

History of 119 East 37th Street

Lots 67,68, 69, 70 and 71 Thomas Ward

Henry C. Urban, b. 1848, in Frankfort, Germany, was the architect of 119 East 37th Street. Urban attended The Berlin School of Art. After mandatory service in the German Army, he relocated to Paris. In Paris, he met William Preston of Boston, who asked him to work for his architecture agency. Urban arrived in the U.S. in 1883 and in 1888 he came to Savannah on honeymoon to supervise the construction of the DeSoto Hotel. Urban fell in love with Savannah and decided to stay in the beautiful city. Urban also rebuilt the Presbyterian Church that had recently burned down, and became one of the noted architects in Savannah. He built many buildings for the city as well as private citizens. He was recognized for the different types of architectural styles he utilized, ranging from Georgian, Queen Anne, Neoclassical revival to Italianate inspired designs.

In early 1897, Urban was approached by prominent Savannahian Lt Col. George Owens to build his home in the Thomas Square Streetcar District. The neighborhood was named after the streetcar lines that made the development of this southern suburb of Downtown Savannah feasible. In 1888, the city electrified the streetcar and extended the A and B belt line south along Whitaker Street into this district creating yet another streetcar suburb. At the time of the neighborhood's development, the area was popularly known as the "extended limits," the "southern suburbs," or the "new section south of Anderson."

Lt Col. George Owens was the son of Congressman George Welshman Owens. Owens Sr. had been educated at Harrow and Cambridge University, England. Eventually, he became an alderman, then mayor of Savannah, then a Georgia state senator and state representative, and finally a United States congressman. Lt. Col. George Owens also became an attorney and specialized in Maritime Law.

Due to George's interest in seafaring culture, 119 East 37th St has many maritime motifs interwoven into the building's design, most notably porthole windows and rope style spindles on the staircase. Two doors located at the front of the property have a ship wheel carved into them.

George Owens only lived in the building briefly; he was struck by a trolley and died at the old Mary Telfair Hospital shortly after the building was completed. Owens and his father are both buried in the Laurel Grove Cemetery in Savannah.

119 E 37th was sold by the Owens estate to the Archdiocese of the Catholic Church, headquartered at St. John the Baptist in Savannah. The grand residence then

became a convent, housing The Little Sisters of the Poor and the Sacred Heart Chapel was constructed on the second floor of the building. The property served as a home for the neediest elderly of all races and religions. Per the Diocese, "The mission of the Little Sisters of the Poor, inspired by Saint Jeanne Jugan, was to welcome these individuals as Christ, care for them as family, and accompany them with dignity until God called them to Himself."

After many long years' tenure in the property, the property was no longer needed by the Diocese and was sold several times throughout the years. In the late 20th century, the building was owned by Roger Peacock and the location was well known as Peacock's Florist. After the florist business closed, the building sat vacant and in disrepair until it was purchased by local restaurants and historic home aficionados, Jeffrey Downey and Donald Lubowicki in 2016.

Downey and Lubowicki undertook a comprehensive and historically sensitive restoration of the property that spanned over three years, culminating in the opening of a beautiful fine dining restaurant, LaScala. Downey and Lubowicki were awarded Historic Savannah Foundation's Preservation Award in 2019 for their outstanding work on the property. Notable features include the installation of a custom stained glass skylight by renowned stained glass artist Carl Fourgerousse and a full preservation of the Sacred Heart Convent Chapel with *Trompe l'œil* and fresco work by local artists. Extensive work was devoted to the exterior of the building as well, with the creation of multiple courtyards fully landscaped with tropical plants and fruit trees. The property is now a fully restored showplace, filled with art and antiques.