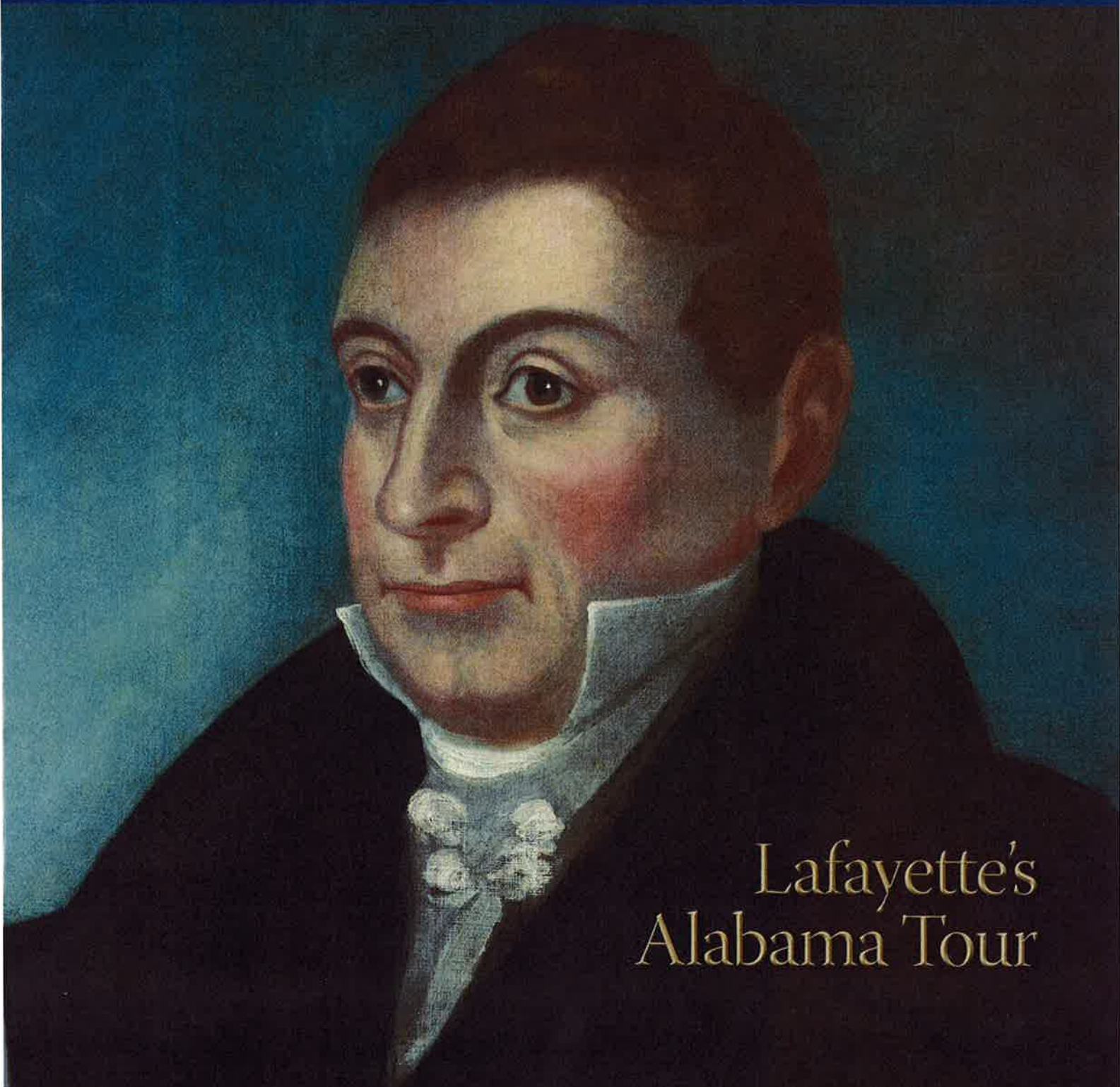


Alabama Heritage



Lafayette's Alabama Tour

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A VICTORIAN LADY GETS A NEW START

BY JAMES BAÑOS

For years, passersby along Highland Avenue were fascinated by a dilapidated Victorian-era mansion near the corner of bustling 20th Street. Inhabited by a mysterious lone elderly woman, it seemed just a matter of time until it succumbed to surrounding commercial pressure. Then, in early 2011, a sudden flurry of construction activity signaled that something was afoot. In fact, it proved to be a transformation that brings to full circle the history of a house that has paradoxically embodied and bucked the shifting fortunes of Birmingham's Southside.

