



A HOME RESTORED

*After more than a century – and many different lives –
The White Columns in downtown Commerce is once again a home*

Story by Alex Buffington
Photos by Alex Buffington and courtesy Perry Benson



Above: The White Columns in Commerce features a sweeping wraparound porch supported by towering columns, a defining feature of the historic home. The home is located on Little Street next to the post office.

Left: A historic photograph shows The White Columns in Commerce, long before its recent restoration. Photos courtesy Perry Benson





Perry Benson (right) and Scott Jenks stand on the porch of The White Columns, framed by the home's towering columns. They are pictured with their beloved dog, Coconut.

For more than a century, The White Columns, a stately Neoclassical mansion on Little Street in downtown Commerce, has watched the town grow and change.

Over the years, generations of Commerce residents have passed through its doors — newlyweds renting upstairs rooms during World War II, diners enjoying meals when the house became a restaurant, and students traveling from across the country to study wallpapering inside its ornate rooms.

Today, after an ambitious restoration by owners Perry Benson and Scott Jenks, the historic mansion has returned to the purpose for which it was built more than a century ago.

It is once again a home.

Built for a family

The White Columns was originally built in 1904 by Enoch Bush Anderson, a prominent businessman in the community. He and his wife, Lola, had two daughters, Maurine and Claire.

Of the two daughters, Claire Anderson, would become one of the home's longest residents. She lived there her entire life.

"She lived here from the time she was born," Benson said. "She was a good steward, keeping the house from falling down."

"It's a big undertaking to keep this going," Benson added. "She didn't make any improvements, but she kept it alive."

During World War II, the large home served another purpose.

"During WWII, there was a shortage of housing and she let people rent some of the rooms upstairs," Benson said. "We've had a lot of people stop by through the years and say that they remember when they first got married, they lived in one or two of the rooms in the house. It's kind of neat."

"People have knocked on the door and asked if they can go see their room," Jenks added.

Benson and Jenks made another historic discovery during the restoration, which revealed an interesting detail about the home's earliest days.

On the underside of the staircase treads, workers found an inscription noting the staircase had been made for "Enoch, E.B. Anderson, Commerce, Georgia."

The town of Commerce, formerly known as Harmony Grove, didn't officially change its name to "Commerce" until 1909. That could mean that the inscription is one of the earliest references to the community by its modern name.

"That was an interesting find," Benson said.





Historic photographs and personal items displayed inside the home help tell the story of the families connected to The White Columns. The owners, Perry Benson and Scott Jenks, were given some items from family of the original owner of the home.

A house with many lives

After Claire Anderson's death, the house entered a new chapter and began taking on different roles.

In the 1970s, the mansion became a restaurant, though its name has largely been lost to time.

"In the 1970s, it became a restaurant," Benson said. "No one knows the name of the restaurant. Everyone we ask, they say, 'Well, I remember the restaurant being here, but we don't know what it was actually called.'"

When Benson and Jenks purchased the property years later, traces of that restaurant era were still visible.

"Whenever we got the place, it had the original stove from the 1970s, a 10-burner big stove for commercial use, the griddle and the big hoods and even the walk-in refrigerator," Benson recalled.

Later, the house took on an even more unusual role as a wallpaper school.

"It was one of four wallpaper schools in the United States," Jenks said. "It was very well-renowned."

The home's architecture made it the perfect place to teach the craft.

"The reason they chose (this house for the wallpaper school) was because of all the unique angles and corners and things that are more difficult to do, more challenging," Benson said.

Years later, while renovating the house, Benson and Jenks discovered a small reminder of that chapter hidden inside a newel post.

"We opened it up and there was a time capsule inside from the wallpaper school," Benson said.

"It had samples of wallpaper and all of their names and things like that," Benson added. "We put it back into the newel post where we found it."

Finding the house

Eventually the house sat empty for years and fell into foreclosure and was considered an endangered property.

When Benson and Jenks first discovered The White Columns, they were living in New York and looking for something different.

Jenks, originally from Cleveland, Ohio, had worked in information technology leadership roles at Case Western Reserve University, Georgia Tech and New York University before retiring. Benson, who is originally from Pennsylvania and moved to Georgia more than three decades ago, previously worked in training and technology roles with Oracle and Manhattan Associates and now runs an estate and auction business.

Over time, Benson and Jenks had built a sizable collection of antiques, artwork and other pieces reflecting their shared passion for history and ancestry.





"We needed more space to put all of the trinkets and (items we'd collected over the years)," Benson said.

When they came across the house in Commerce, they immediately knew they had found something special.

"We came out here and found this and knew immediately that this was the house we wanted," Benson said. "And from there, that's when the fun began."

A massive restoration

They closed on the property Dec. 22, 2017, and work began just weeks later.

While Jenks continued working primarily in New York, Benson took on the responsibility of overseeing the massive renovation project.

Inside, the work of returning the historic home to its original character began in earnest.

"Everything in the house from the top down, every inch of the house has been renovated or restored," Benson said.

Five massive dumpsters were eventually filled with debris and remnants from decades of alterations. Old commercial bathrooms and walls left over from the restaurant days had to be removed, and they had to determine how the original layout once looked.

