

A House By The 'C'

River pilot Captain Bill Bell built the two-story Gingerbread structure in 1889 as a home for his wife and family.

Today it's a gift shop which combines the best of Yesterday's architecture and Today's business expertise.

In 91 years, The C House at Beech and 8th Streets has seen many uses, from a private residence to a Depression Era boarding house. Today the ornate former ship captain's home serves a different master, gift shop owner Jack Coker, Jr., but its bareboard finish and fancy Gingerbread trim are an instant history lesson to tourists pass it by enroute to the historic downtown Centre Street restoration area.

Coker says his father wasn't quite sure what to do with the old building when he purchased it nine years ago... "But instead of letting it sit here, we decided to do something with it."

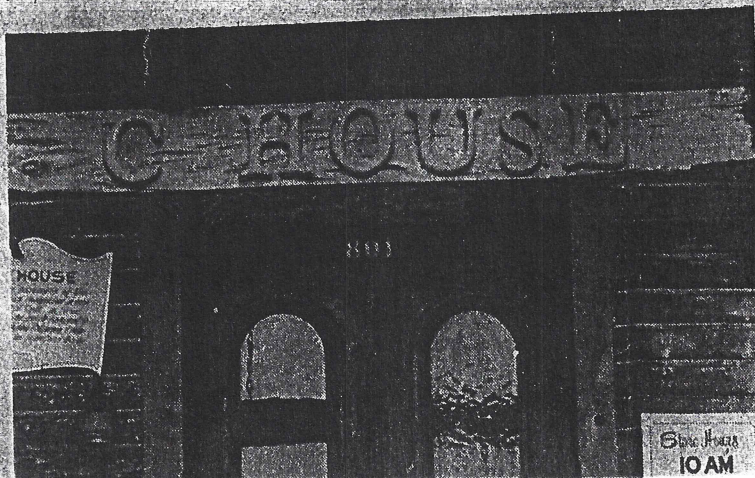
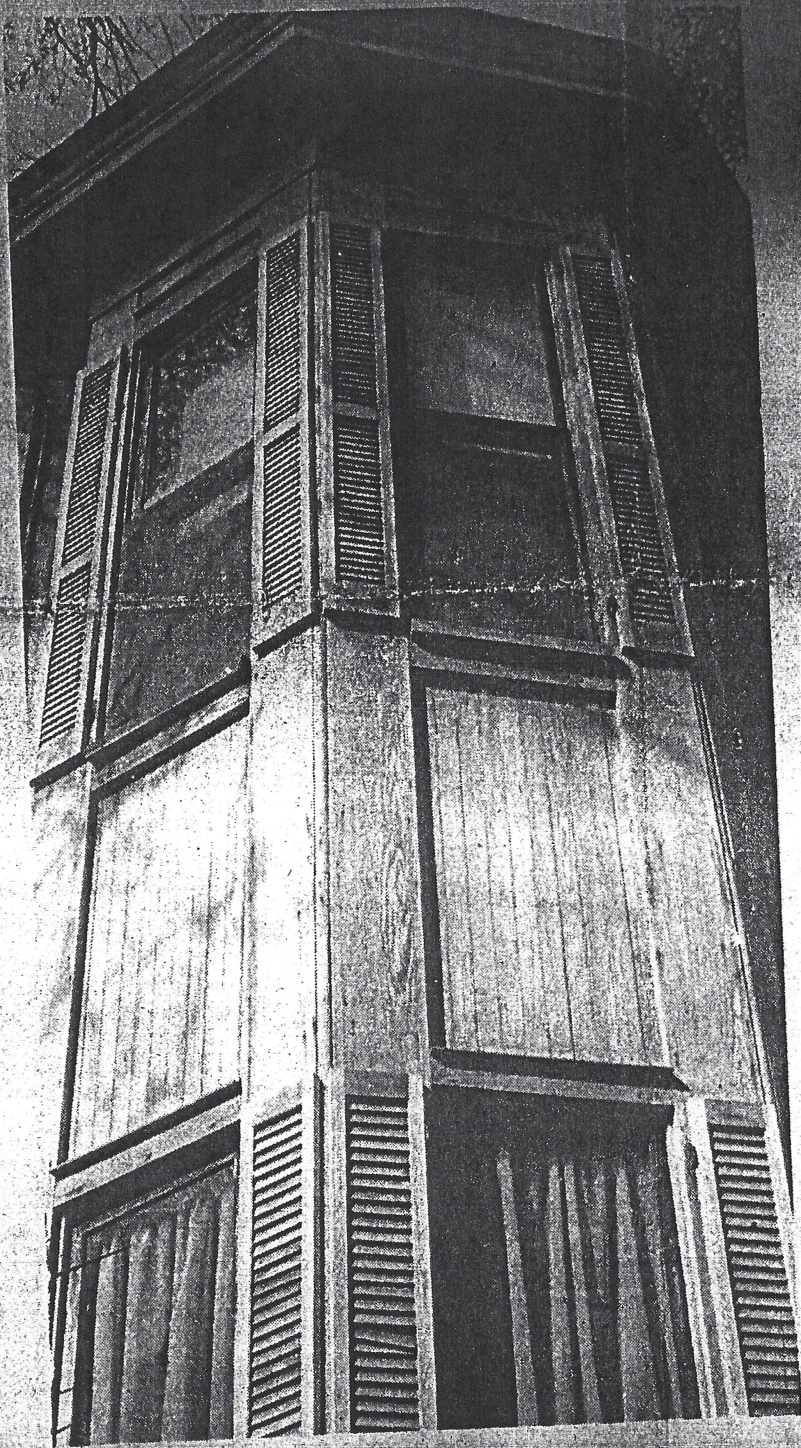
The Cokers refurbished the expansive 13-room residence, replaced an upstairs porch, re-wired the entire building and added new plumbing. But the structure itself, Coker says, has always been sound.

