

House of Seven Gables: A Brief Introduction

History of Site before House was Built

- Located in the area of the early “Clear Water Harbor” settlement.
- Land at the site originally acquired by James Stevens in 1842 as the result of the Armed Occupation Act. Other early owners of the land (before a structure was built) included John S. Taylor and David B. Turner. David Nevins Starr and wife Mary acquired the tract in 1896. Starr retired from his business activities in Rockford, Illinois, and came to the area in search of a warmer winter climate.
- Members of the Starr family visited the area before the arrival of the Orange Belt Railway.

Construction Information

- Seven Gables was built in 1907 on the bluff near the present-day Pinellas County Courthouse, an area with excellent views of Clearwater’s bay.
- This late Queen Anne style home occupied an impressive location in the growing community of Clearwater.

History of Occupants

- David N. and Mary Starr were the first occupants of the house. The Starrs also had a connection with John Cheyney, an early settler and “sponge hooker” in Tarpon Springs who played an important role in establishing the sponge diving industry. Cheyney had served as manager of the Anclote and Rock Island Sponge Company as early as 1891, nearly fourteen years before the first Greek sponge divers arrived in the region. Starr’s older brother, Henry, had a daughter named Mabel. This woman, David’s niece, married John Cheyney. David Starr frequently visited with John and Mabel Cheyney during his later years, and discussed business ventures, including Cheyney’s investments in a lumber mill and in citrus and developments around the Lake Butler region.
- After selling Seven Gables in 1917, Starr continued to visit the region. He lived the last six years of his life in Tarpon Springs.
- A number of owners and occupants stayed at the structure through the mid-1920s, including an Episcopal minister named Arthur R. Cornwell who lived at Seven Gables during the construction of his church’s rectory.
- Chester and Lucy Masslich owned the building from 1925 through 1943. During part of this period, city directories referred to the structure as “Seven Gables Inn” or noted that the boarding house had “furnished rooms.” The rooming house also included a gazebo by this time. For a brief period, near the height of the land boom, a “binder boys” club met/stayed at the home. These speculators often sold prime tracts of land for handsome profits during the land boom of the 1920s.
- Many tenants stayed in the guest rooms at the structure.
- Charles and Clara Dietrich acquired the house during the mid-1940s. They came from Ohio by way of Orlando. The Dietrich family sold the house in 1951 and returned to Orlando.
- The Hemerick family acquired the house in 1953 and made necessary repairs. They owned the structure through the mid-1970s. Williams & Walker architects

acquired the site from the Hemericks, and donated the structure for a planned historical museum that became Heritage Village. This structure and the Plant-Sumner House were scheduled to arrive before the museum complex had even been built.

Moving of the House to Heritage Village

- The structure traveled from Clearwater to the area near Walsingham Road on a barge along the Intracoastal Waterway.
- Shortly after Seven Gables arrived at the “Pinellas County Historical Park,” carpenters, members of the Clearwater Junior League, and others donated their time to rehabilitate the structure.
- By the fall of 1977, crews had finished nearly all of the major rehabilitative work on Seven Gables.
- A ribbon-cutting ceremony took place in October 1978.
- People visiting the structure for guided docent tours actually enter what was once the back door, and leave through the front door.

House of Seven Gables

Overview

The House of Seven Gables has a rich and intriguing history. James Stevens obtained the land around present-day downtown Clearwater through the Armed Occupation Act. Passed by Congress in 1842, this law brought settlers to peninsular Florida who agreed to live on their land, cultivate at least five acres, build a dwelling, and bear arms in event of another Seminole war. After the property exchanged hands three times, David N. Starr—a retiree from Rockford, Illinois—purchased the parcel in 1896. Eleven years later, his family began to spend their winters at Seven Gables. This chapter includes a detailed examination of the Starr family’s business connections prior to the construction of Seven Gables to illustrate how financial and personal resources allowed the Starrs to enjoy an uncommonly ornate house during a time when many Pinellas residents lived in simple shacks, cottages, or small homes.

Originally perched on a bluff overlooking Clearwater Bay west of the present-day courthouse, this impressive house offered a magnificent view and occupied a prominent location in the growing city. The elegant residence contained thirteen rooms and seven gables, allowing for a spacious living area that suited Victorian tastes. The interior paneling is made of heart of pine and beaded tongue and groove that provided durability. Excellent materials and sound construction have allowed the house to survive the October 1921 hurricane, as well as other storms.

The Starr family sold the home in 1917. Two years later, a compassionate woman named Annie Kelley acquired the house. By the early 1920s, she allowed an Episcopal minister to occupy the house with his family until the architects could complete a new rectory at Clearwater’s Episcopal Church of the Ascension. Chester and Lucy Masslich purchased the home in 1925 for speculative purposes and rental income. Over the next two decades, a variety of proprietors operated an inn or rooming house at Seven Gables. During the mid-1920s, a group of realtors utilized the house as a social club for dinners, informal meetings, and card games attended by “binder boys,” young real estate operatives who placed a small down payment, or binder, on real estate during the Florida land boom with a promise to acquire the balance within a short period of time. As the

land boom came to an end, numerous residents rented the upstairs furnished rooms between the late 1920s and the early 1940s. For example, the Guzman family managed the property in 1931 and turned Seven Gables into a tearoom and rooming house with service that included “dinner on the veranda.”

Charles and Clara Dietrich fell in love with Seven Gables in 1944 and planned to retire there. They moved from Orlando to Clearwater and made some improvements to the structure. However, after seven years in the home, the house and stairs become too much for the elderly couple. They returned to Orlando after selling the house to John V. Neill in 1951. Two years later, Neill decided to sell to a young dentist named Frederick Hemerick. Members of that family kept the house until April 1975, when they accepted a purchase offer from Don Williams and Dixie Walker of the Williams and Walker architectural firm in Clearwater. Williams, a member of the Pinellas County Historical Commission and early developer of site plans for Heritage Village, donated Seven Gables and some of the costs associated with its move to Heritage Village in 1976. The enormous size of the house and its location in downtown Clearwater required movers to transport it by barge along the intracoastal waterway, an event that attracted a great deal of media attention. Since arriving at Heritage Village, many individuals and organizations have contributed to the restoration of this grand and elegant house to its original Victorian appearance.

A Starr is Born

The earliest permanent settlers in the Clearwater area arrived after the end of the Second Seminole War. They came to the region to obtain lands available through the Armed Occupation Act of 1842. Passed on August 4, the Congressional measure provided 160-acre homesteads along peninsular Florida to those who agreed to bear arms, clear and cultivate at least five acres of land, and live in a home on the land for at least five years. During a one-year window of opportunity, this act opened lands along the Florida peninsula south of Gainesville and Palatka to individuals over the age of eighteen and heads of household willing to defend their property from Indian incursions and provide a buffer between the Seminoles on the lower end of the peninsula and plantations and settlements to the north. Although this provision did not cover lands within close

proximity to military outposts, the closing of Fort Harrison prior to 1842 allowed applicants to select lands along the central Pinellas Peninsula.

