor and arched entry.
11. Chimneys: Three.
12. Openings, doorways and doors: Semicircular arch over entry, alternately projecting voussoirs in lower course of arch, plain header course, and upper course of projecting headers.
13. Windows and shutters: Segmental arches, projecting upper course over windows, except jack arched windows in bastion. Pintles indicate shutters on west elevation.
14. Roof, shape covering: Parapet, flat built up roof with central drain.
15. Cornice, eaves: Crenelated parapet, corbelled from walls.
16. Dormers, cupolas, towers: None.
17. Floor plans: Interior inaccessible. Foyer, access hall, individual rooms.
18. Stairways, flooring, wall and ceiling finish, doorways and doors: Inaccessible.
19. Special decorative features, notable hardware, mechanical equipment: None.

B.

Site:

One of three built near the railroad terminal in LaVilla, the house is oriented toward the north (15 degrees northeast) in a now blighted area.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey in cooperation with the Florida Bicentennial Commission and the Jacksonville Historical and Cultural Conservation Commission, under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, at the HABS Field Office, Riverside, Jacksonville, Florida, by Susan Tate (University of Florida), project supervisor; Frederick Wiedenmann (University of Florida), architect;Carolynn Hamm (Cornell University), project historian; and student assistant architects Robert Moje (University of Virginia), Ruthie Wiley (Mississippi State University), and Robert Wiltse (Louisiana State University).