



## The home of a 19th-century abolitionist soon will get new life in Oregon Hill.

This Old House  
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Glass crunches beneath your feet as you walk up the steps to the former home of one of Richmond's most famous abolitionists. The front door of the abandoned home is locked, but by peering through a hole in the door you can see the filth and peeling paint.

But all this will change when renovation begins in the fall to transform this 1819 home and former Virginia Corrections Department property into a residence that will house seven or eight apartment units. The "DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS" and "STATE PROPERTY NO TRESPASSING" signs will be removed and new paint will adorn the old walls. Bathrooms and kitchens will be added.

By fall 2001, people will be moving into the 601 Spring St. building that was the home of Quaker and Underground Railroad Conductor Samuel Pleasants Parsons. Builder Robin Miller, of Miller and Associates, has a sale pending on the old home, which is still owned by the state, and he plans to make this building an ideal residence for the Oregon Hill neighborhood.

Miller, who has renovated several other historic properties such as the Medical Arts Building and Linden Tower, says that he is especially excited about this project because of the building's rich history.

"One of the reasons I came to Richmond is it has such a wealth of historic architecture," Miller says. "I love saving old buildings."

The Parsons House is one of the oldest Miller has worked on. Built in 1818-19, it housed a man who was highly critical of slavery, and it may have housed slaves who were escaping to the North. Charles H. Pool, Oregon Hill Home Improvement Council Former board member (OHHIC) and author of the pamphlet "The Samuel Pleasants Parsons House," says that specifics on Parsons' Underground Railroad activities are hard to come by because of the risky and secretive nature of the business. But records indicate that Richmond accounted for more passengers than any city in the South, Pool asserts.

"It was taboo to call yourself an abolitionist," Pool says. "Anti-slavery work has gone unheralded in Virginia. It's taken 100 years to objectively discuss slavery in Richmond."

Parsons kept his aid to runaway slaves quiet, but was outspoken about his anti-slavery convictions. While serving as superintendent of the Virginia State Penitentiary in 1816, Parsons published a notice informing slave owners that the building would no longer house slaves for the convenience of their owners. The notice states, "that in [the] future no slaves or others will be received in the Penitentiary, except those directed by law."

Of the Parsons House, Pool says, "It's a phenomenon that it's survived. It's the only surviving landmark [in Richmond] of these movements."

Protecting old buildings is important, Pool says, because too many historic buildings have already been destroyed in Oregon Hill and other areas of Richmond. In 1997, the Ethyl Corp. tore down a stretch of homes it owned on Laurel and Pine Streets, despite strong protest from Oregon Hill preservationists. At present, Ethyl has not built anything on the still empty lots. "All the houses were listed on the National Register of Historic Places," Pool says. "Some of the houses were pre-Civil War. You look there now and wonder, 'What bomb hit there?'"

Pool also is still troubled by Virginia Commonwealth University's decision to move the Jacob House, home of abolitionist George Winston, to make space for a campus addition. When the structure was pulled up from its 610 W. Cary St. location, workers located a hidden basement that may have been used to hide runaway slaves, Pool says. "I believe it is the only archaeological site in the whole country that relates to the Underground Railroad. We don't know what will happen to [its hidden basement] now paved over."

Clearly, the sale and renovation of the Parsons house is good news for those who have been fighting for historic preservation in Oregon Hill. OHHIC Executive Director Allen Townsend is among those glad to see the old building renovated. It has been 10 years since the building has been inhabited — it was most recently a work-release home for female inmates — and has since become an eyesore that has been defaced with graffiti and has even become home to the homeless.

Like many residents of Oregon Hill, Townsend was concerned about what would happen to the property once it was sold. He values the story behind the home and wanted to see a new owner who would preserve the architecture. Townsend says he believes Miller will do a sensitive job of protecting the building.

"It sounds like he's going to do a class job," Townsend says.

Deputy Director of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources Kathleen Kilpatrick says Miller has a proven track record of historic renovation. "He's done outstanding work," Kilpatrick says. "He's incredibly responsible."

Kilpatrick says that Miller's use of state and federal historic rehabilitation tax credits will force him to be sensitive to the historic features of the building. Use of these tax credits requires oversight and approval from the federal secretary of the interior.

Even greater protection of the property will be provided by a historic easement that will be included in the deed. The easement will set limitations on what can be done to the building and will open the property to inspection by the state.

"[Historic easement is] an enormously effective tool for preservation," Kilpatrick says. "It reflects a public/private partnership. [Properties] continue to be used and cared for. But the state ensures through the easement that they are protected."

Miller says he plans to do his best to keep the building as it is. While there will be some changes, Miller says he will maintain many of the existing features such as the beautiful, old mantels.

"Our concept is to keep the architecture in line with the other Oregon Hill properties," Miller says.