James Stevens made the first land claim in the area of present-day Clearwater. Considered “the father of Clearwater” by many sources, Stevens settled on a parcel along the waterfront between Drew and Jeffords, an area encompassing the former fort site, the Harbor Oaks subdivision, and part of downtown Clearwater. Stevens later encouraged John S. Taylor, Sr., to move from the Brooksville area and acquire lands in central Pinellas. Stevens sold part of his homestead to Taylor on 26 March 1850. David B. Turner came to the area in 1854 and—along with Robert J. Whitehurst—acquired the Taylor tract on 25 March 1858. By 1859, Turner operated a remote post office on part of this land. After the Civil War, the Turner family opened a small mercantile outpost along the harbor. The settlement, then known as “Clear Water Harbor,” remained a quiet outpost until after the arrival of the Orange Belt Railway in early 1888. At that time, approximately eighteen families lived in the area.¹

David Nevins Starr purchased land at the original site of Seven Gables in 1896. Although born in Illinois, David came from a family with connections to antebellum Florida. His father, Melancthon Starr, a native of Albany, New York, entered the world on 14 April 1816. The elder Starr lived in Albany with his parents—Chandler Starr and Hannah Smith—and attended public schools in that city. By the early 1830s, Melancthon moved to Manhattan. For awhile, he worked as a hatter and lived with his brother. In December 1839, Melancthon married Lucretia Mary Nevins, a native of Norwich, Connecticut, born on 26 June 1817. They exchanged vows in New York City, probably at a time when Melancthon worked as a clerk in a wholesale dry goods store. Lucretia gave birth to their oldest child, Henry Nevins Starr, in New York City on 12 August 1840. Shortly thereafter, Melancthon became a broker and merchant who handled cotton transactions between southern farmsteads and northern merchants. His work brought him, Lucretia, and their infant son to Tallahassee in the early 1840s. While in Tallahassee, Lucretia gave birth to two daughters, Florida Lucretia (born 3 August 1842,

¹ William L. Straub, *History of Pinellas County, Florida: Narrative and Biographical* (St. Augustine: The Record Company, 1929), 91-92; “Seven Gables Actual Ownership Information from Records of Pinellas County Courthouse,” compiled on 22 August 1977 by William R. and Elizabeth H. Heath, located in Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo.

a day before Congress passed the Armed Occupation Act) and Elizabeth Smith (born 5 January 1846). Despite the profits he earned from this work, family histories claimed that Melancthon despised the institution of slavery. In the late 1840s, he decided to leave Tallahassee and return to New York City, where he worked as a cashier in a Wall Street bank. In 1850, the family headed from New York to the Midwest. According to one account, as soon as the family came over the ridge and saw the small settlement on the Rock River, Lucretia became captivated by the beautiful village of Rockford, Illinois. The Starrs decided to stay in Rockford, the county seat of Winnebago County and the birthplace of their youngest three children: Chandler (born 29 April 1851), David Nevins (born 9 October 1853), and Lucretia (born 20 April 1857). They had settled in Rockford by the time census agents visited their home on 20 December 1850.²

As the Starr family grew in the community, the town of Rockford transformed into a city. During the early 1850s, Melancthon ran a dry goods market at the center of town. He soon formed a banking partnership with Thomas D. Robertson known as Robertson and Starr, a firm that later became Winnebago National Bank. He joined the local Unitarian church, one of two in Illinois at the time, and his strong feelings against chattel slavery led him to support the Republican Party. The Galena and Chicago Union Railroad arrived at Rockford in 1852. In that same year, the city received its charter. By the mid-1850s, a New York newspaper had dubbed the community “Forest City.” Though Melancthon enjoyed great success in business, the spring of 1857 brought him both joy and sorrow. On April 20, he and Lucretia celebrated the birth of their youngest child and her namesake, Lucretia Starr. Six days later, Melancthon’s wife passed away. During the late 1850s, Melancthon maintained his business enterprises and raised his children. Ellen Marilla Townsend, a young schoolteacher from New England, arrived in Rockford by 1859. Melancthon fell in love with Ellen, and they exchanged vows on 5 August 1861 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Ellen raised the younger children and joined her husband in supporting the prohibitionist movement by forming a local chapter of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. Before his death in November 1885,

² Census records described in this narrative reside in building files located at Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; Newton Bateman, Paul Selby, and Charles A. Church, *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois* (Chicago: Munsell Pub. Co., 1916), 1227; Raymond F. Kearney, *House on the Hill: 405 Summer Street* (Rockford, Ill.: R. F. Kearney, 1981), 1-3.

Melancthon served as vice president of the Winnebago National Bank, brought speakers to appear at Rockford's Lyceum programs, and helped to fund and establish the Rockford Public Library in 1872.³

The Starr children contributed to the development of Rockford during that city's early years. Henry Nevins Starr, the eldest child, attended Rockford schools and followed his father's footsteps by operating dry goods stores in Winnebago County. According to family records, he opened Andrews & Starr Dry Good in or about 1858. On 17 July 1861, he married Emma Stewart. Emma gave birth to two daughters, Laura and Mabel, during the 1860s. For awhile, Henry ran a small mercantile at the Holland House, a famous hotel in Rockford. Between 1869 and 1882, he served as proprietor of the Holland House. Census records from 1870 place the value of Henry Starr's personal estate at \$13,000 and note that he, Emma, and their daughters shared their residence with Julia Stewart, a New York native who worked as a clerk in his dry goods store. Two years after Emma died in 1882, Henry married Caroline "Carrie" Humphrey. Henry had two children during his second marriage, Carroll H. and Lois S. Starr. After leaving the Holland House, Henry worked as a bookkeeper at a manufacturing company, a treasurer at the John P. Manny Mower Company, and secretary of the Rockford Cemetery Association. As Rockford's mayor beginning in 1891, he became the first elected official to appoint women to the school and library boards of the city. Henry passed away in Rockford on 31 December 1921.⁴

Sisters Florida and Elizabeth—both natives of Tallahassee—also spent the bulk of their adult lives in Rockford. Family records indicate that Florida married Addison Brown, Jr., in the early 1860s. A few years later, she exchanged vows with John Pels Manny, a widower whose first wife, Eunice Hicks Manny, had passed away in 1867. In addition to the five children he had with Eunice, John Pels and Florida Manny celebrated the arrival of four children between 1869 and 1879: Mary E., John Starr, Henry H., and Virginia Manny. John's family played an important role in developing agricultural machinery: Pels Manny invented a reaper by the 1840s and received a patent in 1849. He

³ Ibid., "History of Rockford" and "RPL History," available at the Rockford Public Library website, <http://www.rpl/rockford/org>; "Rockford, Illinois," city website with chronology of events available at: <http://www.rockfordillinois.com/chron.htm>.

