

PADUCAH LIFE

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The Wallace home is one of Paducah's oldest houses. And its story lives on due to the strong construction and new generations of owners who value its history



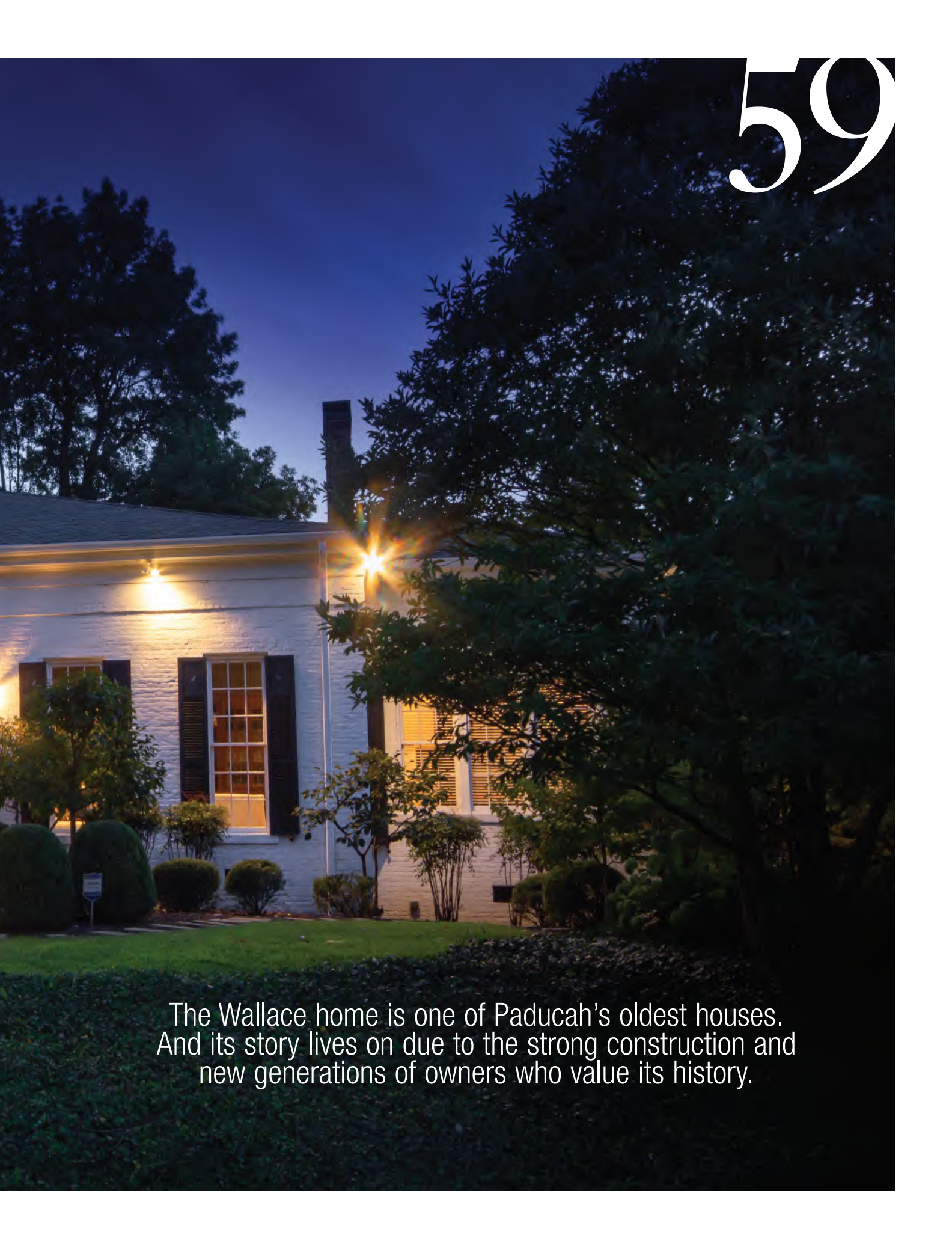
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★
by J.T. CRAWFORD

Through the Dignified Windows *of* Time



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THE HOUSES OF OUR CITY ARE SILENT witnesses to history. We come, we go, and they stand—stoically watching the unfolding of time. In Paducah’s west end, there is a house on a hill that has seen as much of our city’s past as just about any other. The historic home at the corner of Cedar Lane and Forest Circle is noticeably distinct from its neighbors being at a minimum 75 years their senior. And it traces its lineage nearly all the way back to the first claimant of our city’s land, **George Rogers Clark**.

