



## **House of a Thousand Voices**

**By Barbara Mabry**

It seems a house of a thousand voices, the old white Greek Revival mansion on Lexington Avenue. No longer a peeling and crumbling derelict, its tall columns and three-story brick walls are pristine white. Known now as the Blevins House, it sits a few yards behind Maxwell Street Presbyterian Church; it has become the hub of the many mission ministries of the church. Its rooms may have echoes of the many families and individuals who have lived there or passed through for the last century and a half, but echoes are overlaid by the lively voices and eager steps that resound throughout the old house in 1993.

It could also be the House of Many Names; the McCauley House, Totten's School for Boys, Chi Omega Sorority House, Smith Hall – a university residence hall, Miss Cooper's House, the Blevins House. Built in 1850 by Architect John McMurty for John McCauley on a five-acre tract of land fronting Maxwell Street, it was an imposing home for its owner – a successful businessman in a thriving community. McCauley had earned his wealth as a grocer and as a rope and bagging manufacturer. McMurty, born in 1812 on a farm on

Ironworks Road, was apprenticed to architect Gideon Shryock and assisted him with the construction of Old Morrison at Transylvania College. During his career, McMurty had designed many important structures around town, including the railroad depot, several churches (including Second Presbyterian on Market Street), the octagonal "Floral Hall" at the Red Mile (then Maxwell Springs), and numerous residences, including Botherum on Madison Street, Elms on Harrodsburg Road, and Loudon in Castlewood Park.

Thus, McMurty was well-known and experienced; he could design and build in a variety of pure architectural styles. For McCauley, the choice was Greek Revival – a style which represented an important period in America's cultural development when builders were turning to the roots of democracy and freedom - Greece – and away from America's immediate antecedent – Europe. McMurty built a graceful and imposing home, described in architectural-historian Clay Lancaster's book Ante Bellum Houses of the Bluegrass: "... the Doric columns of the portico are of wood with channeled shafts, the house does not have such a high basement, but includes a third floor. Grilled windows in front beneath the plain entablature light the rooms of the third story (at floor level); the entablature turns the corners of the house only for the depth of a pilaster, thus permitting full fenestration in the upper ends of the house, which have parapets above the roofline between the chimneys. Deeply indented is the front doorway in the wider central bay, its Ionic columns having the thick shafts."

The interior of the house is typical of the period, with two large square rooms on each side flanking a large central hall. The open staircase winds up for three flights at the rear of the hall and is lit by an octagonal iron-railed cupola. The double parlors on the west side of the house are the most elaborate, with full Ionic columns, large concave cornices, round ceiling medallions, which are from the famous Lefever design book 1835, and grey marble mantels. The entire first floor has uncommonly wide baseboards in the hall and major rooms. The east rooms are less elaborate, and the original mantels were replaced by Gothic style mantels in the late nineteenth century. The two-story rear wing is evidently the oldest part of the structure, perhaps incorporated, when the house was built, as a kitchen wing and service space. Other auxiliary buildings included a stable, smokehouse, and a two-storied servants' quarters. The stately John McCauley house was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on December 4, 1980.

From 1866 until 1884, the McCauley House was used as Christ Church Seminary – a school under the auspices of the Episcopal Church. From 1884 until 1920, there were several owners. A.N. Gordon operated it as a private school for boys at a time. When Maxwell Street Church was built on the front of the property in 1916, the house was purchased along with the land, but they sold it to the University for a modest sum in 1920. While the University owned it, it was called Smith Hall; it was a girl's dormitory named for UK Trustee Mrs. Charles Judson Smith, sister of UK Librarian Margaret I. King. It was also the Chi Omega Sorority House for a few years.

In 1946 this venerable house was sold at auction to Agnes Spear Cooper for \$18,825.00, with Maxwell Street Church an unsuccessful bidder. Mary Hester Cooper, UK archivist, lived there with her parents and became the owner when her mother died in 1963. Mary Cooper died in the late 1980's; her heirs sold the home to Maxwell Street Church in 1990 for more than \$150,000 – a purchase made possible by a large bequest from Frances Blevins. Renovation began at once and is on-going. Because of the source of the acquisition monies, it is presently known as the Blevins House.