and his son, John H. Manny, created a horse-drawn reaper that reduced the time required to gather and stack wheat. In 1852, their reaper won a “gold medal of achievement” in New York; by 1853 the Mannys decided to move their enterprise to the booming agricultural heartland and selected Rockford for the company’s headquarters. John Pels Manny, John’s cousin and Florida’s future husband, had also joined the operation by 1853. One year later, J. H. Manny and Company began to attract notable financiers, including Ralph Emerson (a cousin of Ralph Waldo Emerson). The Mannys produced approximately 1,100 reapers and mowers in 1854, drawing the attention of Cyrus H. McCormick, a notable reaper maker from Chicago who held a similar patent. Soon, McCormick decided to sue John H. Manny’s company for infringing on the patent for his McCormick harvesting machine. Notable members of Manny’s defense team included Abraham Lincoln and Edwin M. Stanton, who later served as Lincoln’s Secretary of War. By the 1870 census, John P. Manny listed real estate valued at \$30,000 and a personal estate in excess of \$210,000.⁵

Elizabeth Starr, Florida’s younger sister, tied the knot with Charles Wetherbee Brown in Rockford on 20 August 1867. His father was Addison Brown, Sr., meaning that Florida’s first husband (Addison Brown, Jr.) was the brother of Elizabeth’s husband (Charles W. Brown). Thus, the two Starr sisters married two brothers in the Brown family. Similar to members of the Starr family, C. W. Brown operated a dry goods store in Rockford. By the 1870 census, Charles and Elizabeth Brown had celebrated the arrival of two children, Elizabeth and Melancthon Starr Brown, and shared their homestead valued at \$5,000 with Kate Downey, a family servant who originally came from Ireland.⁶

David and Chandler Starr became baseball pioneers while young Lucretia grew into a teacher and supporter of the arts. Many young men gathered to play cricket in Rockford during the city’s early years. By 1865, an insurance agent named John Lewis had moved from Cincinnati to Rockford, and brought along a book of baseball rules. With assistance from older brother Henry, David and Chandler decided to create a

⁴ Census records available at Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; Kearney, *House on the Hill*, 3-5.

⁵ *Ibid.*; [Ashtabula County, OHGenweb], located at <http://www.rootsweb.com/~ohashtab/scrapbook3.html>; Harry Hansen, ed., *Illinois: A Descriptive and Historical Guide*, new revised ed. (New York: Hastings House, 1974), 393-394; “A History of the Emerson-Brantingham Company,” located at <http://members.aol.com/wb8jca/ebhistor.htm>.

baseball to Lewis's specifications by getting an old shoe sole for the core, covering it with yarn, and using an orange peel as a model for the ball's cover. The Starr brothers helped to bring together the Forest City Baseball Club in Rockford, a notable team during the early years of professional baseball. Albert Goodwill Spalding, a member of this team, went on to pitch for the Boston Red Stockings of the National Association and the Chicago White Stockings of the National League during the 1870s, where he compiled an amazing win-loss pitching record of 253-65. Spalding, an associate of the Starrs, later founded the company that manufactures sports balls of many kinds to this day. Meanwhile, Lucretia spent much of the 1860s attending local schools. By the early 1880s, she had joined the faculty of Rockford Female Seminary (renamed Rockford College in 1892). She joined the Church of the Christian Union, the local woman's club, and other civic organizations. She also offered private music lessons. Chandler married Clara Blanche Ellis on 1 January 1874; Lucretia, the youngest sibling, remained single her entire life.⁷

David Starr, the fifth of Melancthon's six children, became the first family member to acquire substantial landholdings in Florida. As a young man, David courted Mary Palmer Robinson, the daughter of Thomas Duncan and Elizabeth Ann Taylor Robertson. The 1870 census places the Robertson, Starr, and Manny families as neighbors along the same street. Each family also had two servants living with them. A native of Scotland, Thomas D. Robinson came to the United States in the mid-1830s. Shortly after his arrival, he settled in Rockford, studied and briefly practiced law, and later worked as a banker and a real estate speculator. His efforts helped secure an extension of the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad into Rockford. One of the city's largest landowners during the 1800s, the Robertson family became prominent in the city's expanding business enterprises. By 1870, Thomas Robinson listed his profession as attorney at law, his family's real estate carried a value of \$147,000, and his personal estate exceeded \$50,000. Sixteen year-old David and fourteen year-old Mary—a native of Rockford and Thomas's youngest child—certainly spent a great amount of time together during this period. Nine years later, Mary exchanged vows with David Nevins

⁶ Census records available at Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo.

Starr on 30 December 1879. By this time, Starr has worked in the store of his brother-in-law, C. W. Brown. The 1880 census even notes that the Starrs shared their home with a sixteen year-old servant named Mary Horley. Starr engaged in other commercial activities—including manufacturing—by the early 1880s; he also traveled to Pinellas Peninsula during this time.⁸

Starr Sightings and an Opulent House on the Bluffs

An early edition of the *West Hillsborough Times* noted that David Starr purchased land on the Pinellas Peninsula as early as the spring of 1886. Although he did not acquire the Seven Gables property until 1896—ten years later—Starr came to the small settlement of Clear Water Harbor two years before the Orange Belt Railway arrived with C. W. Brown. The following account appeared in the 1 April 1886 edition of the newspaper:

(T)he winter just past found Mr. Brown, with quite a crowd of relatives and friends, citizens pro tem. of our town. They leased the 'Orange Bluff,' and occupied it as a home for some months. Among the relatives of his, was a Mr. David N. Starr, a brother-in-law of Mr. Brown, and it was to this gentleman that the last sale, of one lot, was made.⁹

The article then inferred that Brown and Starr had visited Florida on earlier occasions:

Taking into consideration the fact that, these parties are not strangers to our State, and made these purchases just on the eve of their departure, and after they had spent sufficient time in Clear Water to get their eyes fully open, and the influence they wield at home, we are constrained to believe that another wedge has been entered, that will soon open up things on our side of the county.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid.; Kearney, *House on the Hill*, 4-7; Spalding's baseball statistics appear at: <http://www.baseball-reference.com/s/spaldal01.shtml>.

⁸ Ibid.; "Robertson, Thomas Duncan," available at: <http://www.chicago-scots.org/clubs/History/Names-R.htm>; Ruth N. Lunde, board member, Rockford Historical Society, to Mrs. Sheahan, 3 April 2000, copy available in building files, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; Census records available at Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo.

