

**HISTORY**

# Effort underway to restore city's oldest house

**BY ALLAN TURNER****Gary Fountain**

The Kellum-Noble house is perhaps the historical centerpiece of Sam Houston Park.

Earl the bison may not have been the most genteel gent to call it home, but he illustrates a point: Houston's historic Kellum-Noble house is a place of quirky distinction.

At 167 years, it's the city's oldest structure, its first public school. Sam Houston was a guest, as, of course, was Earl when, at the beginning of the last century, the house and grounds were used as the Bayou City's first zoo.

By the 1950s, the old two-story house was home only to city machinery, and, sadly derelict, slated for the wrecker's ball.

The planned demolition propelled history lovers to rally. Kellum-Noble, saved, restored and opened to the public, today is centerpiece of a 10-structure collection of early Harris County buildings in downtown's Sam Houston Park.

For the mid-century history activists and their descendants — now The Heritage Society, the history park's overseers — saving the Kellum-Noble was a big win.

But now the grande dame of Houston buildings again is in peril. Sagging, cracking, leaking and rotting, it is a victim of Houston's merciless climate, soggy soils and its own weight.

In November, The Heritage Society launched a \$1.7 million bottom-to-top repair of the Kellum-Noble

— the costliest restoration project in the organization's history. An additional \$500,000 will be set aside for future maintenance.

The repairs, said Margaret Lawler, the project's capital campaign director, are “way over due.”

Without the intervention, she said, the house eventually would “become so unsafe we couldn't use it for our education operations. It would moulder and fall apart.”

When the project is complete, said buildings curator Emily Ardoin, concrete beams will stabilize the house's foundations, rotting boards on its second-floor gallery will be replaced and the 2,400-plus-square-foot building will sport a new, fire-resistant cedar-shake roof and central heating and air conditioning system.

Lastly, cracked interior plaster walls will be repaired and the museum house given a fresh coat of paint inside and out.

The entire process should be completed in the spring.

## **‘So many firsts’**

Society executive director Alice Collette said the cost of the Kellum-Noble project far exceeds that of the restoration and relocation of the 1823 Old Place, the oldest known structure in Harris County, and the ongoing repair of 1868 Pillot House. Both were flooded in 2001 by Tropical Storm Allison, which dumped more than 36 inches of rainfall on the city.

Slightly more than half of the needed money for Kellum-Noble has been collected through foundation and private donations.

“The Kellum-Noble house is important for the city’s entire history,” Collette said. “It has so many firsts — the first school, the first zoo, the beginning of a heightened awareness of our beginning and teaching people about our history.”

Shaded by its large upstairs and downstairs galleries, said Houston architect James Furr, the house was a house built for its climate. Furr, managing principal emeritus for the Houston office of the Glenser architectural firm, is chairman of the Kellum-Noble capital campaign.

The hip-roofed house, he said, represents a combination of Anglo-American design with its central hallway and cubically proportioned rooms and Louisiana Creole architecture with its double galleries, exterior stairway and brick construction.

The house was built by Nathaniel Kellum, who arrived in Houston in 1839, established brick and lumber yards and became a major building contractor in the 1840s.

Fashioned of bricks made on site of bayou mud, the house was started in 1847 and completed the following year. In October 1849, Kellum left town.

## Was once a zoo

Abram and Zerviah Noble bought the house in 1851. As early as February of that year, Zerviah Noble advertised classes in English, music and painting. Eleven years later, she filed for divorce, a procedure that did not become final until 1865.

In 1871, the state of Texas hired Zerviah Noble, who lived in the house with her daughter and other relatives, to conduct the city's first public school. A year later, the school had 36 students and room for a dozen more.

The city had a population of about 9,300. Noble taught school in the house until at least 1883 and died in 1894. In 1899, the city bought the house and its surrounding 13 acres as the centerpiece of Houston's first public park.

Earl joined snakes, armadillos and other animals inside and outside the house until a new zoo was readied at Hermann Park in the century's second decade.

After its acquisition by historical preservationists, the house was opened as a museum in 1958. Multiple repairs have been made in the ensuing years, notably an effort in the 1980s to correct foundation problems.

Lawler said the need for additional foundation work was recognized 12 years ago, but immediate repair did not seem necessary. Since then, the spread of cracks in interior and exterior walls has been carefully monitored.

Needed repairs were delayed by the economic downturn of 2008 and by erection of a nearby parking garage, vibrations from whose construction, it was feared, might complicate foundation repairs.

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