Acquiring the huge old derelict house in the backyard immediately widened the vistas, responsibilities, and opportunities for the congregation. The decision to buy the house was difficult. The minister, Dana Jones, had arrived in July of 1989, and the church was in the process of rebuilding and of shoring up its shaky financial status. The Blevins bequest could have been used in a multitude of ways; the timing was most inauspicious. Nevertheless, excitement in the church and the awareness of possibilities was kindled – fanned, too, by the need for parking and space and the pressure from the ever-encroaching University. Not without some serious reservations but buoyed by the vision, the Trustees decided to use some of the Blevins Estate monies for the purchase of the house; this was consummated in February 1990.

And Mr. Jones, framing the possibilities the old house would offer in revitalizing the congregation, formed a committee to discuss the many uses for the house.

Meanwhile, using budgeted monies, the early renovation work went forward: putting in new bathrooms and other plumbing, installing heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems, as well as a sprinkler system. One of the first goals recommended by the Committee was to sponsor and house a refugee family, for which goal the congregation was galvanized into action. The suite of rooms on the second floor designated for occupation by the refugee family were, with Herculean efforts, readied, furnishings and appliances were donated, and the waiting for the refugee family began. After months of delay, when the Meshalkin family was detained in the Ukraine, it was decided to take another family. It turned out to be two Ukrainian Pentecostal groups; on the last day of 1990, the Pidgorodetskiy and Kalka families – fourteen individuals – arrived and were taken into the hospitable old house and into the life of the congregation. They were to stay for some months, while they worked on mastery of the English language and the skills to survive in a new country.

The Blevins house offered many challenges. While means of accomplishing and funding the further rehabilitation of the house itself were being explored, another committee was working on plans for the grounds so that the exterior could be both beautiful and appropriate for the many programs being developed. The women of the church began their fund-raising efforts for the many projects. And, more importantly, with the vision for the church that was evolving, it was decided to create a new staff

position, that of Mission Associate, who would be responsible for coordinating church-community involvement and nurture of congregation members in mission efforts. Skeet Ayscue was hired in June of 1991, when he completed his MSW degree, to fill this position. Because so much of the mission efforts would involve the Blevins House, Skeet was also put in charge of the on-going renovation activities. This has proved to be a mighty, but rewarding, task.

After the two refugee families had departed to settle more permanently, plans were made to improve those living quarters and to provide transitional housing for a homeless family. To this end, the Mission Committee worked with the transitional housing program run by volunteers of America. After a few weeks of negotiations and screening, a small family, mother and son, moved in in December 1991. The cost of renovating the living area was offset by a grant of \$2000 from the Presbyterian World Service Program from One Great Hour of Sharing. Labor was supplied by church members and friends. The family stayed until late May and later joined Maxwell Street Church.

One of the first uses to be decided on was the housing of a custodian and his family, both for security reasons and the likelihood of attracting a permanent custodian. Therefore, the rooms in the rear wing of the house, the oldest section, were subject to early and intense renovation. With two rooms on the first floor and two on the second, the living quarters provided a nice home; in July of 1991, Robert Duncan was hired as

custodian. He and his family soon moved in and settled down to be an important part of the church staff. His presence on the premises and a new security system afforded the church some respite from frequent break-ins. And there was a family in residence at the Blevins House once again.

Meanwhile, during the time that the rooms for immediate occupancy were being pushed to completion, other individuals and groups were working to clean and rehabilitate the other rooms of the house. Much repair work – and replacement – and to be done on the walls and ceilings before the painting could be done. Exterior as well as the interior projects were continuously undertaken, with certain individuals coordinating repair and painting of the outside and the finishing and decoration of the interior – including a color scheme.

During the late winter and spring months of 1992, there was a push to finish renovation of the rooms of the west side of the second floor, intended primarily as dormitory and meeting area for urban work groups that would come for week-long sessions of work, reflection and recreation. As part of this plan, twelve bunk beds were constructed and assembled and mattresses purchased. Since housing for temporarily homeless families would be utilized for eight or nine months of the year, the second floor could be used for other ministries.