After serving in the Revolutionary War and securing the property on which Paducah would be established, Clark, in poor health and nearly destitute, returned to Kentucky after spending time living in Indiana. On February 13, 1818, he died at the age of 65. Never married and childless, his land claims fell to family. Louisvillian George Woolfolk, who was married to Clark’s niece Catherine, came to Paducah to help settle his estate. After spending time in the growing city, he decided to remain.

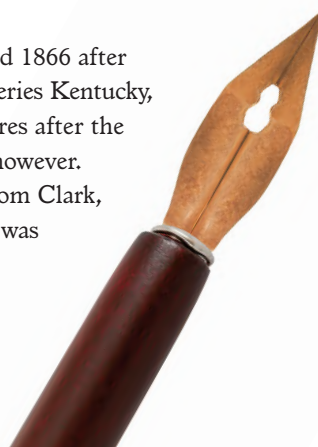
Catherine and George’s daughter, Frances, was one of Paducah’s first natural-born citizens. In 1856, she married attorney Phillip Wallace who’d moved to the area at the age of twenty-three from Christian County. According to a 1901 article in the News-Democrat, they built their home around 1866 after Phillip returned from serving in the Confederate army. Additionally, in the 1887 series Kentucky, History of the State, Phillip is mentioned as having come to his place on 100 acres after the war. There are later conflicting reports that the house was built before the war, however.

The land had been passed down from George Woolfolk’s original holdings from Clark, and it was there that Frances and Phillip built. Located west of the city in what was

known as Arcadia, the home’s glory days were brief. Just a few years later in 1869, Wallace family friend Quintus Quincy Quigley wrote in his diary that Phillip had “squandered his and much of her property.” Quigley described Phillip as an agreeable man at heart but blamed Phillip’s woes on his upbringing, an aversion to work, and whiskey. Phillip had served as County Clerk for a while, but Quigley portrayed a family falling apart. In one diary entry, Quigley told of a social engagement that ended with Phillip presumably drunk and incoherent and Frances crying. His diary, however, does detail later meetings with the Wallaces with no such incidents.



Later, Phillip and Frances would both leave the house to live with their son George in town. George was an up-and-coming businessman in Paducah. Around 1890, just about 24 years after the house was built, the property was sold to the company that would later be named The Paducah City Railway Co., of which George Wallace probably had an interest. The company operated the





Wallace House

city's trolley system, and one of the lines ran to the edge of town, right to the Wallace property. It was the perfect location for an out-of-the-way yet accessible getaway for the city's residents. The company developed LaBelle Park, so named because of the land's beauty. George also had a daughter named Belle.

LaBelle became home to a lake and a 1000-seat theatre for opera, plays, concerts, minstrel shows, and vaudeville. Additionally, a dance

hall, petting zoo (sometimes with exotic animals), race track, golf course, and more were developed. For 5 cents, you could ride the trolley out of town, and for 50 cents admission spend the day riding a few rides, eating popcorn and hot dogs, drinking soda, and playing games to win prizes. The kids enjoyed playgrounds, and, near the rear of the park, couples enjoyed carriage rides and picnics. A main feature was League Park, Paducah's premier baseball field and stadium located where Independence Bank is now on LaBelle Ave. A 1901 News-Democrat article described the park as very beautiful

but the Wallace house was dilapidated.

Phillip died in 1901 followed by Frances in 1904. In 1903, the Paducah City Railway Co. signed a ten-year management lease for the park with George Wallace, Joseph Friedman, and J.E. English. They changed the name to Wallace Park. Even though the house had gotten in bad shape, it was ultimately saved by its usefulness. Full-time caretakers used the home as a residence.

