

Page 4, Basile (La.) Weekly Thurs. Dec. 22, 1983



**Editor's Note:** A Basile native, Michael Paul Myers, is making national news this month as his interior designing of the LaLaurie House in New Orleans is being featured in the January 1984 issue of "House and Garden". Myers is the son of O.J. Myers and the late Mrs. Mildred Myers of Basile. Following are excerpts from the magazine article.

## LIGHT IN THE VIEUX CARRÉ

Decorator Michael Myers brings a refreshing point of view to a restored New Orleans house

New Orleansians all know the LaLaurie House, a refined, luxurious, and unusually large French Empire mansion. Even tourists on a two-hour run through the French Quarter are taken to the building and told a lurid history that often distracts them from the beauty of the architecture. The present owner himself was once such a tourist.

The most famous, and infamous, inhabitant in the past was Mme. LaLaurie, born Delphine McCarty, daughter of a rich and titled Scot who owned land in Santo Domingo. Delphine lived and entertained regally in the circa-1825 mansion for two years, until she and her husband fled on an April night in 1834. Mme. LaLaurie, whose previous husband was a friend of the pirate Jean Lafitte, turned out to be a female Simon Legree who chained, tortured, and starved her slaves.

This horror was revealed when the abused cook set fire to the kitchen. Neighbors rushed in to help fight the flames and discovered and rescued seven chained victims. Said a local newspaper at the time, "The sight was so horrible that we could scarce look upon it." The next day an angry mob surrounded the house and the couple fled in a carriage that charged the crowd and made its escape. Mme. LaLaurie died in Paris many years later. An English traveler's American journal, published four years after the LaLauries' departure from New Orleans, described their house, "its ruined state . . . its gaping windows and empty walls."

City records show that a new owner remodeled extensively in 1841, when the third floor was added and the elaborate plasterwork embellishments were installed. Samuel Wilson Jr., New Orleans architect and historian who advised the present owner in the early stages of restoration, believes that Mme. LaLaurie's house was probably a red-brick Federal structure and that the Empire features date from 1841.

The house served as Union headquarters during the Civil War occupation, later as a gambling house, and then as a gathering place for derelicts and counterfeits, who fostered the building's reputation as a haunted house so that they could remain there without being disturbed.

After the Vieux Carré's slum years early in this century, the Quarter began the climb to its present status as a choice neighborhood, rich in old-world charm. The LaLaurie house had to wait until the early seventies for its renaissance. A physician from Arkansas bought it and returned it to its early splendor and its original purpose as a single-family residence.

As a hospital intern, he had fallen in love with New Orleans, and he re-



Cooling air moves freely through the house and so does the eye: from the rear-dressing room, can be seen the adjacent front dressing room, the central hall, and the dining room across the way. Twin Empire chandeliers of bronze, steel and crystal light the dressing room, which shares a pale-pink wall color. Antique chaises in both rooms from Parsons, Parsons & Marshall, Louis XVI period furniture are signed Henri Jacob 1770. Custom-made table in Parsons style by Earl Springer is an exotic wood inlaid with ivory.

turned there as soon as the Navy and other duties allowed. The city's colorful history fascinated him, and so did its continuing vitality: commercial, social, musical, culinary, architectural. "I wanted to settle in New Orleans and felt it was pointless to live there in anything but an old house."

Already living in the Vieux Carré in 1969, the physician bought the LaLaurie house, which then consisted of fifteen apartments in the main building and former slave quarters in back. He spared no effort in returning the house to its original state, working with Koch and Wilson, a New Orleans architectural firm that specializes in historic restoration. Fortunately, much of the ornamental plasterwork remained, and gaps were filled by making molds of original details. All the mantelpieces were still in the house. Michael Myers, the interior designer, is still involved in filling out the French antique furnishings. His complex goals were to honor the architecture of the old mansion yet

create a comfortable home for a collector of contemporary works of art.

Like any good New Orleans house,

this one makes the best of a hot and humid climate and was planned to exploit any breeze in the neighborhood. Michael Myers had the climate in mind when he chose cool leather for seating and flat weaves for the rugs. He used soft, earthy paint colors not only to set off the white details and the works of art but also to bring a quiet tranquility. The colors reflect a conscious decision not to attempt an exact restoration, for analysis had exposed an original trim finish of polychrome and gilt with walls of Empire greens and reds—not the proper background for this client and his art collection.

What the conscientious team of professionals has achieved is a respectful and affectionate compromise between history and life today. The owner thinks that this house may be passing through the best years it has yet seen. □ Editor: Babs Simpson