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'Begone Beelzebub': Restoration breathes new life into Hill City's haunted home

Carrie Sidener

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Rocking Cradle House on Friday, Oct. 27, 2023.

Paige Dingler, The News & Advance

Carrie Sidener

Behind the sunny yellow painted brick exterior of a home on Jackson Street rests ghosts of the past — though with all the activity there of late, maybe the ghosts haven't gotten much of a break.



Rocking Cradle House on Friday.
Paige Dinger, The News & Advance

Arguably the most storied house in all of Lynchburg, the Poston House at 1104 Jackson St., is on the market for \$289,000 after an extensive two-year renovation.

You may know it by a different name — the Rocking Cradle House.

Owner Diana Jones had no idea of the tales swirling about her latest project when she purchased the house in May 2021.



The infamous Rocking Cradle House sits at 1104 Jackson Street as seen on Saturday, Oct. 9, 2021.

Kendall Warner The News & Advance

“I don’t know if they like this attention they’ve been getting,” Jones joked of the ghosts who reportedly roam its halls. “I really didn’t know the history at all about the house when I purchased it. It wasn’t until after the fact that I found out about it.”

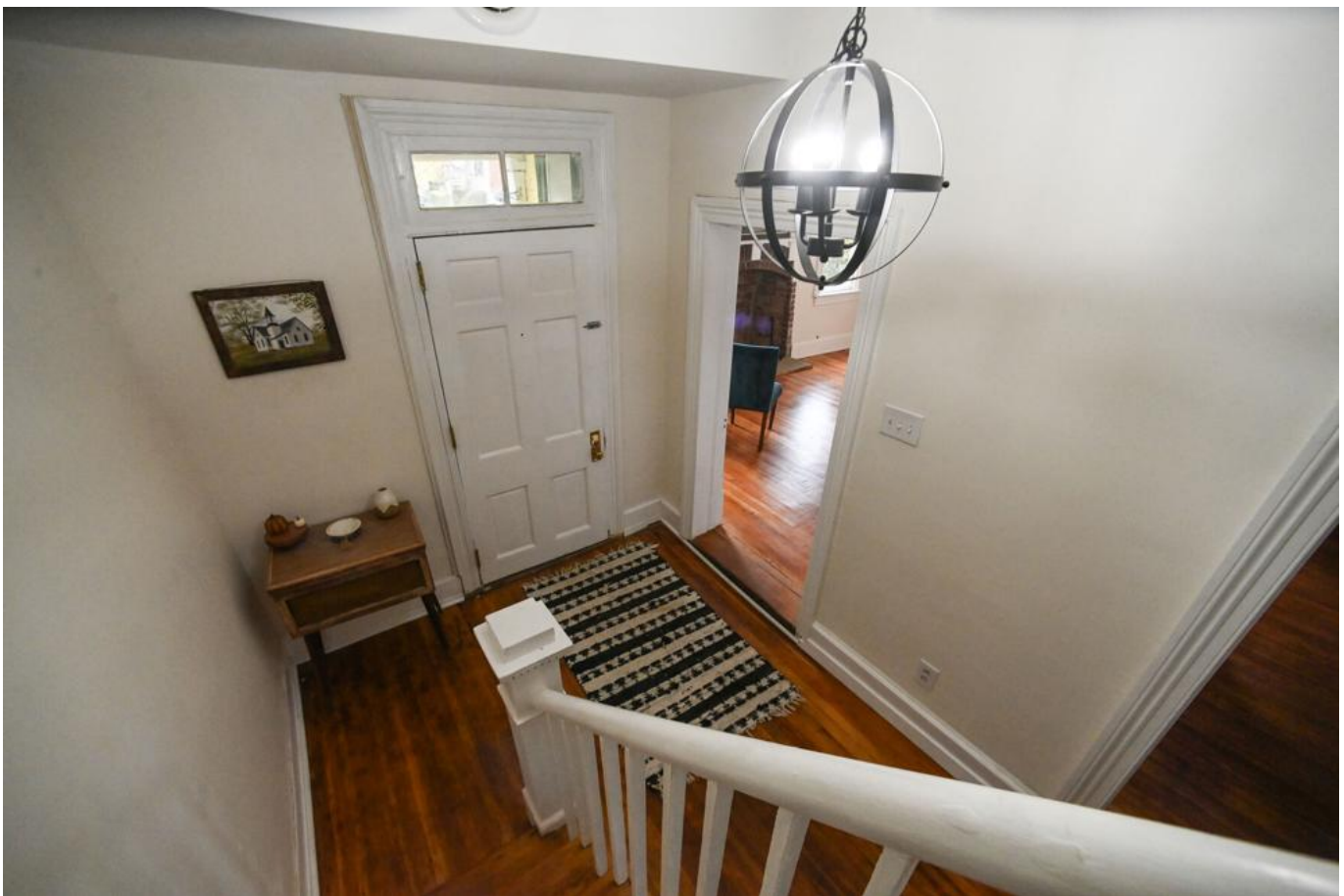
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According to S. Allen Chambers in the book, “Lynchburg: An Architectural History,” the building history of the story-and-a-half T-shaped brick cottage is “rather complex.”

