

If walls could talk, the hallowed halls of this historic building would tell of four prominent owners: three that helped to shape Savannah's history and one helping to shape the city's future.

# Armstrong House



> **Classically beautiful:** Now Bouhan, Williams & Levy's conference room, this blue hued space was originally home to the Armstrong family's formal dining room.

George Armstrong made his money in shipping with the Strachan Shipping Company.

Armstrong's new home, reputed to cost approximately \$680,000, was spacious with three stories and a full basement featuring two libraries, a music room, a solarium, a miniature ballroom and a billiard room. Masquerading externally as an Italian Renaissance structure, the home was actually built in the beaux arts style, common in the United States at the turn of the 20th century. Simply put, it is an elaborate, eclectic twist on a classical style, reflecting European Renaissance elements. The decorative detail, most of which has endured the years, is elaborate, worldly and romantic.

Armstrong died a mere five years after the home's completion. A decade later, his widow gave the property to the City of Savannah to serve as the 1.3-acre campus of the Armstrong Junior College, now Armstrong Atlantic State University. It would serve as a school for more than 30 years. Nine buildings congested the property until Armstrong became a senior college in 1966 and relocated to Savannah's Southside. The Historic Savannah Foundation acquired the home through its revolving fund and held ownership until it was sold to Jim Williams, a respected preservationist and future Hostess City legend, thanks to his starring role in John Brent's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*.

Genteelly positioned at the mouth of Forsyth Park, Armstrong House's sprawling structure instantly attracts the attention of any passerby. In a town of architectural marvels, the home is competitive in its scale, relevance and intricate appointments. Standing sturdy for nearly 100 years, the building has flourished through a variety of owners and even more reincarnations. It served as a private home, a college campus, a property of Savannah's famous Jim Williams and, presently, the residence of Bouhan, Williams & Levy, LLP—a historical law firm that is premier in the region.

Designed by Henrick Wallin, Armstrong House was constructed between 1916 and 19 under the watchful eye of general contractor Olaf Otto to serve as the home of Guyton, Georgia, native George Ferguson Armstrong, his wife, Lucy Camp Armstrong and their daughter. A member of the Cotton Exchange and Oglethorpe Club,



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-Frank "Sonny" Seiler



> **Savannah's White House:** Built of marble dust-made brick with limestone trim and granite appointments, the foundation and structure of the home have well withstood the decades.



**Wood room:** Once one of the home's two libraries, this original wood-paneled room is now the office of Bouhan, Williams & Levy partner, Walter Hartridge.



**A Sonny office:** Currently the office of famed local lawyer Frank "Sonny" Seiler (who has the room filled with UGA memorabilia,) this room was once the Armstrong family's music room.

Williams owned the home for only a brief time, turning the space into an antique shop that housed his high-priced heirlooms. In 1970, he sold the building to the law firm of Bouhan, Williams & Levy—a move precipitated by “virtue of being aggressive lawyers,” according to Walter Hartridge, a sixth-generation attorney and partner with the firm. The structure’s final repurposing is perhaps its most exciting and prestigious, as its new occupants include some of the city’s most influential men and women who brought with them a storied history of their own.

The firm traces its roots to the admission to practice law of W.W. Osborne in 1886. In 1892, Osborne entered into partnership with Senator Pope Barrow to form Barrow and Osborne. Bouhan, Williams & Levy would change names and leadership seven times over its history, pro-

ducing from within its walls countless esteemed judges, renowned authors and political leaders. “We believe in public service, and we encourage all members of the firm to participate in public life,” explains Hartridge.

Today Armstrong House accommodates Bouhan, Williams & Levy’s expansive staff, including the 22 lawyers maintaining the firm’s broad-based, general law practice. “In the early years the firm came to represent the leading industries in our community such as Union Bag/Union Camp, which was sold to International Paper, Savannah Electric and Atlantic Coastline Railroad, now CSX,” says Hartridge. “Our firm has been flexible with the times, but we have always been strong in litigation and the actual trial of cases. All the classic lawyer skills are with us.”

As an epicenter of Lowcountry law, it is only

fitting that the firm occupy a building of stature, but its journey to the picturesque locale is marked by the same intrigue one might find on the pages of a captivating legal thriller.

“We had nice accommodations before we got here,” remarks Frank “Sonny” Seiler, another legacy partner at the firm and the proud owner of the lineage of Uga, the English bulldog mascots of the University of Georgia. “If it had not been for a tragic fire, we would have even nicer accommodations.”

Throughout its history, the firm that became Bouhan, Williams & Levy occupied a number of structures, finally settling in the old Liberty National Bank building at Bull and Broughton—that is, until it was burnt to the ground by arson in a suspicious turn of events following a controversial case.