⁹ *West Hillsborough Times*, 1 April 1886.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Starr, Brown, and other unnamed family members most certainly arrived by steamship. They stayed in the region during the winter months, and returned to Illinois as spring thawed the Rock River. Without a direct rail connection to Clear Water at that time, the correspondent believed that “the lack of speedy and frequent communications with the balance of the world” hindered settlement. Nevertheless, the article mentioned “the day is close at hand” for the arrival of the railroad, because of the resources that will follow “whenever such individuals can be induced to settle near our door.”¹¹

Although the Starrs visited the area by the mid-1880s, they continued to call Rockford their permanent home. The Starrs welcomed the arrival of two children, Virginia and Clinton Starr. Meanwhile, David worked in various business ventures during the 1880s and 1890s. Florida’s mild winter climate may have attracted Starr to spend time in Florida: According to research conducted by a member of the Rockford Historical Society, David Starr spent part of 1900 at the city’s tuberculosis sanitarium. Mary Starr’s father, Thomas Duncan Robertson, passed away on 4 February 1902. Robertson’s last will, written in September 1897, named three major beneficiaries: wife Elizabeth, son William T., and daughter Mary P. Starr. Rockford city directories between 1903 and 1920 place the Starrs in that community, but do not list any occupation. The size of Mary’s inheritance may have provided them with more than enough funds to allow David to retire and continue his involvement in Florida real estate. Early maps of Clearwater subdivisions often describe the area north of Harbor Oaks (between Druid, Fort Harrison, and Turner) as the “Starr and S. Avery” development.¹²

The House of Seven Gables occupied a prominent location along the bluffs overlooking Clearwater Bay. The home sat on a large plot of land in the Markley’s Shore area, due west of the present-day Pinellas County courthouse. This asymmetrical structure included wings and gables in many directions, an impressive porch, and other features typical of Queen Anne homes from the late 1800s and early 1900s. First occupied in 1907, the House of Seven Gables served as the winter residence for the Starrs until 1917. As the Starrs enjoyed their retirement, they also spent a great deal of time

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lundy to Sheahan, 3 April 2000; “Robertson, Thomas Duncan,” available at: <http://www.chicago-scots.org/clubs/History/Names-R.htm>;

with a family member who moved to Florida and married an early resident of Tarpon Springs.

Soaking Up the Sunshine with the King of Sponges

Mabel Starr Englebretson—daughter of Henry Starr and niece of David Starr—married John King Cheyney in Rockford on 17 July 1897. Mabel had originally exchanged vows with a Norwegian immigrant who lived in Illinois, probably in the late 1880s or by 1890. She had a daughter, Alma, from this first marriage. Her union with Cheyney marked her second marriage. Cheyney, an 1858 native of Philadelphia, worked in Pennsylvania banks from the age of sixteen. By 1889, he became a paymaster along the Altoona stretch of the Pennsylvania Railway. His father, Waldron Cheyney, had cultivated a partnership with Hamilton Disston and acquired large tracts of land in Pasco and western Hillsborough counties. John Cheyney decided to move to Florida to look over his father's land holdings in 1889. Shortly after settling in Tarpon Springs, he expressed an interest in the phosphate business but soon thereafter took notice of the local sponge industry along the Gulf of Mexico and the Anclote River. At that time, nearly all spongers along the Florida coast based their operations out of Key West. By 1891, John K. Cheyney had established the Anclote and Rock Island Sponge Company. Cheyney soon brought associates from Key West, Apalachicola, Philadelphia, and other areas; he purchased land on Bailey's Bluff, an area where divers brought their sponge harvests to cure, and entered into partnerships with other early families. H. F. Pent constructed a launch for Cheyney's boats, including the *Asa Lowe* (named after a member of the pioneer Lowe family in Anona) and the *Silver Spray*. Soon, many of the early Tarpon residents—including members of the Fernald, Meres, Noblit, and Pinder families—engaged directly or indirectly in the sponge diving industry. Cheyney helped to transform Tarpon Springs into the center of Florida's sponge industry. By the early 1900s, a formal sponge exchange existed; Cheyney hired John Cocoris, a Greek immigrant who encouraged others to move from Greece and the Aegean Islands to Tarpon.¹³

¹³ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 5 January 1961; *Makers of America: An Historical and Biographical Work by an Able Corps of Writers, Published Under the Patronage of the Florida Historical Society, Jacksonville, Florida* (Atlanta: A. B. Caldwell, 1909-1911), vol. 4, 68-70; Straub, *History of Pinellas County*, 229; R. F.

Mabel became a close companion with John Cheyney during his many business transactions. After selling his interests in the sponge business, John Cheyney established a large sawmill business, produced turpentine for two decades, and continued to oversee operations of the Lake Butler Villa Company, a firm that held approximately 30,000 acres along the Pinellas Peninsula in the early 1900s. Mabel and John also started a family: In early 1898, they celebrated the arrival of a daughter, Starr Cheyney. Mabel's daughter from her first marriage, Alma, also continued to live with the Cheyneys at least through the spring of 1910. The Cheyney's house was originally one of the small "cottages" along present-day Pinellas Avenue near Orange Street, part of the site of a large tourist hotel known as The Tarpon. After that hotel burned down, Cheyney bought one of the cottages, had it moved to West Tarpon Avenue, and built additional rooms. When the census taker arrived at the Cheyney home on 16 April 1910, Henry Starr—Mabel's seventy year-old father—also stayed at the residence, probably as a winter visitor. Henry later returned to Rockford.¹⁴

The Starrs and Cheyneys spent a great deal of time at Seven Gables during the winter months. With the Cheyneys living in the area throughout the year, they probably checked on the house during their frequent visits and business trips to Clearwater. By early 1910, fifty-six year old David and fifty-three year-old Mary hired a live-in cook, Fanny Williams. An African-American and native of Alabama, the forty-two year old Williams claimed to have eleven children at the time of the census. It remains unclear where Fanny Williams lived on the property, whether she occupied the structure when the Starrs returned to Illinois, if any other members of her family lived or worked at the house, and how long she remained on the premises. A June 1913 Sanborn fire insurance map shows properties along Bay Avenue, but fails to include the western portion of the Starrs's property, Seven Gables, or the bluff. It does, however, indicate the presence of a small, one story structure close to the road with the label "servts"; this tiny building,

Pent, *History of Tarpon Springs* (St. Petersburg: Great Outdoors, 1964), 67-72; Census records available at Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo.

¹⁴ Straub, *History of Pinellas County*, 229; Census records available at Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 21 May 1954. Before John and Mabel Cheyney passed away, their daughters—Starr Cheyney Kibbee and Alma Cheyney Wimsatt—regularly visited the house. In 1946, Starr Kibbee sold her parents' house to David Black, who used the ten-room structure as a funeral home. The home, on a large lot of 110 by 170 feet, became the home of the George Washington Chapter 16, Order of Ahepa, in early 1954.

probably comparable in size to the restored Boyer Cottage, may have served as Williams's residence. According to information compiled during the early years of Heritage Village, a longtime resident of Clearwater named Taver Bayley vividly remembered stopped at the house in 1912 after he returned from prep school because he "was courting Starr's daughter at the time." In reality, their daughter Virginia—who often went by her mother's name "Mary"—had exchanged vows with James Edwin Armstrong in 1910. Thus, Bayley most likely spent time with Starr Cheyney, the daughter of John and Mabel, who would have been a teenager in 1912.¹⁵