“But although there have been many additions and alterations,” Chambers wrote, “the simple, original lines still prevail.”

The house was constructed in the early 19th-century. The exact date is unknown, but likely around 1815, according to the nomination form for the Federal Hill Historic District, which was listed as a national historic landmark in 1980.



The entry way of the Rocking Cradle House on Friday, Oct. 27, 2023.

Paige Dingler, The News & Advance

When Jones purchased the property from a pair of brothers who had inherited it upon the death of their mother, it had stood vacant for the better part of 20 years.

Time had worn down its prominent brick chimney projecting from the front of the house. The old wallpaper curled away from the walls and red carpeting covered the hardwood floors, hiding stains from leaky radiators and roofs. Books, photographs, letters and other remnants of the life once in its walls littered the place.

It looked the part of a haunted house.



The front entryway for The Rocking Cradle House on Jackson Street as seen on Saturday, Oct. 9, 2021.

Kendall Warner The News & Advance

The tale for which the Poston House is most famous was recorded in William Asbury Christian's "Lynchburg and Its People," published in 1900.

The Rev. William Smith rented the home in the spring of 1839 while working as a Methodist preacher in the Hill City.

Smith and his wife borrowed a cradle from the Rev. John Early, who would later become Bishop Early, instrumental in organizing the Methodist Episcopal Church.

One morning, the Smiths saw the cradle rock vigorously on its own. According to the account: “Dr. Smith moved the cradle from near the fire-place into the middle of the floor, and said: ‘Now Geoffrey (he called the Devil by that name), rock!’ and he did.”

Accounts, as they often do in such ghostly tales, varied but all agreed on the location of the house itself and, until recently, a plaque to that effect sat in the yard.



A bedroom upstairs at the Rocking Cradle House on Friday, Oct. 27, 2023.

Paige Dingler, The News & Advance

The house and its spirits also were featured in “The Ghosts of Charlottesville and Lynchburg,” a book written by L.B. Taylor in 1992. It references the 1937 Works Progress Administration report which said the house is generally known as “the house where the cradle rocked.”

According to Taylor's account, it was called the Poston House after W.C. Poston, who bought the property in 1902. It is "impossible to determine who built it," but records indicate it was built in about 1819 by Edmund B. Norvell, or by Thomas Wyatt, before 1813.

Trueheart Poston, son of the man who bought the house in 1902, also gave an account of the rocking cradle story in the WPA report. The tale was roughly the same, with some amendments — such as the cradle was commanded in the name of "Beelzebub," and rocked for days.

Other ghost sightings, as told by Poston, include a story about Walter Addison, then editor of The Lynchburg News, the morning edition of the paper before it became The News & Advance. He and his wife were guests in the home. In the early morning hours, Addison said he saw an old woman on the landing, and later would come to find no such woman was living in the house.

Poston's account, as outlined in the WPA report, also noted a "very vague rumor of a body which drops out of an upstairs dormer."

