

Grandeur Returning To Davis Islands' Palace

February 21, 2002

Section: SOUTH TAMPA

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LANDMARK STATUS EXPECTED FOR PALACE OF FLORENCE

TAMPA - Katie and John Favata remember the day as if it were yesterday. They were young newlyweds looking for a place to spend the first night of their honeymoon. Katie caught a glimpse of the Palace of Florence on Davis Islands and said to her husband: "That's so pretty. Let's stay in here."

It was April 26, 1942. Katie was 18. John was 20.

"It was all very beautiful. I thought about it being very European. Being as young as I was, I didn't have any hopes of any European [travels]," she said.

As it turns out, the couple - now married for nearly 60 years - went on to have two sons, five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

The Wellswood couple eventually did make it to Italy, Spain and France.

But they'll always treasure the memory of spending their wedding night at the Palace of Florence, 45 Davis Blvd. And they're delighted that the building is being restored to its former grandeur by Hamilton Jones, president of Gaspar Properties Inc.

The Tampa City Council today is expected to grant final approval to local landmark status for the apartment-hotel that opened in May 1926.

The structure already is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

As a local landmark, the Palace of Florence qualifies for special tax breaks related to its restoration. Jones must submit any proposed architectural changes to the city's Architectural Review Commission.

Jones is using postcards from the past and photographs from the Burgert Brothers collection to guide restoration of the Mediterranean Revival style structure. "I'm just so happy that somebody is doing something with that hotel," Katie Favata said. "Every time we go by there we say, 'That's where we stayed.'" Betty Culbreath, of Davis Islands, has fond recollections of the building's early years. "Mother was the rental manager but also managed the housekeeping staff," said Culbreath, who is married to H.L. Culbreath, former chairman of TECO Energy. "I had my sixth birthday there. It was fun because everyone thought: 'How great to live in a palace.' It just so happened my name was King," she said.

She is impressed with the quality of Jones' restoration: "He is being very meticulous."

"He has done a marvelous job," agreed Annie Hart, administrator for the city's Historic Preservation Commission.

The structure's historic and architectural significance are described in documents contained in an Architectural Review Commission file.

The building, which opened as an apartment-hotel, was designed by Athos Menaboni, who was hired by a group of Italian businessmen active in banking and shipping in Ybor City. The structure was built by contractor R.W. Wishart for \$350,000.

Besides using the Palazzo Vecchio for inspiration, Menaboni incorporated elements from the Palazzo del Podesta for the center court and the stair from a Tuscan castle. The structure was built of hollow clay tiles on a foundation of concrete footings. Its exterior walls are a smooth stucco. Each of its 28 furnished apartments included a bedroom, tiled bathroom, combined living and dining room and kitchen. Patrons could rent by the day, week, month or year, with reduced rates in the off-season, documents in the commission's file say. Standard furnishings, supplied by Maas Bros. in Tampa, included a walnut table, chairs, cabinets, benches, a settee, sofa bed and lacquered wood bedroom set. Besides furniture, each apartment included rugs, table linens, glassware, china and silver. Other features included cypress woodwork and oak floors in the apartments and wrought iron chandeliers in the hallways.

The homelike private apartments boasted hotel conveniences, including telephones in each apartment with a 24-hour switchboard and daily maid and janitor services. All patrons had access to the roof promenade, roof garden and terraces. Afternoon teas and evening concerts were scheduled during the winter months. Jones plans to reconstruct the rooftop garden.

Besides restoring the structure, Jones is modernizing the apartments. He is adding central heat and air conditioning, updating the plumbing and electrical work and adding a laundry room. Jones expects the \$1 million restoration project to be done in July, with some apartments becoming available in May.

Cutline: Tribune photo by ROBERT BURKE

(C) **Hamilton Jones**, of Gaspar Properties Inc., is restoring the Palace of Florence on Davis Islands. Jones is using old postcards to help guide the project. John and Katie Favata spent their wedding night at the Palace of Florence in 1942. The Favatas, here at their 55th anniversary, are glad the building is being restored.