

MOVING IT FORWARD

A tornado, a fire and some 162 years of wear and tear have pushed one of Little Rock's most historic homes to the brink. Here's how the Quapaw Quarter Association and the city are trying desperately to bring it back

BY MARIAM MAKATSARIA

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RHEA ROBERTS

walks up to a tired mansion on a quiet, crumbling stretch of East Eighth Street in downtown Little Rock, pulls a cordless drill from an orange neoprene case and—*bzzzzz*—buzzes screws from the whitewashed plywood sheets barricading the

front door. Her blond hair is pulled back in a messy, let's-get-down-to-business bun, and a pair of red-rimmed sunglasses sits on the top of her head. When asked if she needs any help, she declines the offer.

As the executive director of the Quapaw Quarter Association removes the makeshift barrier, we stand there waiting, exploring with our eyes, our expressions uncertain in the face of so much dereliction. We're a diverse group of people, each here for a different purpose—a painter searching for inspiration, a writer hoarding information for a novel and me. And there's a reason why we all think we're going to find whatever we're looking for here. Encased within the walls of this house is a century and a half of history. It was *Arkansas Gazette* founder William Woodruff's longtime home—a dramatically spacious private escape that has now become a rescue project not for the faint of heart. And in looking at the house—a wreck of its former self—it could easily be mistaken for an abandoned estate whose cry for help had once turned into a howl and has since dwindled to a soft whimper.

When the doors open, the aroma of old cigarettes, mold and something indiscernible wafts out of the house. By the light of flashlights, we examine the foyer. Inside, the Woodruff House's grandeur isn't immediately obvious. Instead, my gaze falls on the mounted wooden mailboxes, their doors unhinged or broken altogether, a bulky, unopened padded envelope resting atop the number "11." I look at the cracked, peeling paint, the coffee-colored stained ceiling whose corners seem to be held together by cobwebs, the gouged paneling, the thick layer of dust coating every possible inch of every possible surface. As we walk up the white-railed staircase, built in the 1920s (no one knows what the original staircase looked like, Roberts says), it wheezes and groans beneath the unfamiliar pressure. There are bathrooms and kitchens and more bathrooms and more kitchens on every floor, and it's hard to think that decades ago, when the house was split into apartment units, they were habitable.

Then there are other disheartening sights, ones not caused by mere inattention, but a lack of sympathy for this downtown jewel—an empty bag of Brim's Classic potato chips, soda cans and broken blind slats jutting at all different angles like the points of a weather vane. There are dusty bottles of J.W. Dant's Olde Bourbon and Italian Swiss Colony's California muscatel with grimy labels dotting the floors. And even if I look at it with as cool an eye as I'm able, I can't help but feel slightly deflated by these facts of neglect.

But in the midst of all the rubble, garbage and bits of glass strewn on the floor, there are glimmers of promise. There is a strip of accent wallpaper in the second-floor bathroom, a series



of teddy bear illustrations right above two beach-ball-sized gashes in the wall, where the guts of the house remain exposed. There is the white-brick fireplace, embellished with intricate golden appliques. And when we move to the third floor, where it's bright and throat-tighteningly humid, there is the stiff, brittle wallpaper in what I assume was once a bedroom, flaking to reveal layers of patterns that graced the walls throughout the years—162, to be precise.

It was in 1819 that Woodruff, a New York native, published the first issue of the *Arkansas Gazette*. Thirty years later, he ordered the construction of a Greek Revival residence on a 25-acre plot of land that he'd bought for himself and his family of 12. And when they moved into the house in 1853, the almost-7,000-square-foot manor had all the makings of an opulent mansion—13 bedrooms, a 40-foot hallway and a library (or the “father’s room,” as it was referred to back then). By the large fireplaces that were built in every room, Woodruff and his family gathered every winter, burning as many as 100 cords of wood. But you didn’t have to go inside to understand its remarkable

IN 2005, A FIRE STRUCK THE ROOM JUST ADJACENT TO WHAT BRIAN MINYARD CALLS “THE PURPLE KITCHEN ROOM.” A RESULTING HOLE IN THE FLOOR WILL ENABLE MINYARD, A TERMITE CONTROL EXPERT AND A CONTRACTOR TO REMOVE THE PLYWOOD AND CRAWL UNDERNEATH THE HOUSE TO INSPECT ITS BEAM, HE SAYS. OTHERWISE, THE TEAM WOULD HAVE TO DRILL A HOLE IN THE FRONT PORCH.