"Then there was this whole period of time sleuthing and figuring out: Where were the doors originally? Were there walls here?" Benson said.

Several fireplaces on the first floor had been vandalized or

stolen over the years, and replacements had to be found. The replacements were eventually found in Paris — salvaged from an apartment building across the street from the Louvre.

"They fit perfectly," Benson said. "... We were so fortunate to find matching ones that fit just in the right spot."

Despite the complexity of the project, the first phase of restoration was completed in about eight months.

"Unbelievable job," Jenks said of all the work Benson was able to manage.

Preserving the past while living in the present

Today, The White Columns spans roughly 7,300 square feet and includes about 20 rooms. A newly finished ballroom on the third floor added about 1,500 square feet.

For Benson and Jenks, restoring the home was about far more than renovating a building.

"This, by far, was the biggest project and the most wonderful," Benson said. "We love, love, love this house. It is the most comfortable place to be."

Modern systems were installed throughout the home, including updated electrical, plumbing and heating and cooling systems, along with a security system and other smart home technology designed to keep the historic house comfortable and functional.

But the work went far beyond mechanical upgrades.



Perry Benson and Scott Jenks stand with their dog, Coconut, at the front entrance of The White Columns in Commerce.



Inside The White Columns



A sitting room inside The White Columns showcases antique furniture, chandeliers and historic artwork displayed throughout the home.



The grand foyer of The White Columns features polished hardwood floors, antique furnishings and a sweeping staircase leading to the second floor.



One of the bedrooms inside The White Columns features a four-poster bed and antique furnishings.



Antique furnishings, chandeliers and artwork reflect the home's historic character.



An upper-level ballroom inside The White Columns.



The dining room inside The White Columns features period furniture, historic, and dramatic red curtains.



The White Columns is illuminated at night, highlighting the home's grand neoclassical columns and symmetrical façade. Photo courtesy Perry Benson

New roofs were installed, the chimneys were restored and repointed, and many original architectural elements were carefully repaired or recreated. Several fireplaces that had once burned coal were converted to gas, allowing them to be used again while preserving their historic appearance.

In other places, original details survived decades of changes. The home's pocket doors — three sets in total — remained intact and still function today.

Other pieces had to be rediscovered. At one point during the restoration, Benson came across a leaded glass transom and door that closely matched the home's original front entrance.

"The transom leaded glass matches what's in all of our palladium windows," Benson said.

Outside, the landscaping also became part of the restoration. A hexagonal fountain was installed in the front courtyard, surrounded by original hexagon-shaped pavers.

"To me, the fountain is the life of everything," Benson said. "And this house was calling for it."

But despite those upgrades, the philosophy behind the restoration remained simple.

Benson and Jenks intended for the house to be lived in as a home, not preserved as a museum.

Over the years, the couple has amassed a large collection of antiques, artwork and historic pieces — items that now fill the home's formal drawing room, music room and other spaces throughout the house.

While the rooms may look immaculate, Jenks said the house functions as a home first and foremost.

"The house is designed to be lived in," Jenks said. "It's not a muse-

um. We love the antiques and things we have in it. But it's a very functional modern home."

Like many historic homes, the work is never truly finished. This spring, there are plans to give the exterior a fresh round of care — cleaning, scraping and repainting the outside to keep the house looking its best.

A connection to the past

Benson and Jenks have also been able to connect with Anderson's great-granddaughters, who now live in Arizona and Wisconsin. The women remembered visiting the house as small children.

When they later returned to see it again, their reaction meant a great deal to the new owners.

"They said the decorations in the house weren't as fancy, but the house is exactly the way they remember it as children," Jenks said. "We were trying to gauge how close we got the renovation back to what it was when they were children. So that was really nice."

For Benson and Jenks, that moment confirmed something they had hoped all along — that the house had truly been brought back to life as it had been originally.

A home again

For decades, many residents of Commerce had stopped thinking of The White Columns as a home at all. The building had spent so many years as a restaurant, school or vacant structure that people saw it more as a landmark than a residence.

"When we first got the house, people didn't think of it as a home anymore because for so long, it had not been a private residence," Benson said.

Even now, visitors still stop by to admire it.

"We love that people want their pictures taken with the house," Benson said. "It's beautiful for everyone to share."

For Benson and Jenks, restoring the house was never just about renovating a building.

"You do this because you love the house," Benson said.

The project was also one of the most demanding they had ever taken on.

"It was an enormous challenge," Benson said. "It stretched our limits on imagination and everything else."

Finding skilled craftspeople capable of working on the historic structure was another challenge during the renovation, which required specialists who understood how to restore older materials and architectural details.

Still, they said the effort was worth it.

"This, by far, was the biggest project (we've done) and the most wonderful," Benson said. "We love, love, love this house. It is the most comfortable place to be."

Both Benson and Jenks say their shared passion for history, antiques and preservation played a major role in the restoration.

Restoring the home correctly was important to Benson and Jenks, not only because of its history, but because of how the house was originally meant to be used.

"When you use them the way they're supposed to be used, they flow well," Benson said.

That philosophy helped guide the restoration from the beginning.

After more than a century — and many different chapters — The White Columns has come full circle.

It continues to serve as a landmark in the city.

And, for the first time in many years, a home.