At the time of the fire, Bouhan, Williams &

Levy was defending a motorist in a civil case arising out of a traffic accident that occurred near Ludowici, Georgia. In those times, it was common knowledge that no one could win a case against local political boss Ralph Dawson. Governor Lester Maddox had a warning sign erected on the highway cautioning motorists about a speed trap in Long County. When the sign repeatedly went missing, Maddox stationed a state patrolman to permanently keep watch over the sign.

“You couldn’t beat the system,” recalls Hartridge. “[Dawson] always sued just under jurisdictional amount so you couldn’t take it to the United States District Court. You were at his mercy.

“[In the motorist case,]” he continues, “Frank Seiler and I challenged the county’s method of selecting jurors. We filed an action under the civil

rights statute arguing that jurors were not being selected based upon the voters list.” After the U.S. marshal came to collect Boss Dawson’s lists, the firm’s building went up in smoke. According to the fire marshal’s records, four 55-gallon drums placed within the building caused the blaze. And while the firm fortunately did not lose any of its records, which remained in a separate building, Dawson was never pinned to the crime.

“The Savannah gray bricks came down like dust,” Hartridge remembers. “We had to do something.” So Bouhan, Williams & Levy purchased Armstrong House, a property with the advantage of visually suggesting the power and prestige for which the firm was and still is known.

Aside from taking out the billiards room and

erecting partitions to create more office space, Armstrong House has maintained most of its original features, inside and out. The law firm has replicated many of the period wall colors and appointments with the aid of preserved watercolor paintings by the building’s original architect. The paintings hang in various rooms on the main floor and depict the spaces as they once stood.

On the main level of the law offices is an expansive conference room, once the formal dining room of the Armstrongs. With its acanthus leaves crown moldings, implied paneling, decorative ceiling and garland fireplace, the conference room is, in the opinion of Walter Hartridge, “one of the handsomest Georgian rooms in the country.”

Across the entry hall from the former dining room, Sonny Seiler’s office once served as the music room. The style is derived from the English



“The Savannah gray bricks came down like dust. We had to do something.”  
-Walter Hartridge



“We have been very content here and we get an awful lot of compliments.”  
-Frank “Sonny” Seiler



► **Grand entrance:** Any guest to Armstrong House is greeted by the building's grand foyer from which one can see into the firm's spacious conference room.

## Midnight at Armstrong House

"Did you know that there have been at least three major movies shot in here?" asks Frank "Sonny" Seiler. It's true; Armstrong House has been the picturesque setting of several blockbusters, including the original *Cape Fear*, starring Gregory Peck, Robert Mitchum and Polly Bergen. Of course, the building's most famous Hollywood connection lies in its involvement in the factual inspirations and following movie adaptation of John Brent's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Seiler, who represented Jim Williams in his second, third and final murder trials, opened the doors of Armstrong House to *Midnight* producers and even had a cameo in the film. The building's interior can be viewed in all of its grandeur in the first half of the film.

Adamesque tradition with original parquet floors and dentil crown molding. The large, flowerlike plaster ceiling medallion is accentuated by intricate, floral patterns that extend out from the center of the room. True to Seiler's famed first love, the room's delicate designs are uniquely complimented with UGA Bulldog statuettes and paintings, filling the room with red and black memorabilia.

Adjacent to Seiler's office, Walter Hartridge occupies the former library, encased in rich, dark walnut paneling. Original to the building, the wood is hand carved and treated regularly with beeswax for protection and luster. A fireplace dominates the room, its vibrant stones providing texture and a sense of reprieve from the otherwise darkened space. The ceilings are Italian inspired and complement the room with subtle ornamentation.

Tucked towards the back of the building sits the former private library of George Ferguson Armstrong. Once used by Jim Williams as a private office, the little library today feels a little like being caught in a maze. Boasting a Chippendale style, the effect of the cherrywood wall paneling is unique in a house full of more classical interpretations. The walls are extremely elaborate with beautifully hand

carved details, a Jacobean fireplace, crown moldings and Ionic pilasters. The ceiling is a fascinating honeycomb pattern. As an extra treat in this captivating space, silhouettes on the wall of hidden doors conceal what was once Armstrong's private wine stock.

"This has been a great investment for us," explains Seiler. "It suits the needs of the firm in every way. It has a great history behind it, [and] we've done our best to keep it presentable to the public."

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If walls could talk, Armstrong House would have stories to tell: of early 20th century opulence and propriety, of decades of lectures and learning, of Savannah society soirees at the hand of a principled preservationist, later branded a killer and, even later, a legend. It would whisper of courtroom drama, civil and criminal law trials, and a lawful legacy that would shape the legal landscape of the region. It would understand the sentiments of great wealth, principles of education, salvation through preservation, authenticity of antiquity, discernment and the true discipline of advocacy. ★