

From the
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SEBASTOPOL:

*A Legacy of Preservation
 in St. Bernard Parish*

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View of Sebastopol's restored porch and façade.



Gates to Sebastopol Plantation House, St. Bernard Parish.

How many times have you flipped through the pages of *Preservation in Print* and admired the buildings and causes they represent? How

many times have you read an article about stunning preservation efforts and said to yourself, "Wow, what a transformation, but I could never



Restored firebox and French wraparound mantel at Sebastopol.



Pigeonnier located on grounds of the plantation.

do that"? Keep reading, because the case study of Sebastopol Plantation House and its owners/curators, James and Alberta Lewis, will alter your perception of the capabilities of normal homeowners.

Sebastopol stands as a one story, *cabine* style Creole plantation home, complete with *pigeonnier* and privy, located along LA Highway 46, 15 miles downriver from New Orleans. This house on a sugar plantation was built in the early 1830s by Pierre Marin and Evariste Wagan as a private residence among the cane fields. As it did with so many other houses and structures throughout St. Bernard Parish, Hurricane Katrina took a damaging toll on the home. Sebastopol endured a mangling of its roof, resulting water damage and surging floodwaters that tainted its interior. The Lewis' road to recovering the home's beauty has been long and hard, but great challenges provide great rewards. Although they may have felt like it at times, as did many victims of the storm, they were not alone.

The Lewises were awarded a Historic Building Recovery Grant in early 2007, but their work on Sebas-

topol began much earlier. Realizing the importance and significance of the property, they managed to combine various resources to restore the glory of their home precisely and respectfully. The couple spent countless hours researching and garnering advice from local professionals and experts before and throughout the project in order to carefully preserve the historical integrity of

the home. Authenticity and accuracy were paramount to them in order to give Sebastopol the treatment it rightfully deserved. No historical detail was overlooked during the repairs. Paint samples were taken and analyzed to match those original to the 1830's application. Constant collaboration with William Hyland, St. Bernard



Sebastopol's beautiful original floors had been concealed by oak strip flooring.



Mrs. Lewis and her son Michael Meitin, the principle carpenter throughout the restoration process, relaxing on Sebastopol's gallery.

Parish Government Chief Historian, Dr. Eugene Cizek, Director of the Tulane University Historic Preservation Department, and the State of Louisiana's own HBRGP staff ensured that no details would be overlooked.

Having all the information at one's fingertips makes the process easier, but planning is only half of the project. The physical repairs to the house were undertaken the same way that the research phase was – a little local networking and an abundance of elbow grease. Various volunteers pitched in and helped when they were able. Sabre Technical Services, located in New York state, donated mold fumigation services. Northern roofing specialists were called in to create the unique custom roof composed of overlapping and interwoven shingles. Local craftsman and historic masonry expert Theodore "Teddy" Pierre rebuilt the fireboxes and chimneys the traditional way, using soft lime-based mortar. This aspect of the project was intriguing due to the fact that the fireboxes possess a unique diagonal



Sebastopol's restored pine plank ceilings and hardwood floors are noteworthy.

brickwork pattern, which delineates the exterior edges.

On any given day, you could find James and Alberta getting their hands dirty on some aspect of the home's numerous repairs. However, the largest single contributor and principal

employee to the project was Michael Meitin, Alberta's son. Michael serves as the master carpenter for the plantation operation and specializes in historic carpentry renovations. From start to finish he has breathed new life into a Creole masterwork.

Michael removed water-damaged paneled ceilings to expose original pine planks that run the length of the rooms. He has also refurbished the home's original pine floors, found underneath a 1950s oak slat treatment, sanding and refinishing them to a brilliant hue of amber. Special attention was given to the details of the French wraparound mantle pieces. They were taken out and refurbished while the masonry repairs to the crumbling fireboxes were being done.



Original shutters and hardware at Sebastopol.

visits Sebastopol, embrace the legacy he has left behind for all of us.

Sebastopol has recently been reopened for tours and afternoon tea gatherings, and is helping to further the economic growth of cultural tourism throughout St. Bernard Parish.

For information about touring the home, please contact

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Their details are simple and smooth, yet powerful when joined with the repaired walls and masonry. By using traditional methods and painstaking care, Michael has sensitively crafted all elements of the home to resemble their original appearance. The final product is one of the finest examples of a historically accurate renovation that one may ever witness.

The rebirth of Sebastopol is a beacon of light for the historic community of St. Bernard. The project sets an example of how incredible things can happen when a homeowner's passion, dedication and community involvement are melded into a single purpose. The building itself is inspiring, but it is the story of hope and accomplishment for the Lewises and for St. Bernard Parish's history that will stand the test of time.

Sadly, James Lewis passed away shortly after the completion of the project. I would like to say that working with him on Sebastopol has been an honor and a privilege, and he will be greatly missed. For everyone who



Sebastopol's restored porch and façade.



James and Alberta Lewis, owners of Sebastopol Plantation House, pictured on the day of the first site visit for the Historic Building Recovery Grant Program.