Though the Starrs sold the House of Seven Gables on 3 April 1917, they continued to visit the Pinellas Peninsula. For example, the 20 April 1918 *Tarpon Springs Evening Leader* announced that "Mr. and Mrs. David Starr, of Rockford, Ill., arrived last night to be the guests for a time of Mr. John K. Cheyney. They will be welcomed by a host of friends here." After settling in, the Starrs and John Cheyney "motored" by automobile to Clearwater and other areas to attend to business. Later that year, both the Starrs and Cheyneys watched as twenty year old Starr Cheyney briefly entered non-combat military service at the end of the First World War. She served in the United States Navy as a "landsman" at the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C. After the war ended, Starr Cheyney went on inactive duty on 30 January 1919 and received her discharge papers on 28 October 1920 with the rank of "Yeoman 3 Class Female." The Cheyneys looked forward to their daughter's return. In March 1921, the office of the *Clearwater Sun* "was brightened" when Starr Cheyney telephoned them to say she had just celebrated her birthday and "was old enough to vote." The following month, Starr traveled with Clearwater with her parents to watch the screening of the 1920 film "Humoresque" at the recently opened Capitol Theatre. About that time, John Cheyney's mill located three miles east of Tarpon burned to the ground, causing him a loss of over \$25,000. By the end of June 1921, Cheyney devoted his efforts developing the lands of the Lake Butler Villa Company.¹⁶

¹⁵ Census records available at Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; "History of Seven Gables," manuscript researched by Bill Heath and Mike Sanders and compiled by Ken Ford, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; Sanborn Map Company, *Fire Insurance Maps: Florida* (Teaneck, N.J. : Chadwyck-Healey, 1983), June 1913 map, microfilm reel 1.

¹⁶ "Seven Gables Actual Ownership Information," compiled on 22 by William R. and Elizabeth H. Heath; *Tarpon Springs Evening Leader*, 20 April 1918, 29 April 1918; *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 28 March 1921, 13

By 1920, the Starrs had returned to Rockford. When census enumerators arrived on January 12, they found David and Mary Starr living next door to their daughter, Virginia (appearing on the census rolls at “Mary”), husband James Edwin Armstrong, and children Jack M. (age twelve) and Mary E. (age seven). The Armstrongs shared their home with Rose Wersa, a widowed servant from Germany. Meanwhile, Clinton Starr—David and Mary’s son—lived in Madison, Arkansas, with his wife, Evelyn, and their infant daughter, Edith. In 1920 and 1921, the elder Starrs decided to spend their winter months in Los Angeles. Mary did not feel very well in the autumn of 1921. After the Starrs arrived in California, Mary passed away on November 5. David retuned her body for burial at the family lot in Rockford’s Greenwood Cemetery.¹⁷

David N. Starr retuned to Tarpon Springs and purchased property there in the closing years of his life. As he reached his late sixties, in 1922 or 1923, Starr married Leadocia R. Hyans, a native of Louisiana twenty-eight years younger than him. By the mid-1920s, Starr and his new wife lived in Hollywood, California, during the summers, and spent some of their winters (as in 1926-1927) in Orlando, Florida. By April 1927, Starr decided to purchase land in Tarpon Springs and have his final retirement home built. While staying at the Cheyney’s home during a visit from Orlando, the Starrs saw a lot on the corner of Banana and Lemon streets in Tarpon that interested them. Mabel and Uncle David looked up the owner, asked him his price, and handed over a check. In a thirty-six hour period culminating on April 13, Starr acquired the land and contacted contractors Humpheys and Joy to build him a large cottage house costing about \$10,000. David Starr enjoyed his new home, but his health started to deteriorate by the late 1920s. While driving with his wife on the afternoon of 28 April 1933, David quickly became ill and they promptly returned to their home at 122 Banana Street. By four o’clock, Starr had passed away. By April 27, members of the funeral party took a train from Tarpon to Starr’s final resting place, a cemetery in his second wife’s hometown of Baton Rouge.¹⁸

April 1921, 29 June 1921; “Cheyney, Starr,” available from *World War I Service Cards online at the Florida State Archives*, available at: <http://floridamemory.com/Collections/WWI/index.cfm>.

¹⁷ Census records available at Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; Lundy to Sheahan, 3 April 2000.

¹⁸ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 13 April 1927, 28 April 1933; *St. Petersburg Times*, 26 April 1933. Files at Heritage Village include a certified copy of David N. Starr’s death certificate.

Cornwells, Chestnuts, Binder Boys, and Boarders

The House of Seven Gables served as a private residence, rooming house, and social club during the next twenty-seven years. Joseph B. Carse acquired the property from the Starrs on 3 April 1917. A native of New York, Carse probably came to Pinellas County to take advantage of the frenzied real estate speculation that resumed after the end of World War I. Substantial improvements to roadways connecting towns, regular train service, and other enhancements in transportation brought newcomers to the region after Armistice Day. Carse occupied Seven Gables for barely two years before selling the homestead to Annie D. Kelley on 16 April 1919. Carse then purchased a dwelling along First Avenue North in St. Petersburg. By the spring of 1920, the unmarried Carse worked as a real estate broker in the Sunshine City. He also shared his St. Petersburg home with a number of lodgers, although it remains unclear whether he took in boarders at Seven Gables. The six tenants at his new home included another real estate broker, a dressmaker, and a mechanic. Meanwhile, sometime in or about July 1920 Kelley allowed the new pastor of a local church to live in the House of Seven Gables for approximately three years while architects designed a new rectory.¹⁹

Annie Kelley's generosity benefited Arthur Temple Cornwell, Rector of the Church of the Ascension. A native of Bayonne, New Jersey, born 27 October 1873, Arthur moved to Tarpon Springs as an eleven year old child in 1884. The following year, his parents—Arthur Temple, Sr., and Catherine DeCoudress Cornwell—decided to settle in Bradenton, then known as Braidentown. Arthur's father began his duties as a Manatee County judge, while the Cornwell family played an important role in establishing an Episcopalian church on land donated by Captain John Fogarty at Fogartyville along the Manatee River. Arthur's father served as superintendent of the Sunday school and as a lay reader on those Sundays when ministers could not travel to the small church. In a family history of Fogartyville, Ollie Z. Forgarty referred to the elder Cornwell as “a consecrated gentleman, an efficient leader (who) . . . served unstintingly until a full-time rector could be supported by the congregation.” By 1889, the congregation constructed Christ Episcopal Church on Sarasota Avenue, the first formal church for Episcopalians in

¹⁹ Census records available at Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; “Seven Gables Actual Ownership Information,” compiled on 22 by William R. and Elizabeth H. Heath.