Another story involved a major in the Confederate Army who lived in the house at one time. When he would overindulge on alcohol, his family would lock him in the dining room, and he would attempt to beat his way out of the room with a poker. According to Poston, it was said at midnight, the doors in the room would all open, whether they were locked or not.

Doors no longer separate the dining room from other parts of the house, though ornate hinges covered in a fresh coat of paint hint to that part of the story.



The living room area of the Rocking Cradle House on Friday, Oct. 27, 2023.

Paige Dinger, The News & Advance

Jones, a small real estate investor, first caught sight of the house in 2021 as she was driving through Federal Hill, looking for apparently abandoned properties she might be able to purchase from owners who may be eager to sell.

Jones, 38, is originally from Madison Heights, and has been living in Alexandria working as a patent examiner with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. After more than a decade of flipping houses, she's moved on to providing housing for travel nurses after completing the Poston House.

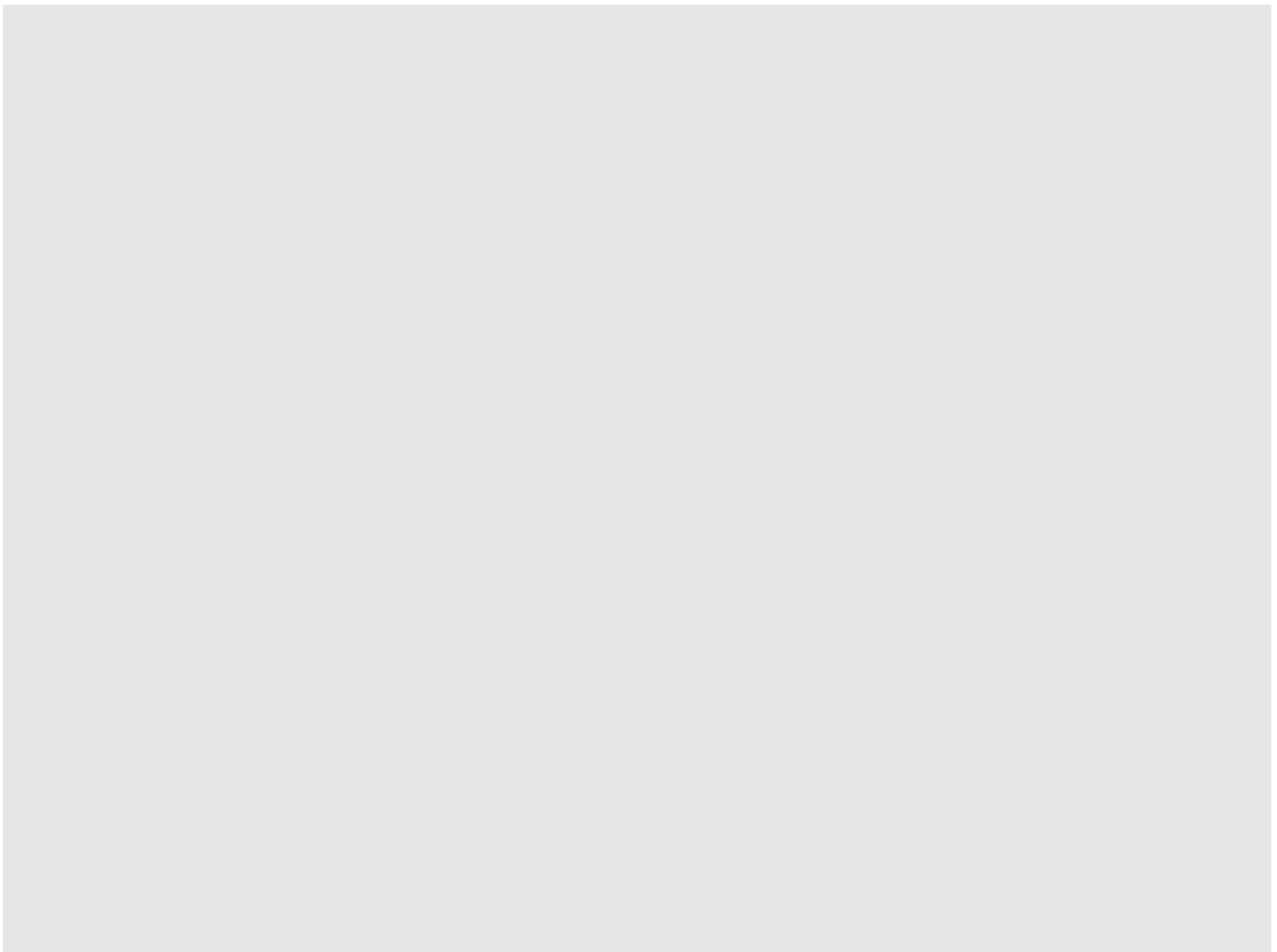
The first time she visited the home, she said it felt very welcoming despite its rundown appearance. Jones wanted to capture that feeling, working to highlight its historic character while updating its look and essential features.