lavishness. It opened to a circular carriage driveway, nestled in what was, back then, a piece of the countryside, dotted with an orchard, a poultry yard and beehives. On its east side, the Woodruffs tended to their vegetable and fruit garden; on its north side, the horses rolled in the stables and the pigs fed in their pens. At the time, the house faced south, and its circular upper-floor balcony overlooked Ninth Street (it would be later flipped to face north). In the heat of the Civil War, when Woodruff was banished for his support of the Confederacy, the Union Army commandeered the house to serve as a makeshift hospital, patching up combat wounds and recovering after sieging the surrounding land. And although Woodruff reclaimed it in 1865, the manor was sold out of the family six years after his death in 1885. Since then, it has been restructured to suit many purposes—a cottage home for out-of-town working women in the 1920s, a Colonial Club for Business Girls in the 1930s. For the following decades, it functioned as apartment homes. But in 1999, a tornado tore through the Little Rock area, and the stoic structure felt the toll deeply. It ripped the roof. It blew out 60 of the home’s 75 windows. Its then-owners, Vickie and John Karolson—a North Little Rock couple who’d bought the house in 1986, renovating and restructuring it into 14 apartment units and then renting it out to low-income tenants—couldn’t shake the disbelief. They decided to sell to Eric McDuffie, a Bank of the Ozarks vice president, and Mike Helms, an attorney, who spruced up the apartments, escalated the monthly rent and kept their fingers crossed that, upon the construction of the Clinton Presidential Center, the surrounding neighborhood—which McDuffie described as a “dump” in a 2000 article by the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*—would somewhat improve.

But even though much of the land east of Interstate 30 was bought up after the presidential library’s location was announced, says Brian Minyard, a planner with the city’s Planning and Development Department, the land was never developed. And this surprises him. “I do think there was a possibility that [the house] could have been

demolished during that time,” he says in his cramped office on West Markham Street. “There are also people who demolish buildings just for the bricks, and this house is three bricks thick.”

McDuffie and Helms’ efforts were only a temporary reprieve. (They ultimately sold the house to an LLC by the name of Allyn Ward Investments in 2003.) In 2005, the house suffered another blow from which it couldn’t recover. A fire damaged a first-floor room, leaving a hole in the floor. And ever since, the house has remained vacant, lingering in real estate limbo, waiting for a new owner.

In 2007, the house made the list of Arkansas’ most endangered places, raising alarm among preservationists and community members alike. That year, according to an article published by the *Democrat-Gazette*, it was on the market for \$428,000. In an auction held in November of that year, two dozen potential bidders crowded the foyer of Woodruff’s home. Only one made a meager bid of \$75,000, which was not accepted. The Quapaw Quarter Association (QQA) kept an eye on the property, wanting to restore it but unable to afford it.

Seven years later, the city and the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program (AHPP) pitched in with \$99,500. After years of waiting, the association was finally able to get its hands on the property from Allyn Ward Investments for a significantly reduced price of \$107,000 in December 2014. The association also snagged a Certified Local Government grant of \$49,500 to restore the house. But to use such a grant, which is drawn through the federal Historic Preservation Fund and offered to city and county governments enrolled in the AHPP’s preservation program, the home had to be a government entity, an obstacle the association managed to get around by donating an easement to the city (the facade) and an easement to the AHPP (the interior).

“I guess the big thing is that, since I’ve been at this job with the QQA, it’s the only brick-and-mortar project that we’ve been able to [work on and restore],” Roberts says. Her soft voice echoes in the reception room of the historic Curran Hall (aka the Little Rock Visitor Information Center in which the QQA is headquartered), where she sits at an old dining room table on a wobbly wooden chair with a sunken cushion. There are Woodruff’s belongings in vitrines around the hall and, most notably, his elaborately carved grand piano quietly rests in a corner. “It’s exciting for me, to really get in there and do things. I’ve become quite familiar with the house, and I can see the potential, and I can see what it can be.”

Although things have been moving along slower than she likes, both the association and the city know what needs to be done: Fix the brick where it’s falling out, the roof where it’s leaking, the wood where it’s rotting. In other words, the goal is to get the first floor to a decent, perhaps not excellent, condition so it can be listed in January for a price Roberts says they haven’t determined yet. (Roberts says she wishes the same could be done with the second and third floors, but funding would be an issue). And once it’s stabilized, it’ll be stripped. Stripped of the walls that once separated apartment units. Stripped of the modern intrusions that disturb its historic appeal. Stripped of the unnecessary bathroom plumbing, the carpets, the chipped tiles, the nonhistoric doors and door frames.

When future buyers walk in, they should be able to envision themselves living there—or perhaps envision an office, or tenants cooking in their apartments, or a decluttered, airy space that could potentially be anything. (The historic tax credits they’d get for making it an income-producing property won’t hurt, either.)