Manatee County. Catherine Cornwell provided the window over the altar at this imposing building on the frontier. In 1887, Judge A. T. Cornwell and members of the Fogarty family constructed Wilhelmsen Academy, one of the earliest schools in Manatee County. The Judge also conducted many weddings of pioneer families living along the Manatee River during the late 1800s, while his wife started a social group known as the Elysian Club for women who enjoyed cards and other gatherings. In 1891, the elder Cornwell acquired the *Manatee River Journal*, a weekly with a circulation of 300. A few years later, he purchased land on lower Anna Maria Island and oversaw the construction of cottages. By May 1903, Judge Cornwell became the first mayor of the newly-incorporated City of Braidentown. He also served on the Manatee County Commission and the Board of Public Instruction.²⁰

The younger Cornwell followed in his father's business and religious footsteps. After graduating from the East Florida Seminary, now the University of Florida, Arthur worked as editor and general manager of the *Manatee River Journal*. He married Holly Murphy, daughter of a cattle rancher, in 1898. They had three daughters: Ellene Stanley, Emma, and Elizabeth. Arthur spent approximately nineteen years in the newspaper business and other commercial pursuits before beginning his training for the Episcopal ministry with a priest who individually tutored him. After his ordination in 1910, Arthur and his family served in several churches. By 1920, Cornwell came to Clearwater from a parish in Bolivar, Tennessee.²¹

The Cornwells lived in the House of Seven Gables for nearly three years. They witnessed the wrath of the October 1921 hurricane that damaged structures throughout Pinellas County, though left their imposing house on the bluff untouched with only a few broken tree branches on the property. Soon after his arrival, Rev. Cornwell established two important goals for his tenure at Ascension: to obtain parish status for the church and to oversee the construction of a new house of worship. He realized his first goal by 30 March 1922, when the area's Episcopal bishop signaled his approval of a new parish. He then sought to replace the small wooden building erected in 1887 at the former Haven

²⁰ Straub, *History of Pinellas County*, 251; Sabine Brumby Korosy, *The First Hundred Years, 1885-1985: The Church of the Ascension* (Clearwater: n.p., 1985), 11-13; Ollie Z. Fogarty, *They Called It Fogartyville: A Story of the Fogartys and Fogartyville* (Brooklyn: Theo. Gaus' Sons, Inc., 1972), 102-106, 113, 150, 157, 162-163, 172.

Street and Fort Harrison. In addition to his duties as rector, Cornwell put his previous business experience to work as chair of the building committee. He spent much of his time at Seven Gables planning for the new church and participating in community activities. Services began in the white stone Gothic structure in 1925. In addition to his duties at the church, Rev. Cornwell offered daily chapel programs for local students and taught science and history at South Ward when that campus served as Clearwater's high school. After retiring from his duties as rector in 1937, the church named him Rector Emeritus. He remained in Clearwater and was buried in Clearwater cemetery after his death in 1955.²²

The Seven Gables property offered ample space for picnics and other family activities. One daughter, Bradenton native Ellene Stanley, remembered frequent visits to the house when returning from her classes at the Florida State College for Women (now Florida State University) at Tallahassee. In a 1984 interview, she recalled her family's time at the thirteen-room home in the 1920s:

I'd come home from FSU on holidays and in the summertime. Seven Gables was a lovely place to live and a nice place for young people to gather. I was one of three girls and we brought our dates there. We had picnics and card parties and enjoyed it very much. It was a very nice time in my life. . . . We had a dock out there and the bay was so clean and clear we'd swim off the dock. We had a boat we went fishing in. The fish and scallops and clams were so good.²³

Stanley, a graduate of the high school at nearby South Ward, returned to the area after graduating from the State College for Women. As her father completed plans for building the new church, she exchanged vows in 1924 with John Chestnut, Sr., an entrepreneur who came to the region as an insurance broker. While John worked at Guarantee Abstract and Trust Company's offices in Clearwater, she began her teaching career at Clearwater's North Ward and South Ward schools. The Chestnuts had three children, including John Chestnut, Jr., a 1925 native who later served as a county commissioner.

²¹ Straub, *History of Pinellas County*, 251; Korosy, *The First Hundred Years*, 11-13.

²² *Ibid.*, *Clearwater Sun*, 11 May 1984.

²³ *Clearwater Sun*, 11 May 1984.

By 1984, Ellene Stanley Cornwell Chestnut lived in Oak Bluffs, a retirement complex in downtown Clearwater located on the former site of Seven Gables.²⁴

The House of Seven Gables changed hands twice in 1925. On April 29, Annie Kelley sold the property to Edith C. Moore. By this time, Rev. Cornwell had moved into the new rectory at the Episcopal Church of the Ascension. Seven months after acquiring Seven Gables, Moore decided to sell it to Chester B. and Lucy S. Masslich on December 17. During much of the next eighteen years, the Masslichs rented the property. Physical changes to the property occurred during this period: A comparison of drawings from Sanborn fire insurance maps indicates that later owners of the residence expanded the original home sometime between 1923 and 1929. Details about this expansion remain unclear, in part because the recessed location of the home on the property did not allow full access to Seven Gables for an accurate rendition of the structure. For example, as late as the 1949 revision, the waterfront side of Seven Gables—an addition probably built in late 1910s or early 1920s—appeared one-story in height even though the second story had been added by that time. Meanwhile, by 1923 the former servant’s home had disappeared, though two small structures, possibly outhouses, appeared on the southern property line halfway between Bay Avenue and the Seven Gables. By April 1929, these small buildings disappeared and a dwelling with an assigned address of 418½ Bay Avenue and an adjacent outbuilding appeared at the northern boundary. According to 1949 revisions of the Sanborn maps, these structures remained on the property without substantial modifications through the end of the 1940s.²⁵

The Masslichs rented the building to local “binder boys” during the height of the real estate boom in the mid-1920s. Binder boys assisted realtors by searching for prospective buyers, accepting a binder (usually a deposit of about \$1,000) as a down payment on property, and passing the transaction along to an agent before the end of the binder’s financing period (usually one month, but sometimes longer). Often college-age and full of enthusiasm, their marketing efforts added fuel to the engine driving Florida’s real estate frenzy in the Tampa Bay area and southeastern Florida. In early research on

²⁴ Ibid.; Straub, *History of Pinellas County*, 251.

²⁵ “Seven Gables Actual Ownership Information,” compiled on 22 by William R. and Elizabeth H. Heath; Sanborn Map Company, *Fire Insurance Maps*, June 1923, April 1929, and 1949 revision maps, microfilm reel 1.

the House of Seven Gables, Albert P. Rogers mentioned that he remembered the many meetings of binder boys during the mid-1920s. Rogers, who worked as a real estate broker in Clearwater for nearly fifty years, said that binder boys convened at Seven Gables for informal gatherings, card games, dinners, and other activities. Along with “bird dogs,” the male and female “couples” that also pounded the pavement in search of property purchasers, the binder boys encouraged many visitors to the area to acquire lands or homesteads along the Pinellas Peninsula. During their meetings at the beautiful home on the bluff, young and adventurous marketers certainly compared notes, practiced selling techniques, and tracked transactions. As the land boom sputtered during the late 1920s, many binder boys left the area in search of other work. Gatherings at Seven Gables probably ended long before the stock market crash of October 1929 accelerated America’s economic depression.²⁶

By the 1930s, proprietors rented rooms at the structure to tenants. Known as the “Seven Gables Inn” and later listed in city directories as “Seven Gables, furnished rooms,” the one-time retirement home of the Starr family became a boarding house with a number of proprietors. By 1929 and until 1931, Keith A. and Myrtice P. Nisbet leased the building from the Masslichs and operated Seven Gables as a lodge during tourist seasons. In 1931, the Guzman family moved onto the property and opened a tea room and rooming house. Charles V. Guzman, a native of Louisiana, had married a Floridian named Sally. By the time they moved into the house, Charles was in his mid-sixties and Sally approached her sixtieth birthday. At least three children lived with them in the early 1930s: a daughter named Cary Rebecca, and two teenage sons, Liddle H. and Gardner. The family had previously lived in Louisiana, and moved into a dwelling on Osceola in Clearwater by the spring of 1930. At that time, Charles worked as an engineer for a pile-driving company, Sally as a practical nurse, and Cary as a drug store cashier. When the Guzmans took control of Seven Gables, they featured outside dining along the exterior porches. Although the 1934 city directory lists no occupants for this property,