She began renovations in September 2021, thinking at the time it would take just six months to complete.

The house looks small from the front, despite its 2,438 square feet. It is listed as having four bedrooms and three full bathrooms.

“It’s super compartmentalized, it’s not very open,” Jones said. “I tried to make it a little bit more open without really interfering with a lot of the structure.”

Jones said the kitchen was tiny, with a bedroom added onto the back. She demolished the wall leading into the back bedroom and used that space to craft a giant kitchen with ample counter and cabinet space, including a coffee nook with a vein of exposed brick running up one wall.



The kitchen at the Rocking Cradle hHouse on Friday, Oct. 27, 2023.

Paige Dingler, The News & Advance

She also added space to one of the first floor bathrooms by harvesting a closet. In this bathroom, she added a black and gold clawfoot tub lit by a black candle chandelier.

“Those are the only two rooms that really got expanded,” Jones said. “... Other than that I tried to keep as much of the original features as possible without really disrupting the character.”



A downstairs bathroom in the Rocking Cradle House on Friday, Oct. 27, 2023.

Paige Dinger, The News & Advance

Jones ran into some issues with the large chimney protruding from the front of the house. Weather and time had caused the bricks to deteriorate and water was coming inside. Jones ended up having to replace about a third of that prominent chimney but could not match the brick color. Many Hill City homes of that vintage were built from bricks made of the Virginia red clay dug up in the construction of the home.

It was that mismatch that led Jones to paint the house its current sunny yellow.

“It’s actually really sound,” Jones said. “I mean, no foundation issues. ... It has good bones.”

Jones said installing the HVAC systems was challenging in a home that never was designed for duct work. It has two units, one controlling the upstairs and another for the first floor. It took a bit of creativity to find a place for the units and to hide the duct work.