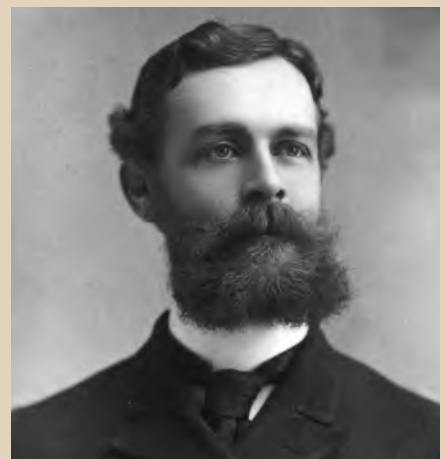
One of the most celebrated residents of that time was Pearl Grinnell who took the caretaker job around 1912. He was a musician and conductor of the I.O.F. orchestra. Pearl's wife Ada was born with dwarfism as were the couple's two sons. The paper reported in 1917 that she stood about 40 inches tall and would make traveling appearances as the world's smallest mother. And much like their father, the sons were entertainers. They sang regularly and performed comedy skits at various functions around Paducah. In 1920, the family left Paducah to pursue entertainment full-time.

Even though Wallace Park was generally known as a city park, it was still privately owned,

and in 1924, the owners put it up for sale. Interest came from developers who sought to subdivide the land and turn it into a neighborhood. The owners, wanting to keep it as a park, offered it to the city. In November of that year, a voter-approved bond option went on the ballot. It was defeated. Critics of the sale said that the issue was down on the ballot, and most voters left it blank not voting either way.

The Wallace house then became one of many that would make up the developing Wallace Park neighborhood. Its first renovation came in 1926 when Mrs. Henry Overby divided it into two residences—one side for her and the other half for Mr. and Mrs. Jack Brinkley. The house functioned in a duplex style, and, in 1939, it was purchased by the Nichol family who passed it down through generations until 2001.

By then, the home had sat vacant for a few years and was



BEHIND THE LINES

Frances Wallace's Wartime Diary

Frances Wallace was 26 years old when her husband Phillip left their Paducah home to serve in the Confederate Army. Three years into the war, she'd not seen him since his departure, and news of his wellbeing was rare. In 1864, Frances and her cousin Amanda, whose husband was also a Confederate soldier, along with Frances's three-year-old son George, left Paducah seeking a southern route past the war front in north Alabama. Frances kept a journal along the way, and today, her diary stands as a lasting witness to daily life in the wartime south.

Urged not to go by family and friends, Frances and Amanda, whom she called Mally, boarded a boat at Cairo and made their way to Vicksburg. Along the way, she learns of Forrest's raid on Paducah and how cannonballs smashed into her sister's home. From then on, the diary is punctuated with worries about her mother back home.

Frances then detailed the trek on land from Vicksburg to south Alabama. The journey was arduous, and it was oftentimes difficult to find food and a place to sleep. The trio of travelers was helped along the way, and she often made connections with extended family or others from the Paducah area. Frances described a landscape that was beautiful yet alternatively tragic. She writes, "Oh! What a glorious world, all that is necessary to make us happy and content, and yet this beautiful land is flowing with human blood, death, and suffering. It has become an accustomed sight. Oh! God! when will this sinful strife end?" And, repeatedly, she writes "Oh! Where is my husband?"

An accomplished musician, Frances entertained in the evenings at the various homes she stayed in, and she would often buy sheet music throughout her travels. She also made clothing to sell. Eventually, she found her husband in south Alabama, and he was able to take some time away to spend with her and their son.

Her descriptions of the people, clothing, food, and culture of the deep south are a priceless snapshot into a world long past. It is on the one hand beautiful, elegant, and charming. And on the other, it is decorated with fear, tragedy, and sickness. It also gives us insight into the life of a nearly fearless young lady who would let nothing stand between her and her husband. A typed copy of the diary has been passed down from owner to owner of the Wallace house, and it remains an important look at life for historians of the south and the Civil War.

Pictured left are Frances Wallace and her son George, who was raised in the house. He later renamed the area Wallace Park.

The text of the diary is available online at docsouth.unc.edu/imls/wallace/wallace.html

due for some major repairs. In stepped Rick and Ginny Coltharp. "We were both very aware of the house," says Rick. "When I was just out of architecture school around '74, I was driving around one day and really saw that house for the first time. I was intrigued and took a photo of it at that time. I wanted to remember it." Rick filed it away, and he and Ginny continued with their lives, both engaged in preservation projects throughout the years. Then, in 2001, they saw the house was up for auction. "It was a leap of faith," adds Rick. "We thought we would love the house and hoped we would survive the restoration."

The original core of the house was four rooms with a central hallway. There had been an addition on the back

Preservationist Kelsie Gray removes layers of paint from the front door after the bottom layers showed signs of failure.



