A Passion to Preserve

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Proverbially the most famous gay preservationist in America is Georgia native Jim Williams. A central figure in John Berendt’s best-selling book, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, Williams died in 1990. Born sixty years earlier in a small town near Macon, young Williams was smitten by old-fashioned things. In his teens he rode his bicycle in search of antiques. He would buy old oil lamps, mirrors, and pieces of furniture, fix them up in his workshop, then sell them by advertising in the local paper. Wealthy women from Macon were known to get Williams out of school so that he could take them to the house, where he sold antiques out of his bedroom.

Even as a teenager, Williams realized that much of Georgia’s heritage was being destroyed, with many abandoned old houses being torn down or allowed to go to ruin. Recalling his exploration of one of the first houses to grip his imagination, Williams wrote, “Few places have held such a powerful psychic intrigue for me. . . . Where were these souls once vibrant and so alive? . . . Where was continuity?”

About 170 miles southeast of Williams’s hometown, Savannah lay moldering through the 1940s. The old center of cotton commerce had been growing shabby for years before Williams was born. With the proliferation of automobiles after 1910, the city’s gracious public squares were often targeted for elimination in favor of uninterrupted thoroughfares and more parking space. Many of its great houses were badly deteriorated, and the privations of the war years intensified the toll. In 1946 Lady Astor likened Savannah to “a beautiful lady with a dirty face” when she visited the city.

Williams fell in love with scruffy Savannah. He moved there in the summer of 1952 and opened an antiques shop. He was twenty-one, the city was filled with blighted architectural masterpieces in need of rescue, and there were only the faint beginnings of a preservation effort. “In those days,” Williams said, “people like me, with a love for taking old houses and putting them back into shape, were considered a little eccentric.”
“The old part of town had become a slum,” said one of Savannah’s preservation-minded women. “The banks had red-lined the whole area. The great old houses were falling into ruin or being demolished to make way for gas stations and parking lots, and you couldn’t borrow any money from the banks to go in and save them. Prostitutes strolled along the streets. Couples with children were afraid to live downtown, because it was considered dangerous. One thing we did do, we got the bachelors interested.”

Williams was one of the city’s bachelors, confirmed as well as concerned, but he would have scoffed at the suggestion that his interest in revitalizing old Savannah was sparked by the women of the city. He had refurbished antiques and sold them to the ladies of Macon as a teenager, just as he was selling antiques and interior design services to the citizens of Savannah from his shop on East Broad Street.

Savannah’s nascent preservationists were riled by the razing of City Market in 1954 to make way for a parking ramp. When Davenport House, a rundown rooming house at the time, was targeted for demolition in 1955, Historic Savannah Foundation got started. The official story in Savannah is that seven ladies—outraged, courageous, and fiercely resolved—joined together to save the 1820 Federal-style house and found the organization. As is typical, the uncommon men who worked with the ladies have been edited out of the story.

Jim Williams worked side by side with the women of Historic Savannah Foundation as they scrambled to rescue many old buildings, with very limited funds. With local businessmen declaring downtown doomed, most banks refused to extend financing on downtown property. The demand for distinctive old Savannah gray bricks to use in new suburban construction helped keep the wrecking ball swinging. “Georgia Fawcett and I had many a tearful meeting,” Williams recalled. “What house shall we save next? How? How much money did we have? How much money could we borrow? We used every dollar we could to preserve multiple houses.” Even if there weren’t enough funds to restore a building right away, acquiring it and making sure the roof and structure were sound would see it through to better days.

Williams’s own architectural preservation work began in 1955 and saved more than fifty houses over a period of thirty years. “All existence is rehearsal for a final performance of perfection,” Williams wrote. He strived for perfection in his restoration work, doing whatever research was needed to achieve authenticity, selecting appropriate materials from his huge accumulation of architectural elements that he had salvaged from doomed buildings and stashed away wherever he could find storage space. Through the 1960s Williams continued to reinvest his real-estate profits, buying, restoring, and selling dozens of old Savannah houses.
“There can never be a suitable replacement for a living historic city,” Williams said. “It gives its inhabitants a sense of well-being and security that only an old section can create.” His own example prompted others to get involved in rehabilitating blighted buildings and neighborhoods. “By the early 1970s,” John Berendt writes, “couples with children came back downtown, and the prostitutes moved over to Montgomery Street.”

“Voices from the past speak to me,” Williams wrote in his fifties, recalling his response as a fourteen-year-old to a white-columned antebellum house he encountered while traveling with his parents. “Our journey continued but my mind hesitated, reflecting on vibrations clearly received from that mysterious mass.” Such vivid vibrations drew Williams to many a restoration project. “Some people are blessed with the ability to see beauty even when that beauty has been tarnished or besmirched,” said one of Williams's friends. “Jim Williams had the extraordinary talent to see potential beauty in an enormously wide spectrum of art objects, antiques, buildings—and people. Just let him near a painting, a piece of furniture, a house, or a person whose beauty had become obscured by the vicissitudes of time and life, and he would instantly and energetically begin, as if by magic, to make that beauty apparent to those willing to take a moment to look.”

By the time artist Jack Richards moved to Savannah, its rescue had been underway for almost thirty years. Born in 1952, Richards grew up in a small Illinois town. “When I saw the city of Savannah, I really fell in love,” he says. “It was absolutely seductive. Within a matter of months I was down here painting and found a place that would sell my work on consignment. I lived in several lovely apartments in the historic district and became acquainted with Savannahian architecture. I got involved with Historic Savannah Foundation as a tour guide. Then, because of my interest in spiritual concerns and because Savannah has so many legends, I developed my own walking tour, ‘Ghost Talk Ghost Walk,’ with the help of Margaret De Bolt, the author of Savannah Specters and Other Strange Tales.

