

Historic Building Was Scene For John Berendt's Book, Now A Law Firm

Daily Report (ALM Properties), by Katheryn Hayes Tucker.

Most law offices don't have tourists stopping to look and take pictures, but that's business as usual for Bouhan Falligant in Savannah. The firm is located on Bull Street at the edge of Forsyth Park in a four-story mansion built between 1916 and 1919 by shipping magnate George Armstrong and known as Armstrong House.

"The home is fabulous," said Leamon Holliday III, the firm's managing partner. "More importantly, it's been a great law office for us. The building was built more to a commercial standard than residential. It has reinforced concrete. It was designed by an architect who knew what he was doing. Mr. Armstrong used skilled artisans."

After Armstrong's death in 1924, his wife and daughter, both named Lucy, donated the house and its gardens to the city of Savannah to serve as the centerpiece for Armstrong College. Classes began in 1935. The college later became part of the University System of Georgia and moved to a campus on the southside in 1966, according to the firm's website. The website describes the house as an "Italian Renaissance structure of granite and glazed brick."

John Berendt called it a "palazzo" for palace in his 1994 book, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. The author took note of its location "directly across Bull Street from the staid Oglethorpe Club."

As tour trolleys stopped for a look at the house on a recent sunny Saturday, a guide glanced across the street and told her audience that over there was "a high-class men's club."

Here's what Berendt had to say: "Armstrong House was a lion of a house. It gloated and glowered and loomed. It even had a curving colonnade that reached out like a giant paw as if to swat the Oglethorpe Club off its high horse across the street." Berendt said Armstrong was falsely rumored to have been blackballed from the elite club. The firm website says he was a member.

Armstrong House appears in the first chapter of the book, by way of introducing Jim Williams, who went on to be tried for murder four times in the 1980s. In the last three, he was defended by Frank "Sonny" Seiler, a partner in the firm then known as Bouhan, Williams & Levy. Williams purchased Armstrong House from the Historic Savannah Foundation preservation group in 1970, restored it and ran his antiques shop there for a year before selling it to the law firm.

Seiler is now 80. Still listed on the firm's website, he is "retired but active," Holliday said, adding that he'd seen Seiler in Armstrong House that day. Reached by phone later, Seiler says he's staying busy on a case and "taking the dog to Athens." He breeds and supplies English bulldogs to serve as the University of Georgia football team mascot, a service he and his family have provided since 1956 when he was a law student there.

Holliday was new at the firm when he helped move it to Armstrong House in 1971. He recalls that at the time, the firm had been in a bank building also on Bull Street. The firm wanted to renovate and preserve another building in the historic district. While the construction was underway, the firm filed a civil rights lawsuit in a nearby rural county challenging the jury selection process. "Shortly thereafter, our building burned down," Holliday recalls. "We never said why, but we had four fires."

Around that time, Williams decided to sell Armstrong House. Newly renovated, the house required surprisingly little work to become a law office. "The firm put in central air conditioning and changed the heating system. We modified a few rooms," says Holliday. "We tried to keep the character and integrity of the structure."

On Jan. 1, 2013, Holliday's firm, Bouhan, Williams & Levy, merged with Inglesby, Falligant, Horne, Courington & Chisholm to create Bouhan Falligant. With a combined 27 lawyers, it's second in size in Savannah only to HunterMaclean. The firm shares the No. 2 spot with Oliver Maner, which also has 27 lawyers.

"The experience of practicing law in Savannah is not what you would expect from a smaller town where you'd have one or two powerhouse people," says Holliday. "In Savannah, there have always been good lawyers, people who are a cut above."

Savannah hasn't had the economic drivers for the kind of rapid growth that Atlanta experienced in earlier eras. As a result, Savannah remained more stable through the great recession years. The work for lawyers includes not only insurance defense and representation of governments and major companies as the former Savannah Electric and Power, which is now part of Southern Company, and Gulfstream Aerospace Corp., with 8,406 employees, according to the Savannah Economic Development Association—but also admiralty and maritime law.

"Admiralty work has changed dramatically. The simple concept of putting cargo into a container has changed that industry. [We] no longer have things breaking, getting lost, going missing we have whole containers going missing," Holliday says.

Laws that apply at sea differ in complex ways from those that apply on land, an admiralty lawyer with the firm, Todd Baiad, notes in an article on the Bouhan website. For example, overtime pay requirements are different. If companies don't get it right, maritime workers are protected in unique ways, "including allowing workers to seize a ship as collateral for a claim of unpaid wages." Consequently, Savannah lawyers working in this area have developed unique and valuable expertise.

Adds Holliday, "Savannah's been good to us because we've been able to handle work that's challenging. It's made the practice more exciting."

And yes, the firm's location adds some interest as well. Armstrong House is not open for tours, but plenty of people seem to wind up there wanting one.

For all its opulence, the law office of Bouhan Falligant lacks efficiencies of a modern building's layout. For example, Holliday notes his office is quite large, but it also serves as the access to his secretary's office, which is on a porch overlooking the lavish fountain and live oak trees of Forsyth Park. "My point is, it's not perfect," says Holliday. "It's been good for us."