²⁶ Michael Sanders, “Seven Gables,” undated manuscript, located in building files, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo.

genealogical research indicates that the Guzmans continued to live in Clearwater. Some family members occupy sites at the Clearwater Cemetery.²⁷

Members of the Reilly family occupied the house during the mid-1930s. Neil Reilly lived in Seven Gables as a ten year old child in 1935. At the time, his mother took in five paying guests at the rooming house. The Reilly family lived downstairs, with part of the current kitchen area partitioned into sleeping space for him. His parents slept in the side parlor, and the older children slept in a detached garage (possibly one of the two structures appearing on the 1929 and 1949 Sanborn maps). The Reilly children played along the bluff and along the circular drive in front of the house that had bamboo planted in the center. They also spent evenings perched on the gazebo near the bluff that overlooked Clearwater Bay. When their parents were away, Neil and his brother used to take a cushion that once sat on the window seat at the stair landing and slide down the stairs. However, they avoided these bumpy journeys if they sensed the presence of any adults. Neil remembered roasting peanuts and selling small bags of the goobers at the nearby county courthouse. During this time, the second floor had two bathrooms: the one presently in the building and another in the small room near the hall. Family members ascended the back stairs to get to the first bathroom; tenants used the other one. During the depths of the Great Depression, men often came to Seven Gables in search of work. While the family had no jobs to provide, Neil remembers his mother always finding some food for those in need.²⁸

The Wyllie and Reid families offered furnished rooms at Seven Gables between the late 1930s and 1944. Nellie C. Wyllie, a teacher at South Ward and widow of Alfred Wyllie, appeared in 1937 and 1939 directories as the occupant of Seven Gables. During the summer of 1938, Lee H. Reid arrived in Clearwater with his family and began his duties as a northern Pinellas County fuel agent for the Shell Oil Company. The Reids moved into the House of Seven Gables by the spring of 1939. For over five years, including most of the Second World War, the Reids lived in the house. In a 1977 interview, Reid remembered that he paid rent on the house to Helen Weber, a local

²⁷ See available issues of: R.L. Polk's *Clearwater (Pinellas County, Fla.) City Directory*; Census records available at Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; Sanders, "Seven Gables" manuscript.

²⁸ "Recollections of My Meeting with Neil Reilly on Oct. 11, 2002," transcript of email message, located in building files, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo.

realtor who represented the Masslichs. He recalled that the owners lived in the Philadelphia area at the time. His daughter slept on a “full-size double bunk bed” in the present kitchen, and the family cooked their meals in the small foyer near the side porch. The family ate in the adjacent room, which also served for a time as the father’s bedroom and sat atop a novelty in much of Pinellas: a basement area with a coal furnace. The elevation on the bluff allowed owners to place a basement on the site, although the date of the basement’s construction remains uncertain. Reid operated a filling station at 1740 North Fort Harrison by 1941, but tough financial times and wartime gasoline rationing during World War II forced the Reids to take in boarders in the two long and rectangular rooms on the second floor. He procured a sign that read, “Seven Gables Guest Rooms.” One tenant, Myrtle Williamson, rented the two small bedrooms above the living room for \$8 per week, while the longer rooms went for \$12 and \$15 per week. Williamson, then a religious director at Clearwater’s First Presbyterian Church, lived in Seven Gables for nearly four years, and often kept a small oil burning heater near the fireplace in one of her rooms. Although they rented the rooms, the Reids did not provide meals to any of their tenants, including Williamson. From 1939 to 1941, a stenographer named Clara L. Cole lived in the smaller dwelling on the northern portion of the property (418½ Bay Avenue). By the early 1940s, Reid sought to purchase Seven Gables, but could not afford the \$25,000 price. The family moved from Seven Gables to another home in Clearwater when the Masslichs decided to sell the property during the spring of 1944.²⁹

The Dietrichs and Hemericks

Charles Fredrick Dietrich purchased the House of Seven Gables on 12 September 1944. Unlike the Masslichs, who used the property for a source of income, the Dietrichs acquired Seven Gables as their retirement home. They may have accepted occasional boarders, however, since city directories issued during their ownership mention furnished rooms at Seven Gables. An Ohio native born in 1872, Dietrich and his wife—the former Clara Mae Bennett of Michigan—had at least two daughters, Edith (born 1902) and Grace (born 1905), both natives of Ohio. Records from the 1910 federal census placed

²⁹ Ibid.; memorandum re: conversation with Lee Reid, 18 August 1977, located in building files, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; *Clearwater Sun*, 11 May 1984.

the family in Pulaski Township, Williams County, Ohio. At that time, Charles worked as a retail merchant of implements. The Dietrichs moved to Orlando circa 1925, where Charles owned a merchandise store, transacted real estate, raised chickens, cultivated citrus, and restored properties for use by winter visitors. He leased many of these places to friends from Ohio who visited for the winter tourist season. The daughters married: Edith to a member of the Comstock family and Grace to Joseph Robinson. During a visit to the area, the Dietrichs “fell in love with the house on the bay” as soon as they saw it. They acquired Seven Gables, sold their properties in Orlando, and performed some restoration work, including the placement of a new tin roof on the structure. The labor and stair climbing soon proved too much for the Dietrichs, especially as Charles approached his mid-70s. On 18 April 1951, the Dietrichs sold Seven Gables to John V. Neill and returned to Orlando to live close to their daughters. Neill held the property until 24 March 1953, when he sold it to a young Clearwater dentist.³⁰

When Frederick A. and Virginia M. Hemerick acquired Seven Gables, the structure required rehabilitation. During a July 2003 oral history interview, family members recalled that the paint had chipped along the walls, porch banisters required repair, and the interior required substantial work due to the wear-and-tear caused by years of tenants. Electric lights dangled from unsightly cords, and trash inside the home and on the grounds when the Hemericks first acquired the home provided evidence that vagrants had occupied the structure at some point. The family painted the house’s exterior, and the dry wood absorbed quite a bit of paint. The children—Harriette, Judith, and David—helped their parents restore the house. During interior remodeling, Fred decided to replace the large bathtub with a shower. Instead of lugging the heavy tub down the stairs, he broke it into pieces and threw it out of the bathroom window. The Hemericks also added a bathroom on the lower floor. According to later interviews, the Hemericks made some improvements to the structure with materials from other early buildings. For example, doors leading to the informal parlor may have come from an early grove house owned by the Brown family near present-day Gulf-to-Bay and U.S. Highway 19. The

³⁰ Census records available at Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; Charles O. Comstock, Sr., grandson of Charles F. Dietrich to Donald Ivey, 29 May 1996, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; see available issues of: R.L. Polk’s *Clearwater (Pinellas County, Fla.) City Directory*.

