

Investigation ordered

Old Goddard House impressed first visitor

By ED PETERS

The Army got a lot of houses when it purchased nearly 40,000 acres of land for Redstone Arsenal, but only three endure today.

One is a military residence on Buxton Road, another is the Rocket Nursery building and the third is Goddard House, the ante-bellum structure on Redstone Road.

Goddard House was on a 675 acre parcel just west of Gate 9 that the Army acquired for \$8,000.

It was moved in 1956 to the Redstone Road location across from Bldg 7101, then post headquarters.

It was built in the early 1800s. Until the Army moved, renovated and renamed it for a rocket pioneer, it was know as the Chaney house after the family it was bought from.

The house is presently being evaluated for the National Registry of Historic Places.

On the way to becoming a candidate for the

registry, the old house has survived a near miss of the wrecker's ball, a direct hit by a bolt of lightning, an 11.5 mile move across the arsenal and an investigation by the Secretary of Defense into the machinations involved and money spent on setting it up as a guest house for visiting bigwigs.

Old records show that it was used to store supplies during early construction of the arsenal, then was renovated in 1942 and used for military quarters for 11 years. There were problems with the old house. The well was no good and the house was considered a fire hazard.

The house was proposed for demolition in 1953, but was spared because of "public sentiment" and a determination that its value and condition didn't warrant destruction.

The house stood empty a couple of years, then caught the imagination of officials of the

newly-formed Army Ballistic Missile Agency late in 1955.

They were expecting visits from some very important people, and there was an "acute" shortage of housing for high level visitors. Neither Huntsville nor the arsenal had "quarters commensurate with requirements of high level government officials" and this "made it mandatory" that adequate quarters be provided "as expeditiously as possible", old records indicate.

"After considering other solutions, it was determined that the most practical and economical solution was to use the otherwise unusable farm house by moving it to the headquarters area. . .", documents state.

"Due to the urgency of the project expeditious handling was directed by CG ABMA" when a request was put in Dec. 1, 1955 for \$18,000 to move the house. The request was granted within five days by the Office of the Chief of Ordnance.

The "urgency" of the project was the expected visit of the Secretary of Defense and Secretary of the Army.

The records say that after the move "verbal" approval was gained from Office of the Chief of Ordnance to proceed with necessary repairs. No written request was made then because of the "engineering workload of ABMA on a crash basis."

Work began apace to fix and furnish the old house and it was ready in six weeks when the Honorable Charles E. Wilson, Secretary of Defense, arrived on February 14. His party included Wilber Brucker, Secretary of the Army, Dan Thomas, Secretary of the Navy, and LT. Gen. James Gavin, Army Chief of Research and Development.



Shown to his quarters by ABMA Commanding General John B. Medaris, the Secretary of Defense was impressed by the room that had been prepared for him: The fireplace faced in pink marble, the rich mahogany dresser and desk, the posh easy chair, the impressive wool rug. He was indeed impressed.

When he got back to Washington he fired off a request to the Secretary of the Army for "a complete report as to the cost of the house, including furniture."

After much debate over whether more than \$10,000 in plumbing, roofing and stucco repairs should be reported, since these ostensibly would have been necessary even if

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House

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the house hadn't been moved and set up as a guest house, a report was sent to Wilson.

He didn't like what was sent, and shot back a second request for a "complete" breakdown of expenditures.

Work began feverishly on an "amendatory project covering work not included in the first project that went up". It included a \$3,105 "oversight" that occurred when one ledger sheet was "overlooked" while hurriedly compiling costs from various ledger sheets.

Other expenditures listed included these: Dresser \$1,400, Easy Chair \$1,055, Bed \$702, Mattress \$273, Mahogany desk \$495, Wool rugs \$1,552.

The "amendatory project" was hand-carried to Washington by "someone familiar with the background", to help an OCO official get his act together before he had to present his case to General Maxwell Taylor, Army Chief of Staff on March 15.

There was an anxious wait at Redstone for the verdict. Later that day it arrived. "The briefing to the Chief of Staff on the VIP guest house at Redstone was very successful. General Taylor agreed heartily with the desirability of the project and on the basis of the facts, he felt we had nothing to apologize for," the message stated. And there the matter of the Goddard House move seems to have ended.

In retrospect, if the fate of the many other houses that used to be here is an indication, the chicanery that resulted in Goddard House's conversion to VIP quarters probably also saved the stately old home from destruction.