“I've always been interested in older people and their ideas, in 'oldish' things and restoring them. Bernice Coleman and her husband, Floyd, lived in the oldest house in Georgetown, Illinois. It was an 1852 American Gothic structure, in beautiful condition, and they had some of the nicest antiques. Everybody in Georgetown knew I was a little odd, but Bernice and Floyd were not so judgmental. Both my grandmothers had died when I was two, so the Colemans were like surrogate grandparents. I was very inquisitive. They taught me a lot about quilts and how to look at things and determine their age. The first thing I bought from them, when I was sixteen, was a beautiful wingback chair with a hassock, upholstered in a tufted brocade velvet that's
really lovely. And I bought a flax wheel for $125. Lord knows I couldn’t afford that at the time, but I had to have it. I’ve used it a lot in the past thirty years to spin flax into linen thread. I weave the thread into what I call my prayer cloths—intimate, shamanistic pieces of work that I’ve needed to do now and then, when I’ve had something to work through.

“I’m one of those people, like a lot of gays, who are drawn to history, art, aesthetics. I love to look at things, to study how they were made and why they are beautiful, and to restore things. My grandfather was a furniture doctor and had a little shop where I would work with him during summers and holidays. It was wonderful to listen to my grandfather as he worked over an old piece of furniture. As he rubbed it with a special kind of oil, he would say, ‘This wood is coming alive again because I’m putting my energy into it.’”

Bob Page’s penchant for restoration led him to put his energy into founding Replacements, Ltd., “the world’s largest retailer of old and new china, crystal, silver and collectibles.” From a sprawling facility in Greensboro, North Carolina, Page and his staff help to make things whole again. The company’s warehouse and showroom contain millions of pieces in thousands of patterns, many of them discontinued. Thousands of pieces arrive each week from the company’s network of freelance pickers around the country, who scour estate sales, flea markets, thrift shops, and auctions. Some items need to go to the company’s restoration department before being offered for sale.

Born in 1945, Page grew up near Greensboro and became part owner of an antique shop in 1978. After he found some pieces of china that a customer was missing, she recommended him to her friends, and the requests kept coming in. “There are a lot of people out there who are really looking for some of these older patterns,” Page says. “It was grandmother’s or Aunt Sally’s china and they inherited it, or they got it years ago when they got married. It’s very sentimental to them. There’s no greater feeling than when you get somebody on the phone, or they walk into our showroom, and they say, ‘I’ve been looking for that for twenty-five years!’ Sometimes they have tears in their eyes.”

China collector and show-tune enthusiast Richard Jost commented that the remarkable involvement of gay men in historic preservation “would seem to argue for the existence of a preservation gene, which I would guess is located very near the Broadway show-tune gene.” Perhaps no gay man in America offers more compelling evidence of the proximity of those two genes than Jerry Herman, the composer and lyricist whose career brought the world celebrated musical productions, from *Hello, Dolly!* to *Mame* to *La Cage aux Folles*. Herman started writing songs as a child but decided to study archi-
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tecture and interior design, his other loves, in college. Though he completed only one year of design school before his show-tune destiny prevailed, he never lost the urge to design and decorate.

In the mid-1980s, Herman began a relationship with Marty Finkelstein, who was involved in architectural design and restoration in Philadelphia. Finkelstein had never been to Key West, one of Herman’s favorite places. “So we flew down to Key West for a long weekend and I showed Marty all the things I loved,” Herman writes, “the little bridges, the tree-lined streets, the charming old houses. There is something very romantic about the ambience and informality of Key West.” Finkelstein was captivated by the place and soon moved there for good. Many gay men had made the move before him: though Key West has only about thirty thousand residents, it has several thousand historic structures and more preservation organizations than Miami.

Key West became Herman and Finkelstein’s common ground; its needy old houses became their rehab ventures. “The preservation society loved us,” Herman says. “A lot of people buy these old Victorian houses and jazz them up, but we honestly restored them by keeping the integrity of the original design. Some of the houses we did were no more than falling-down shacks, so we rescued them and created elegant new exteriors for them.” The couple rehabilitated eleven Key West dwellings. “In a way,” Herman says, “doing houses is like doing a Broadway musical, only without the chorus girls. You have to love the property and give it all your time and concentration. And if you want to make the work interesting you have to keep trying something new. You have to make it a challenge for yourself.”

The persistent urge to rescue and rehabilitate is evident in the five individual stories that follow. Allan Gurganus sees “something potent about taking a beautiful, broken, preexisting form and making it once more whole.” Myrick Howard directs Preservation North Carolina, calling it “an animal shelter for buildings . . . the poor dogs that nobody else will love.” John Anders, preserver of forgotten literature, sees his passion for the North Carolina historical novels of Inglis Fletcher and the New Orleans writings of George Washington Cable “as a way of saving them from oblivion.” For serial house restorer Robert Barker, who fell in love with and rescued his first desperate old house at age eighteen, “it’s quite a thrill to take a place that’s really been altered and get it back to what it was originally, . . . the way it was meant to be.” Cranford Sutton longs to see his highway-sundered Georgia hometown revived, a strong sense of community rekindled. In the meantime Sutton channels much of his restorative energy into several vintage automobiles and his century-old family home.