Wallace House

of two bedrooms and a bathroom, and the addition is nearly as old as the house itself. Rick estimates that it was added on around 1900. Then, around the 1930s, two smaller additions were added onto either side of the house. “We pretty much returned the floor plan to its original state,” says Rick. “We had to take out the floors from the ‘30s addition and replace about a third of the floor joists. We pretty much had to address every surface in the house.”

In the central hall, a lowered-ceiling had been installed. When removed, the Coltharp’s discovered original paint on the ceiling. Instead of painting over it, they installed drywall in just that one area of the house to preserve the original ceiling and paint below. “We also discovered that the original doorway between the living room and dining room was a pocket door,” adds Rick. “In working on an electrical issue in the wall, we found the track. So we were able to take that back to a pocket door.”

The restoration took about eight months, and the Coltharps loved every moment of their time in the home. “We just walked around with grins on our faces,” says Rick. “It felt comfortable to us right from the beginning.”

“We were just so happy that we’d done it,” adds Ginny, “and we’d preserved history.”

After the Coltharps, another architect took interest in

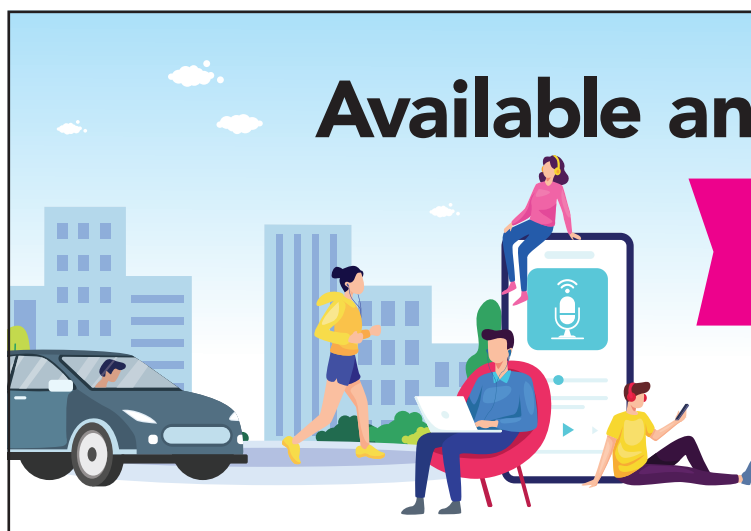
the house. “I remember when Rick and Ginny bought it and started the work,” says Randy Davis. “I went over and took a look and just loved that house. I had already said that if I could own any house anywhere, that would be the one I’d want.” Randy and his family had been living in a historic home in the county, and by 2016, they were looking for a house in the city. They’d just about

given up on their search when he discovered that the Colotharps had put it up for sale. “I love history,” adds Randy, “and the house has deep roots to the founding of Paducah. I love the grandness of it and how well built it was. And even though it is grand, it isn’t huge in scale. So it was perfect for my family.”

Unlike most houses, the owners of the Wallace House get to know one another. Sellers pass down the history of the home, the land, and the succession of owners to new occupants. They are tied together by a shared experience that places them as guardians of one of Paducah’s storied houses.

“It’s a very simple, Greek Revival house,” says Rick. “It was done without pomp. We didn’t even find evidence of crown molding. It’s classic with clean lines. That was very appealing to us. It was a simple house very simply done. Between the history and the house itself, you find a simple dignity about it.” 📍

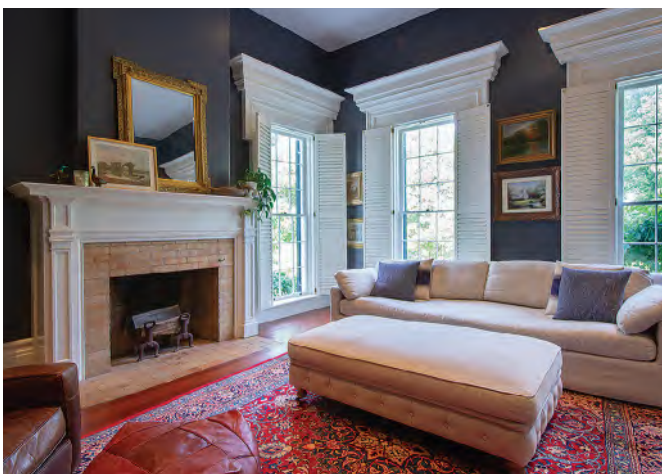
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