The house has already garnered the interest of many, Roberts says. If not to buy it, then at least to play a part in its rebirth. Many folks have reached out through social media, unwilling to let an important piece of Little Rock’s history go. In August 2015, for example, community members and preservation devotees came together to help clean up the lot surrounding the house. But even after the effort, in which volunteers in closed-toe shoes and raggy clothes helped remove trash off the

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COZY UP

There are plenty of outdoor adventures to be had this winter at **ARKANSAS' STATE PARKS** (arkansasstateparks.com) such as hiking Lake Catherine's Horseshoe Mountain Trail for a view of downtown Hot Springs that can only be enjoyed after the trees drop their leaves. But our favorite winter activity at the parks is quite a bit toastier: Nothing beats snuggling up in a cabin, sipping a cup of hot chocolate and stoking the fire—an activity that can only be had at one of these 10 state parks.

CENTRAL

LAKE CATHERINE

If a crackling fire's not enough to keep you warm, all of the cabins at this lakeside park come equipped with spa tubs to soak the day away. (1200 Catherine Park Road, Hot Springs; (501) 844-4176)

LAKE OUACHITA

Book cabins 1 through 5 for that classic Civilian Con-



servation Corps charm complete with wood-burning fireplaces and nearby docks. (5451 Mountain Pine Road, Mountain Pine; (501) 767-9366)

PETIT JEAN

Many of this mountaintop park's cabins include wood-burning fireplaces, but trust us: Book the Honeymoon Creek Cabin. It's set apart from the other cabins and includes a hot tub. (1285 Petit Jean Mountain Road, Morrilton; (501) 727-5441)

NORTHWEST

DEVIL'S DEN

Once the leaves fall, three-bedroom cabin 8 offers one of the best views of the park's 17 cabins. Oh, and did we mention it includes a spa tub? (Notice a trend here?) (11333 Arkansas 74 W., West Fork; (479) 761-3325)

LAKE FORT SMITH

Built in 2013, these 10 modern cabins are some of the newest in the park system and include reclaimed-stone fireplaces and covered decks. (Shepherd Spring Road, Mountainburg; (479) 369-2469)

MOUNT MAGAZINE

Take in the view of the Petit Jean River Valley and Blue Mountain Lake from your hot tub at one of these 13 ridge-top cabins. (Lodge Drive, Paris; (479) 963-8502)

MOUNT NEBO

With mountain views, fireplaces and spa tubs, the rustic cabins at Mount Nebo are perfect for a cozy winter weekend. (16728 Arkansas 155 W., Dardanelle; (479) 229-3655)

NORTHEAST

CROWLEY'S RIDGE

Perfect for large families, the cabins at this small state park near Paragould sleep four to six campers. (For really big families, there's even a group-lodging area that can fit 60. (2092 Arkansas 168 N., Paragould; (870) 573-6751)

VILLAGE CREEK

While the weather likely won't cooperate for a full 18 holes, you can still enjoy the view from cabin 4, which overlooks the park's 27-hole golf course. (201 County Road 754, Wynne; (870) 238-9406)

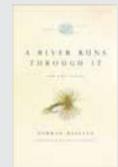
SOUTHEAST

LAKE CHICOT

The cold is a natural insect repellent, which means winter may be the best time to book one of the 15 cabins at this lakefront state park. (2542 Arkansas 257, Lake Village; (870) 265-5480) **AL**



The Snow Leopard
by Peter Matthiessen
While this 1979 winner of the National Book Award is ostensibly about writer Peter Matthiessen and naturalist George Schaller's Himalayan search for the mysterious snow leopard, the book is also a meditation of life, death and our place in the world.



A River Runs Through it and Other Stories
by Norman Maclean

It's likely that you've seen the movie—it helped launch Brad Pitt's career, after all—but a copy of Norman Maclean's seminal work, poetic and profound, should be on everyone's bookshelf. Bonus: The book contains two other novellas about coming of age in Montana that are no less beautiful.



Old Glory
by Jonathan Raban

Arkansans will recognize the main character in this travelogue—the winding, muddy Mississippi River. Following it from Minneapolis to Morgan City, Louisiana, British writer Jonathan Raban not only explores the river itself but also the character of the people, the land and the way of life he finds along its banks.



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V-neck T-shirt and smokes a cigarette, his eyes lifted to the second story of the house where he's pulling the roof apart, gently pressing, nuzzling the six-pronged iron scoop into crevices and gently pushing the pieces of timber away as if they were pieces of straw or toothpicks. Walls swing out as if they were doors on hinges. For a time, the scoop looks as though it's trailing braided lines from a spider web, wispy things that hang from the prongs; it takes a moment to realize they're the wiring of the house. In every moment as the house comes down, something is revealed and then pulled apart, the layout combusted and allowed to crumble, made to crumble—the sick and the cathartic sound of destruction.