The C House is constructed with Heart Pine and includes a coal burning fireplace imported from England. Captain Bell apparently wanted only the best for the building which became a home for him and a long line of descendents.

The architecture, Chinese Chippendale, is based on an ornate style of furniture made in China. The outside structure - because it is covered only with sealer and wood preservative to maintain the rustic look - probably appears much as it did in 1889, Coker said.

Until about five years ago, trolley tracks were still visible in front of the C House, a reminder of the days when trains carried cargo to and from the city docks.

"For some reason a lot of people lived here," Coker says recalling customers who drop in from time to time claiming to have lived at the C House when it was a boarding house. "They'll come in and say 'I lived in that room for two years.' But a lot come in



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"For some reason a lot of people lived here," Coker says recalling customers who drop in from time to time claiming to have lived at the C House when it was a boarding house. "They'll come in and say 'I lived in that room for two years.' But a lot come in just to stop and see the house."

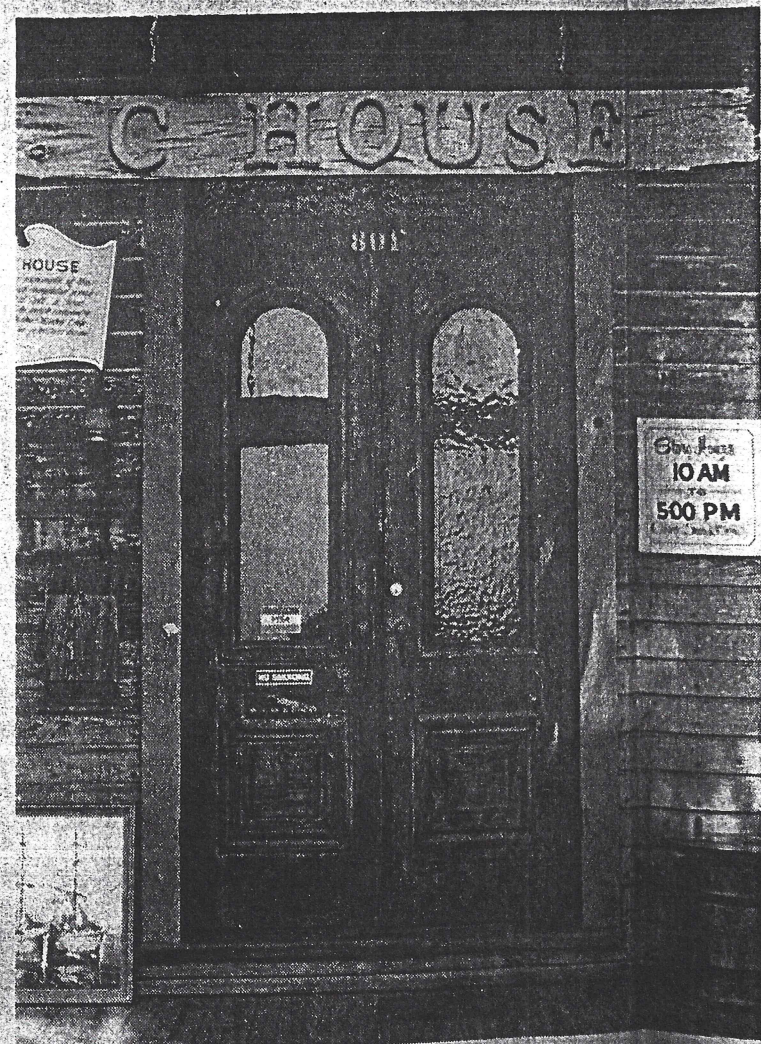
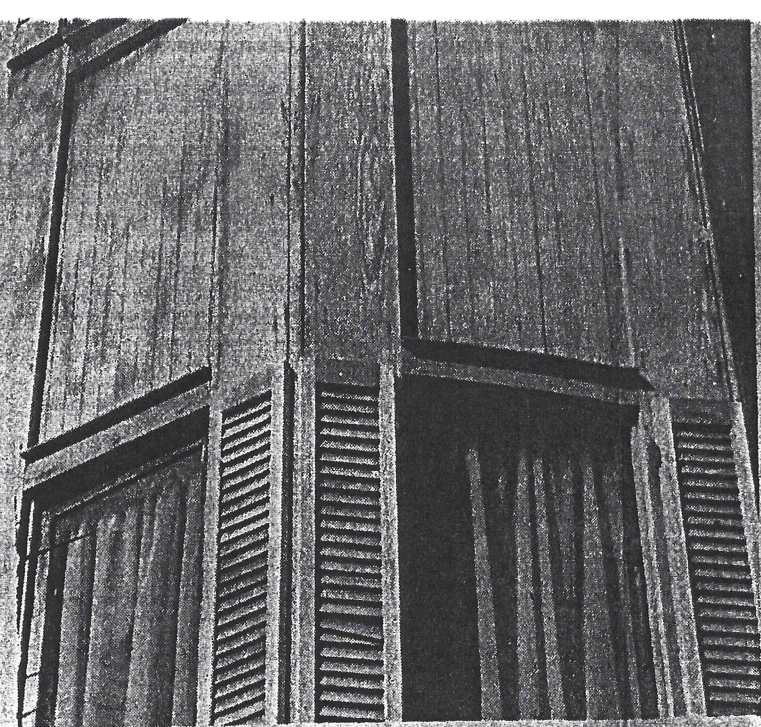
The name, incidentally, is a play on words, Coker says. One could construe the name to mean "Sea House," or "See the house," or "C(oker) House."

"For a long time we tried to think of a name and never did," he explains. "And then my brother, who was about seven at the time, popped up and said, 'Why don't you name it C House,' so we did."

Sixty percent of his customers are tourists, Coker estimates.

"It's unreal how people from such far away places get to Fernandina Beach."

But somehow, they manage. The guestbook at the entrance lists visitors from England, Guatemala, Canada and Germany, to name just a few recent foreign visitors.



Story By Joseph Harry/Photos By Ed Kuhn