

# New Life, New Family

*Built at the dawn of the Civil War by a captain of industry, and elegant Fair Haven mansion gets a whole new purpose*

By DUO DICKINSON

**A**s you cross the Quinnipiac River and drive eastward up the hill on Grand Avenue, you catch a glimpse of history. To the north, reposing in elegant calm, are two mid-19<sup>th</sup>-mansions that are virtual time machines back to Fair Haven's history as a prosperous fishing village.

The original mansion set back from the road was built by James F. Babcock, a lawyer and publisher of the *New Haven Palladian*, in 1862. It sat upon the crown of the hill and once dominated 30 acres of clear-cut estate.

Anecdotally, it was said that Babcock was Abraham Lincoln's best friend in the area, and that Lincoln would actually stay in the house when he came through town. Following the Civil War the house was sold, the property subdivided and the more visually prominent mansion set directly on Grand Avenue was built in 1875 by Lucius Moody, a successful insurance agent whose wife, Mary Blair Moody, was the first female physician in the area. (Yet another home was built to the other side of the Babcock house in that period, long since demolished.)

The Babcock house and its remaining offspring home are nearly perfect examples of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Carpenter Victorian Gothic architecture — a fusion of an elaborated wood design with elements of pointed arch (“ogee”) detailing. Both of these homes have a profusion of stick built brackets, porches, bays, dormers and applied ornaments.

These twin anomalies came to be surrounded by much smaller homes as, piece by piece, the original 30 acres was whittled down to 0.5-acre lot surrounding the original Babcock house. What is wondrous is that upon entry, the home is largely unchanged save for a wing projecting south that appears to have been built later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Otherwise, the original layout remains almost intact — and although a bit shopworn, the elegant openness of the generous interior spaces, trim and wood floors remain true to its vintage.

The James F. Babcock House is a classic example of Victorian Carpenter Gothic architecture, with a tack-on social wing (at right) added several decades after the home was built in 1862. The distinctive porch detailing, fully restored slate roof and animated roofscape make the exterior a point of pride for the Fair Haven neighborhood as well as for architecture aficionados.

PHOTOS: ANTHONY DECARLO

The third floor has a generous stair hall with bedrooms located to the corners off its central location. The ceiling's imposition is a direct reflection of the roof's Victorian lines.



While its intact neighbor appears to have a loving family keeping its exterior presence proudly intact, the Babcock house has a more checkered history. Given the economic ups and downs of the region generally and Fair Haven specifically it is not surprising that the house was foreclosed on several years ago, and was sold to recoup losses from an overextended loan from the 1990s.

Although that scenario is hardly uncommon, the recent history of the historic Babcock house is, well, a little freaky. For the last 15 years (according to its current owner) this work of significant historic and architectural value was ambiguously known as a “party house” — available for a bacchanalias. More scandalously, there are even rumors that the home was for a time a house of ill repute.

Be that as it may, its present proposed use likewise strays from the conventional. The house was purchased out of foreclosure last year for \$165,000 — a fraction of the sum owed to the bank. Unoccupied for several years, it was intact but a mess. Nevertheless, an amazing bargain due to the oddity of the home, the depressed real estate market and its location in a neighborhood that had seen ups and downs.

And the purchaser was as unusual as the home itself.

Throughout the U.S. not-for-profit groups build (or “repurpose”) single-family residences for unrelated people living together as if they were a family. In Connecticut, the legal term for this use is “reasonable accommodation.”

Robert Hargrove, director of a non-profit known as The Way Back, realized that the Babcock home was in an ideal location for this type of occupancy — close to public transportation and of a size and capacity that would allow for efficient

operations. Hargrove saw an opportunity to at the same time save a house — and a bunch of human lives. The Way Back is an organization dedicated to help adults ravaged by drug and alcohol addiction become productive.

The Babcock house offers an opportunity for the next level of The Way Back’s mission: It would become a “sober home” for those who have gone through a 12-step program to break the cycle of addiction. This would be the group’s fourth home in addition to the two for men and one for women Hargrove previously created. This particular home would create a safe place for between 16 and 20 male residents to live.

Not surprisingly, this use has generated neighborhood concern given the troubled histories of the occupants. But



given the presence of live-in staff and close supervision, the history of sober homes such as these has been quite benign.

However, having 16 or 18 people living in a single eight-bedroom structure raises reasonable concerns among neighbors in the single-family-home residential community that envelops this historic gem. Which is why the proposed sober house, as envisioned by a partnership between Hargrove and Herbert Schwartz, is being reviewed by state authorities in terms of what they would deem it to be its appropriate use and level of occupancy.

The light renovation that this 5,400-square-foot house has undergone essentially cleaned things up. The home seems to have been fairly carefully renovated and tightened up from its previous dubious occupancy. Most of the bathrooms, for example, are in relatively good shape.

Although the interior is neither squeaky-clean nor decorated,

Many bedrooms in the Babcock house open up to one another, creating a social arrangement for the new residents that James Babcock could never have envisioned when he built the house almost 150 years ago.



the house as cleaned up does maintain the silent elegance of the original. When Babcock built the home an entire wing was given over to “staff,” and a tiny *portecochere* allowed occupants of carriages to disembark out of the weather before entering the house.

It would be a rare traditional family (read: large, rich and brave) that would buy a building of this size, maintenance requirements and property taxes in a neighborhood that has not had a consistent value. Hargrove’s and Schwartz’s for-profit effort, created to save lives, may be the only economic model that can preserve this particular home at this particular time of the century. In any event, Hargrove sees this building as a “perfect fit” for his vision.

Explains House Manager David Seiniger: “The layout works well. We want for everyone to spend time together — meals, watching TV, just hanging out. The layout of the downstairs is perfect for that. A lot of men in recovery are not coming from the best of life circumstances — living out of a car, shelters, rehabs... Most have had any sense of ‘home’ removed from

their lives long ago. Many in fact have been kicked out of their house by a wife and family who want nothing to do with them.”

In truth, a “home” is likely the most fundamental structure humans create for themselves. It is intended to be a safe harbor — originally safe from weather; more recently a place where creature comforts and possessions ground and embellish a family’s life and legacy. When James Babcock built his house in 1862, he could never have envisioned that a day would come when its very survival would depend on a large group of unrelated men living there.

This is no rooming house — not a place of casual accommodation where strangers come and go as they please. The explicit intention of this sober house is to create a family environment where everyone meets at the end of the day and shares meals, counseling and creates the bonds of family that are normally associated with the nuclear variety.

Here, men who have lost hope and the ability to function have been brought back

from the brink of disaster. They need the unconditional acceptance of family that many of them have never had. In that way the Babcock house has regained its status as home from “party house.”

The Babcock house has always been a focal point — the elegant structure high on the hill, looking west over New Haven. In recent years it gained infamy as a place of questionable social use in a quiet residential neighborhood. Now, once again, a new spotlight is cast on an old building: People will live there, and hopefully grow and thrive — though not as a traditional family. Homes can reflect status, as this one did for James F. Babcock. Homes also reflect values, as do the sturdy homes that cluster around Babcock’s “statement” home.

But there are homes that give hope and safety to those who need it. It’s not just the architect’s job to do that, but when a house becomes a home, it’s the people who live there that offer the protection and acceptance necessary to allow a family to happen. Maybe that will happen here.

Robert Hargrove in a former servant’s quarters room, a classic ‘ell’ wing off the mansion’s symmetrical center hall house. A lower shape, the ceilings help shape each room’s space.