family also installed some window air conditioners in the house that he purchased at the Seaboard Air Line depot, probably in the 1950s.³¹

The interview revealed many details about life for the Hemericks during the twenty-two years they owned the home. The family originally came to the area in the mid-1940s. Frederick had joined the Army and transferred from Michigan to Drew Army Air Field during World War II. During some of their years at Seven Gables, the family enjoyed the services of an African-American maid, Eva Pollock, who cooked and cleaned for the family five days per week. One of the Hemerick children later took a job at Morton Plant Hospital at the same time the maid's daughter worked there. They often kept the fireplace vent closed to prevent birds from flying into the house through the chimney, although they did remember bats occasionally getting into Seven Gables. Outside of the home, the property included a cistern by the time Hemericks acquired it. The gazebo remained, and a slope of the bluff resembled a jungle with all of the wild plants and tiger lilies. The family maintained a dock on Clearwater Bay alongside the bluff, and had a boat moored to the dock for their use. Gatherings on the Fourth of July with hot dogs, hamburgers, and watermelon, as well as religious services by family and church members, took place on the rear of the property. A small Indian shell mound once sat in the front yard. One time, Frederick wanted to host a cocktail party, and called a representative from the Campbell family's pavement company to bulldoze the mound. The children remembered seeing some bones along with the shells after the bulldozer left the scene.³²

By the late 1960s, the Hemerick parents grew tired of living in such a big house. Frederick and Virginia had purchased another house in or around Belleair and decided to move to their new home. By this time, their children had left for college and started working. Harriette enrolled in the University of Florida's pharmacy program in 1956. Judy spent time working as a dental hygienist in New Orleans. David, the youngest of the three children, earned an undergraduate degree at Florida Southern College before studying dentistry at Emory University. Although city directories list the structure as "vacant" or having "no return" in 1969, 1971, and 1972, son David lived in Seven Gables

³¹ Transcript of interview of F. David Hemerick and Barber Hemerick Campbell by Ellen Babb and Alicia Addeo, 18 July 2003, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo.

during part of that time. The family also called Seven Gables “the halfway house of dentists” because Frederick often rented the home to new dentists who had recently graduated and started their professional practice. For example, the family rented the home to Dale K. Christensen in 1973. Roy A. Workman III, a longtime family friend, lived in Seven Gables in 1975.³³

A Barge Ride and a New Home

The Hemericks decided to sell the House of Seven Gables during the spring of 1975. The attractive waterfront property attracted much interest, and the family sold the tract to Enterprise Building Corporation and the architectural firm of Williams and Walker. After the closing, Frederick Hemerick provided enough money for each of the children to buy a new car. Meanwhile, Don Williams and Dixie Walker finalized their plans for an adult congregate living facility on the site. Realizing the historical value of Seven Gables, Williams considered the structure a perfect fit for the newly planned Heritage Village under design in unincorporated Pinellas County near Largo. Williams had developed the initial site plan for the park as a member of the Pinellas County Historical Commission (PCHC). In early 1976, Williams and Walker agreed to donate the house to the Historical Commission. Park Director Kendrick Ford and PCHC Chair George Gramling met with Don Williams during the spring of 1976 to discuss the relocation of Seven Gables. The parties hoped to transport the house by July, but worried about a shortage of funds and the logistics of such a move.³⁴

The size of the structure called for an innovative plan. While moving companies frequently have to remove roofs or “cut” structures before taking them to their new sites, the size and architectural layout of Seven Gables made any such plan difficult or cost prohibitive. Also, the home’s location in downtown Clearwater would have required incredible effort to remove and relocate telephone and electrical wires, street lights, tree limbs, and other impediments between Bay Avenue and Walsingham Road. Given these obstacles, Williams and others involved with the project decided that Clearwater Bay,

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.; Records of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo, 16 June 1976.

rather than Bay Avenue, offered the best route. They developed a plan to lower the House of Seven Gables onto a barge, float the structure along the intracoastal waterway to a location south of the Indian Rocks Bridge, then transport the home along Walsingham to its new plot at the park. An article in the 9 August 1976 *St. Petersburg Times* hinted that Pinellas County commissioners needed to approve \$17,500 to fund this move, with other parties covering the remainder of the \$72,550 required for this plan. Roesch Housemovers coordinated the move. The site of the grand gabled home floating along the waterway attracted international media attention. By the early fall, the House of Seven Gables occupied its new site on the southwest corner of Heritage Village; the second structure placed at the new park, this large building sat next to its only neighbor at the time, the Plant-Summer House.³⁵

Workers and volunteers promptly began restoration efforts. Less than one month after Seven Gables arrived, volunteers from Carpenters Local 1275 in Clearwater and Local 531 in St. Petersburg offered their time to repair porch flooring, seal joints around windows, repair beams and stairs, and perform other duties that saved county coffers in excess of \$7,000. Students at the county's Vocational Technical Institute near High Point also did masonry work and other improvements with materials supplied by Pinellas County. Workers peeled layers of linoleum from the kitchen floor; the entire kitchen required extensive restoration. Park Director Ford remembered that most of the upstairs rooms "were in bad shape, except for the floor." Termites had infested the building years earlier, entering behind the drywall. At the 21 September 1977 PCHC meeting, Ford reported that workers had completed nearly all of the major renovations on Seven Gables. He hoped to have the structure painted during the fall and acquire appropriate furniture for the building so that public tours could begin by January 1978. By the fall of 1978, groups associated with Heritage Village prepared for the ribbon-cutting ceremony on October 7, an event that included many dignitaries. In time, park staff and associated groups acquired furniture and household materials to represent the earliest years of occupation.³⁶

³⁵ *St. Petersburg Times*, 9 August 1976; Interview of Ken Ford, former director of Heritage Village, by Stephanie Ferrell and Jim Schnur, 3 May 2003, Heritage Village, Largo.

³⁶ *St. Petersburg Times*, 20 October 1976; Records of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, 20 October 1976, 21 September 1977, 20 September 1978; Ken Ford interview.

This substantial project to preserve an elegant chapter of Clearwater's early history required great collaboration and coordination. The Board of County Commissioners provided resources to bring an important structure to a newly opened park. Don Williams and Dixie Walker donated the building, and Williams lent his talents to designing an early layout for the open-air historical museum. Oak Bluffs, Ltd., the company that constructed a senior residence on the site, and Enterprise Builders contributed nearly \$30,000 towards moving expenses. Harris Paint Company of Tampa donated paint and coordinated efforts through the Painting and Decorating Contractors Association to find members willing to volunteer their time to paint Seven Gables. General Telephone Company covered \$11,750 worth of labor and resources, while Florida Power Corporation assured the temporary lifting and relocation of electrical lines along the route. In addition, the Junior League of Clearwater, vocational students, local carpenters, members of the recently formed Pinellas County Historical Society, and many private citizens offered their support of this project.³⁷

³⁷ "History of Seven Gables" manuscript; Charles W. Finegan, president, Harris Paint Company, to K. T. Ford, 17 September 1976; George F. Gramling, PCHC chair, to Finegan, 4 October 1976.