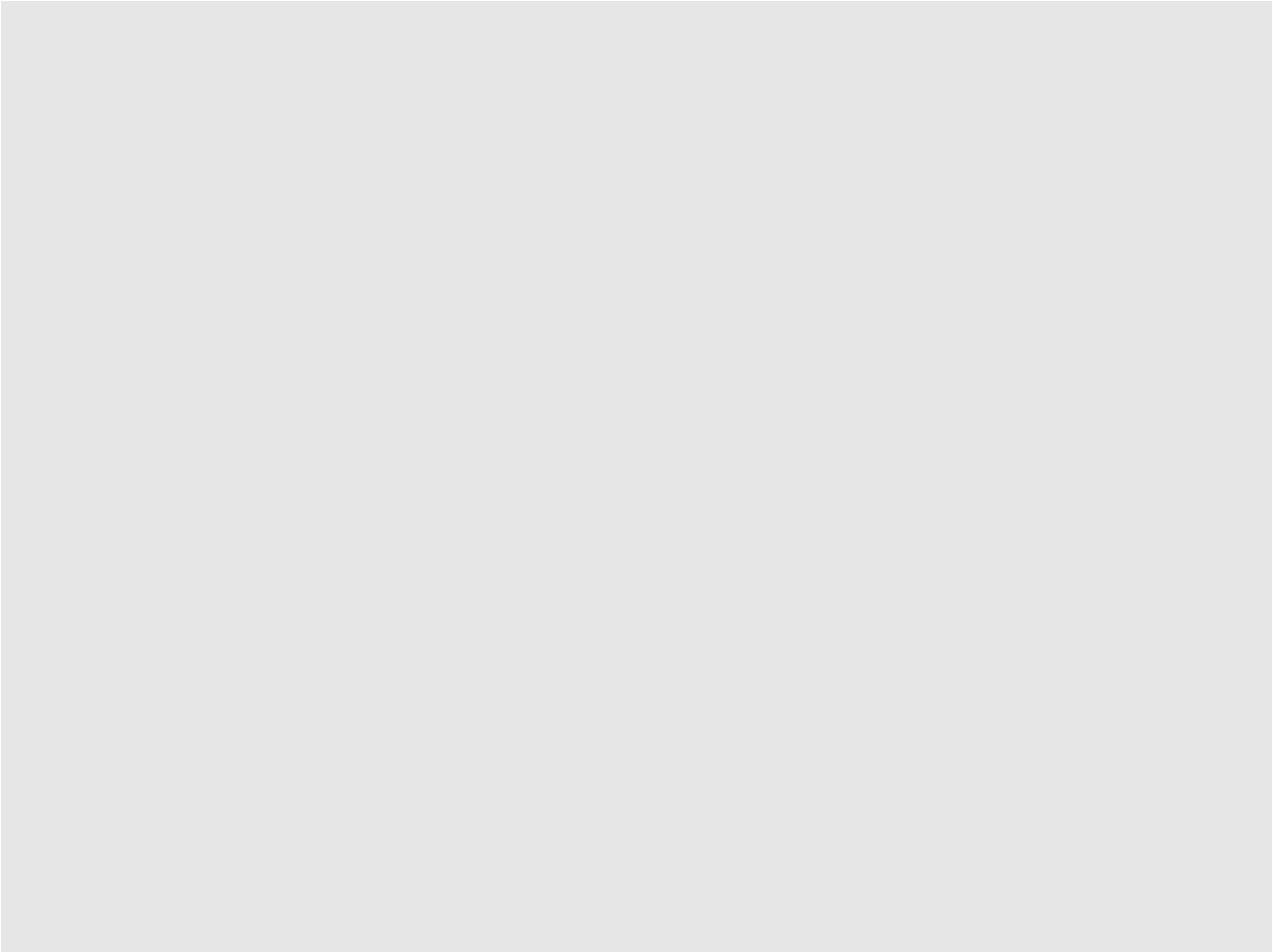
Some of the items left behind by the prior owners she tried to save and use as design elements in the home, including that black chandelier. A cabinet found in one of the upstairs bedrooms turned into the vanity in one of the first floor bathrooms.

Jones found a cradle tucked in the cellar around the side of the house during the renovations, but it’s not the one of the legend, which now resides in the Lynchburg Museum. Siblings Tom Jackson and Joan Coleman, both of Lynchburg, the great-great-great-grandchildren of the cradle’s original owner, donated the piece to the museum in 2021.

Jones herself doesn’t have any tales of the supernatural in her time spent at the Rocking Cradle House. The creepiest thing to happen was a large black bird that had forced its way through a narrow opening in the fireplace and began flapping its way around the house.

The contractor managed to catch the unruly intruder. He told her, though, of hearing a child crying upstairs who sounded to be a boy younger than 10 years old.

Jones hasn’t heard anything strange herself.



The Rocking Cradle House on Jackson Street in Lynchburg was built in 1834 by Bishop John Early, who loaned it to a young minister. A cradle there would rock mysteriously, drawing crowds, until Bishop Early figured out what was going on and told the devil to vacate the premises, according to one report.

News & Advance file photo

In the two years of renovation, Jones has noticed more of the historic homes in the neighborhood getting new life. The Poston House's neighbor, though, still stands with a partially collapsed exterior wall providing a stark contrast to its new sunny façade.

Jones has high hopes for the storied home.

"I'm hoping that the history, of course, is going to be preserved and maybe someone could do something a little bit more creative with it," she said, noting some have mentioned using the property as an Airbnb or as a museum.

Ultimately she wants someone to fall for its charms just as she did.

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By Carrie Sidener

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