

John and Sarah Don't Live Here Anymore

Ghosts live here.

From the outside, it looks like a fairy-tale mansion, with pink siding, fish scale shingles and colorful stained-glass windows. Nobody would guess it's haunted.

Although the historic Williams House now rests on the USF St. Petersburg (USFSP) campus, most students don't bother walking inside. They trudge past, textbooks tucked under their arms, cell phones to their ears.

If they did walk up the flight of teal green steps and turn the old lever door handle, they would enter another era. The inside is furnished as it might have been when it was first built in the 1890s. A huge black-and-white photograph of its first owner, John Williams, greets guests who walk through the door. His long white beard hides his mouth, and his eyes glance sideways toward the grand mahogany stairway, as if waiting for his wife Sarah to saunter down. But she doesn't. She, like all of the house's previous owners, is dead.

Sometimes it's hard to believe that Sarah and John don't live there anymore. The house is so quiet it seems to be holding its breath, waiting for them to come home and drink fresh lemonade on the veranda.

"I feel like Sarah is in here all the time," says Joan Tschiderer, the USFSP special events coordinator.

Although Tschiderer hasn't actually met a ghost, she's heard plenty of stories. Like the one about the spirit that spooked the construction crew

When USFSP began renovating the Williams House, a group of construction workers got out of their truck, walked inside, and came straight out again.

"There's a presence," they said. "We won't work here."

But whose presence was it?



It's 1875. The Williams House hasn't been built yet. Instead, an empty tract of Florida scrub, overgrown with palmettos and palms, waits for the Williams family to arrive. But at the moment, John Williams is stuck in Detroit.

John is 58, asthmatic and overly-idealistic. His doctor has told him to move to a warmer climate if he wants to regain his health. Stroking his long beard, John wonders about Florida, with its sultry weather and healing salt water.

USFSP historian Ray Arsenault describes John Williams as an “Old Testament patriarch.” Like Father Abraham, John packs up his children and his first wife, Charlotte, and heads to an unknown land. Instead of a camel, he journeys by covered wagon. Unlike Abraham, John has a lot of cash.

He travels up and down Florida, searching for the right place to start his life again. Jacksonville. Tampa. Cedar Key. Nothing feels right. Someone tells John to look at Point Pinellas. “Damn Point Pinellas!” John snaps, but he looks anyway. Still seeking the healthiest spot on earth, he buys 1,600 acres of land that will someday become downtown St. Petersburg.

Charlotte Williams hates her new home. This isn’t paradise; it’s sweltering heat, buzzing mosquitoes and backwoods culture. John has grand plans of becoming a farmer. He plants potatoes and sugar cane. The crops fail. Charlotte, sensing her chance for escape, argues for a return to Detroit. Once there, she divorces him – plunging their prestigious family into scandal. John has a stroke.

This might seem like the end of the story. But it isn’t.

Eight months after his divorce, John marries Sarah Craven Judge – a Canadian widow he met at a picnic. He is 65. She is 39.



Today, a black-and-white Williams family portrait hangs on the wall of the parlor. Sarah’s image has been cut out and superimposed onto the photograph. She looks larger-than-life. Vivacious. Spirited. The sort of woman who would savor a Florida adventure.

“John is important, but Sarah is equally important,” says James Schnur, special collections librarian at the Poynter Library.

If John was the Father of St. Petersburg, Sarah was its Mother. She loved to sing and dance. She was smart and “disarming,” according to Ray Arsenault. And she was willing to explore the wild.



It’s 1879. Together, John and Sarah pack up their combined families and move to Tampa, where they live until a yellow fever epidemic strikes. No one knows how to stop it. Scared locals spray streets with bichloride of mercury. Rub trees with lime. Fire guns into the air to kill invisible germs. John, already frail, can’t risk contracting the disease.

The Williams pack their bags again and move across the bay to St. Petersburg.

Only, it isn't St. Petersburg yet. It's nothing. Thirty people, including children, are scattered around the scrubby land, living in shacks or frame houses. The general store is stocked with nails, gunpowder, coffee, sugar and flour. Altogether, the merchandise totals less than \$200. The settlers' only link to the outside world is the mail boat which comes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, in good weather. It's a far cry from high society.



"This was still a rough-and-ready jungle," Tschiderer says, describing 19th century Florida as "hot," "mosquito-laden" and "alligator-filled."

But Sarah Williams liked it.

She must have noticed the span of an egret's outstretched wings, the flash of a mullet leaping in the bay, the silhouette of an ibis against the sunset. Her home is filled with these images, painted on ceilings, stenciled into borders, ornamenting wall medallions. Almost every room reflects the "rough-and-ready jungle" that once surrounded the house.

It cost a lot of money.



It is 1890. Artisans from Tampa trickled into the village, busy decorating the 15-room Williams mansion. Neighbors stare. They sleep on palm frond mattresses in log cabins. Who does this John Williams think he is? Gossip says he's a Yankee snob. But the house goes up anyway, three-stories tall with a cupola on top.

A Queen Anne style structure, the house is whimsical and filled with light. From the upstairs windows, Sarah and John gaze at the bay. Outside, they are surrounded by palms and palmettos, with a carriage in the back lot. During the evenings, they eat in the elegant dining room, where stenciled fish border the walls. The artwork reflects their cuisine: snapper, stone crabs, scallops and sea trout make plentiful fare. While John smokes in the library after dinner, Sarah sews in the second-floor sitting room.

Together, John and Sarah transform the community into a respectable town. Sarah works with the Women's Town Improvement Association to keep hogs and cows off the streets and put up wooden sidewalks. But more importantly, she and her husband negotiate with entrepreneur Peter Demens to bring the Orange Belt railroad to their village.



Railroads mean success. Originally, the Orange Belt wasn't supposed to come to St. Petersburg. Demens planned to bring the train to the area now called Gulfport.

“Had history been slightly different, Gulfport would be our main city,” Schnur says.

But when Demens ran out of cash, the Williams made him an offer, and he accepted.

The first train chugged into town in 1888, screeching to a stop in front of a wooden platform. No train depot existed yet. A lone traveling shoe salesman got out of the passenger car. He took one look at the shabby village and boarded the next train out of town.

St. Petersburg didn't look like much. But thanks to the railroad, it didn't stay that way for long.



It is 1892. Proud of his accomplishments, John runs for mayor on the “wet ticket,” promising to keep saloons open on Sundays. His wife and son vote for temperance and support the “dry ticket.” John's loses, humiliatingly. Now 75, brimming with bitterness and disappointment, he disinherits his children – claiming in his will they don't love him – and bequeaths an insultingly small patch of land to the city. That same year, perhaps in an old brass bed in the Williams mansion, John dies.



The Williams House possesses more than one ghost story: mysterious auras, clocks stopping simultaneously, a friendly spirit visiting at midnight. Nobody knows exactly who haunts the old mansion. John and Sarah are now buried together in Detroit. But something of their presence still remains in the home they built from the scrub.

Maybe they never left.

Author's note:

Sources for historical information include the following books and articles:

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