Erected around 1898, the fourteen-room mansion exemplified an eclectic style of Queen Anne architecture that flourished in early Birmingham. It was built for William Hassinger, an enterprising industrialist who lived in the home with his wife and six children. By 1930, however, the once-fashionable residential neighborhood had begun to decline. Some houses were demolished and replaced by commercial structures. Others became doctors' offices. In 1949 the Hassinger house became the office and residence of optician Roy Daniels and his wife Venoa, who also sublet rooms for a number of other businesses in what later came to be known as the "Twenty Twenty-Eight Building."

Left a widow in 1998, Venoa Daniels did something unusual that ultimately proved to be a wonderful act of historic preservation: she stayed put. Yet as signs from her late husband's practice rusted away and plants overgrew the yard, maintaining the house became increasingly difficult. Developers saw a likely site for new construction and offered to buy the old mansion. But it was not until December of 2010 that Daniels, at age ninety-four, finally sold the home to Ira and Sheila Chaffin, who planned to preserve it as a bed-and-breakfast inn.

The Chaffins embarked on the project after having restored the nearby Cobb Lane Bed and Breakfast. Sheila's architectural experience and Ira's fine woodworking skills no doubt helped, for the restoration was daunting. Years of roof leaks had caused extensive water damage throughout the house, leaving spoiled plaster behind layers of peeling paint and wallpaper. Yet the grandeur of the home is apparent. The main entry hall is flanked by Ionic columns and features a fireplace, wainscoting, and a staircase partially housed in a half-round turret and illuminated by curved stained-glass windows. The house boasts large pocket doors, claw-foot



When purchased by Ira and Sheila Chaffin (above), the house held no shortage of hazards, including a rotted porch (opposite page below). (Both James Baños) The Chaffins supplied architectural and woodworking expertise (opposite page, above), lending new life to the historic structure. (Robin McDonald)

bathtubs, and a small, low copper sink—allegedly where a child servant could wash dishes. Surprisingly, eight beautiful wooden mantelpieces managed to escape water damage.

Initial renovation focused on immediate needs—foremost a new roof. Decking and eaves required extensive



repair, and deteriorated slate had to be replaced with Lamarite composite shingles that recall the look of slate. A coal furnace and coal-fired water heater also gave way to more modern systems, though the heater remains in the basement as a silent reminder of another era.

Interior work struck a balance between preserving the home's historic architectural character and meeting the needs and code requirements of a bed-and-breakfast conversion. The first floor includes an entry hall, parlor, dining room, kitchen, guest room, and the owners' living quarters. Upstairs guest rooms—most with fireplaces—include a

suite and an extended-stay unit with its own kitchen. The previously unfinished attic was converted to four guest rooms, taking advantage of the dormer windows on the roofline of the house and an upper tier of stained glass in the peaked-roof turret. Even the basement is used, housing owner-artist Ira Chaffin's Carousel Carving School, one of the few such schools in the nation.

Its rescue has secured a unique place for the Hassinger-Daniels house in a neighborhood where conversion to a medical office or commercial space usually presaged the demise of another landmark mansion. Now the home will survive to delight future generations, thanks to the vision of Sheila and Ira Chaffin and the unsung contribution of Venoa Daniels—the woman who stayed.

Originally from Louisiana, James Baños is now a practicing clinical neuropsychologist in Birmingham who enjoys exploring regional history and architecture through research, photography, and pen and ink drawing. Robert Gamble, standing editor of the "Southern Architecture and Preservation" department of Alabama Heritage, is senior architectural historian for the Alabama Historical Commission.