In the summer of 1992, three groups of senior high students and leaders – from Missouri, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania came from urban work camps. During each week, campers work at the Hope Center, the Nest, God's Pantry, Habitat for Humanity, Housing Rehabilitation, the Salvation Army, and in the Blevins House itself. Work is lightened by some free time and a trip to King's Island, by meal-time socializing, and by guided reflection in the evenings. A new understanding of the complexity of obtaining affordable housing is developed by their playing a housing simulation game early in their visit. The fee of \$100 per person does not reflect the evolving appreciation of the problems of the poor, homeless, and abused that happens during their stay. During the summer of 1993, eight groups, from North Carolina, South Carolina, Missouri, Pennsylvania, Iowa, and Nebraska, will be attending seven workcamps.

Another evolving ministry is for person visiting inmates at the Federal Medical Center, where Maxwell Street has weekly Bible study and visitation support for those who do not have regular visitation. A number of visitors have already used rooms in the Blevins House, but, eventually, they will have a large third-floor room available for short-term stays, with access to a bathroom. It is expected that this particular housing ministry will have steady growth as word spreads of its availability.

Because of the growing number of groups using the Blevins House, the Mission Committee recognized the need for usage and behavior guidelines. They also determined that management of the home needed to be the responsibility of one person, who would coordinate usage, maintenance, and scheduling. Accordingly, they hired Mike Pentecost, a college student church member, for that position and prepared a room for him. He moved into his newly renovated quarters in February 1993. He works closely with the Mission Associate, church staff members, and the pastors. With planning and supervision of the workcamp groups, groups passing through, emergency housing, temporary homeless families, prison ministry families, retreat groups, and various meetings, it is predicted that the intern will be quite busy.

Eventually there will be a chapel for multiple uses for the large room on the front east side of the first floor. The next room on that side presently is used for fifth and sixth-grade Church School classes and as a game room during the summer for urban workcampers. There is also discussion about using this room as a third-world store. Two parlors have been finished in the more ornate west side rooms, decorated and furnished principally by the Lear family, and made possible by money from the Frances Philpot bequest. The second of these two rooms is designated as the Session Room, and the two rooms together have already been used for a wedding reception. It is anticipated that many groups will use these gracious adjoining rooms and that various retreats can be

held there, with the added attraction of the “get-away” atmosphere. They especially lend themselves to small-group activities.

At present, although much has been done, much remains to be done. Construction of more bathrooms and in-room sinks is under way, and most of the rooms on the third floor are scheduled for end-of-summer completion. To accomplish these goals, a number of Saturday workdays have been set. The first-floor chapel room still requires a good bit of final preparation before it can fulfill its intended function. And with the nature of old house, there will be on-going repairs and improvements throughout. In addition, there is much work and fund-raising ahead before all the plans for the grounds can be brought to fruition. Besides plantings, there will be an outdoor barbecue constructed and special areas for outdoor programs and activities. In the plans, also is a garage for the church vans, possibly with rooms above it for visiting scholars, since the present utilization scheme for the third floor is for occupancy by refugee families. It is obvious that there are many possible ways to use all of the space to extend the many mission ministries and for the many church groups with their varied activities. Committed, talented, hard-working individuals and groups continue the on-going rehabilitation, refurbishing, and decoration.

Once it was the concern of the Trustees that the Blevins House might prove to be a white elephant, a financial burden for the church. Instead, it has become a place to practice pragmatic discipleship, a centerpiece for a labor and ministry of love, evolving weekly as new opportunities to serve are revealed. No haunted house, the Blevins house; it is alive with activity. It has incidentally but fortuitously proved an outlet for an amazing array of congregational skills and talent – a way to be personally involved in mission – a way to bring vision to reality, a way to make good things happen – as well as a place to labor, to laugh, and to enjoy the special camaraderie of hard work. So the old white mansion in the backyard of Maxwell Street Presbyterian Church in the Lexington, Kentucky of 1993 is full of daily activity, full of voices of the present, full of hopes and plans for the future. No need to dwell on its distinguished past; the Blevins House, whatever the name, has a raison d'être well into the next century.

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