Around 9:30 a.m., a code enforcer from the city stops by, wearing khakis and a quasi-iridescent blue polo. He wears a badge and has two cameras, one for film, one for stills. He spends some time chatting with a guy from the demolition company who's spraying the house down with water to keep the dust from rising. After a few minutes, he walks to the front and stands with Smith, saying that he's going to send Tyler a bill for the demolition and the dump fee. They get to talking, and Smith says he's been trying to buy the land for the past few years—he'll later explain that he'd like to buy up the lot to the west and perhaps put in a pair of '40s or '50s-era style town homes—and then asks the guy from the city about how he'll be able to go about doing that once the house comes down.

At a certain point, what's dragged from the house ceases to be distinguishable from the rest. Everything is shades of brown: white brown, gray brown, red brown. The backhoe moves up and down the ramp that the house has become. And then the front wall comes down, and then all that's left is a portion of a hallway with a door that reads "private" and the banister of a staircase that now leads nowhere. And then the arm of the scoop comes through and pushes it over. And then the last bit of the façade is all that's left, and then he digs into the floor with the sound of a *crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch*. But it's more than a crunch. It's something that even at a distance you can feel in your chest—the move and violence of a bowling ball going step by step down a stairway. But not even that.

"Oh, he's going to town now," says the guy from the city.

It takes somewhere between 25 and 30 loads—7 to 8 tons each—to truck what's left to the dump. All told, it costs the city \$9,926 to do the demolition. A lien is filed Sept. 17, and Tyler is told that she will have to repay the city before it's released.

IN MID-DECEMBER, the upset soil at 1325 W. 12th St. is still there. And in a way, to look at the scene as well preserved as it is nearly six months after the house came down, the comparison that comes to mind is the surface of the moon—footprints made and left undisturbed in the absence of some outside force to clear them away. And while the plot will likely change—perhaps Smith will build his town homes; perhaps grass and weeds will continue to grow and fill the divots left by the demolition—what was there is gone.

But there's history in empty lots, stories in the stasis of memory near gone and fading. In some instances, there are plaques where the structures stood, and in others just memories parroted and passed down through the oral tradition of neighborhoods and hearsay—stories of those people who lived there and how they lived and how the places they called home eventually came down. But in terms of what of history is available there on the surface: When the structures are gone and the memories drained and faded, it's as if whatever had been there had never been at all. **AL**



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a cardboard box—remain scattered on grass that looks tired and withered with no prospect of a triumphant resurrection.

ON A SUNNY October afternoon, a tree is about to fall—and Minyard, Roberts and Paul Porter are there to hear it. Most of its limbs have been chopped off already, the open wounds resembling giant mushrooms. Sitting in the belly of the 70-something-foot tree, which is now beginning to look like a fondue fork, an employee of Giraffe Tree Service wraps a thick rope around a branch and, with a chainsaw, cuts it off. There's a moment of uncertainty when it finally lets go of the body it's been a part of for years, swings back and forth and grazes the roof of the house before it's lowered to the plush cushion of leaves ringing the trunk. And then, in the distance, as we hear the sound of a train chugging down the track, Porter, AHPP's easement coordinator, tells me about the diseased trees that have met an unfortunate fate today.

"When they started cutting into it, they discovered that the trunk was rotting all the way through," he says, suddenly speaking in a higher decibel as a Giraffe Tree Service employee begins to maneuver a growling mini skid loader, riding it as if it were an animal. "You kind of looked at the trees as—well, this one is an invitation to termites, and that one could potentially impact the house during a storm."

We're all squinting. Although the sun, no longer leaf-filtered, is a blinding disturbance, the fall weather carries a chilly note, and the occasional breeze sweeps the autumn leaves off the ground of the overgrown front yard and into a miniature twister of dust.

The house looks like a relic from the past—a display of grandeur and local history—wrapped in ropelike ivy that, over the years, has crept all the way to the top, and is surrounded by a metal fence. And as more century-old trees hit the ground, it looks more and more naked and vulnerable to a shift in the wind, a threat of decay, the passage of time. Although it has limped through times of uncertainty, there is one thing that's for sure—there are many hopeful faces staring up at its egg-nog-yellow facade, with its white columns and cactus-green shutters. And these are the folks who have not yet exhausted all hope in finding it a future that could be as grand as its past. **AL**