

Developer Lewis Stirling turns storied New Orleans funeral home into a Borders bookstore

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You never know what might happen when you decide to turn a storied New Orleans funeral home into a bookstore.

Developer Lewis Stirling and his partners found out in the process of converting the Bultman Funeral Home on St. Charles Avenue into a Borders bookstore -- opening the weekend of Dec. 5 -- that it could get pretty strange.

About four months ago, Project Manager Mark Salvetti was on site when he was approached by a man who introduced himself and gave Salvetti his business card. It read: "Dr. Roderick Pyatt, Ph.D., Paranormal Psychologist. Public/Private Paranormal Investigations."

"He told Mark that people hire him to be a ghostbuster; he gave him his spiel. Apparently he's the real deal," Stirling said.

"Don't leave me out of the loop on this one," Salvetti then told Stirling. "I may never get another chance in my lifetime to see something like this take place."

After opening its doors in 1883, Bultman, operating at four locations, served as the undertaker for a number of famous people. Among them: Confederate President Jefferson Davis, who died in New Orleans in 1889 and was buried in Richmond, Va., after a lengthy cortege that began here; and blond-bombshell actress Jayne Mansfield, killed in a car wreck in 1967 on old U.S. 90 on the way to New Orleans.

Funerals for famed pilot Brig. Gen. Claire Chennault, leader of World War II's Flying Tigers; Stan Rice, husband of author Anne Rice; and oil magnate Patrick Taylor were held under Bultman auspices. For generations, families of many prominent Orleanians chose Bultman for services -- until August 2006, when the final location was closed, having not recovered from Hurricane Katrina.

So what would make anyone think the House of Bultman is haunted?



Chris Granger / The Times-Picayune

The floor of one of the entrances leading into the historic Bultman Funeral Home on St. Charles Avenue.

"No. 1, it's in New Orleans and New Orleans is just abounding in ghosts," Pyatt said. "In a city as old as this one, there are thousands and thousands of them. And funeral homes tend to be very active, spiritually speaking."

In fact, any buildings occupied by man can be haunted, he said. "Ghosts are not particular. Where there is death or agony or any problems, they tend to

congregate."

Pyatt offered to walk through the building and take electromagnetic baseline readings to determine the amount of ghostly activity. But the developers "haven't called me .x.x. yet," he said. He also said a new building at a location doesn't stop any activity there. And even if he found ghosts, unlike demons they can't be exorcised because they're human spirits.

Bultman Funeral Home was first located on Camp Street near St. Patrick's Church, likely where Davis' remains were prepared, said family member Johann Bultman. Then it was moved to Prytania Street at Washington Avenue, in the house behind The Rink, which served as the livery stable.

From there, Fred Bultman moved his funeral home to Magazine Street near where the Salvation Army once was located. Then in the late 1930s, Bultman said, his grandfather took three 19th-century Victorian row houses, cut them up into five pieces and re-assembled them at the corner of St. Charles and Louisiana avenues.

Now that the new bookstore has been constructed, the only part of the former funeral home that remains is the facade. Completed in the early 1940s, it somewhat resembles that of Mount Vernon, so the building fell outside of the historic period (1835-1926) necessary for tax credit purposes. It also had no architectural historical landmark status that prevented its total demolition. But Stirling's group decided to save it.

"It's an important facade; it's more Virginia-esque, non-Deep South, but people like it because they grew up with it," Stirling said.

"Let's just say it's important to the scene," Bultman said.

Fred Bultman picked up pieces and parts of homes, including fireplaces, and incorporated them into his building. "He was something of a scavenger, it seems," Stirling said. Ironically, some of the doors, windows and staircases bought from Ricca's Building Materials way back when now have been sold back to Ricca's.

After the funeral home closed, Stirling said, he and investors Bill Ryan and Glad Jones took a look at it and thought: "That's a great building. We need to do something with it. Let's buy it." One early concept was to turn it into condos, but wives and friends thought it would be creepy to live there. There also was some interest in making it a Ruth's Chris steakhouse, but the brainstorming turned to a bookstore, which was acceptable to neighborhood groups.

Borders CEO George Jones, who has a second home in the French Quarter, liked the idea and signed a long-term lease.

"The stars lined up. We all thought it would be good for New Orleans after Katrina, and we'll save a little piece of New Orleans and keep the taxes in the city," Stirling said.

Owners of local small bookstores obviously are not pleased with Borders' presence, but Stirling believes those stores' customers are fiercely loyal and the businesses won't be affected as much as they fear.

Also salvaged out of Bultman's were four large stained glass windows done by acclaimed artist Fritz Bultman, a family member and student of abstract expressionist Hans Hofmann. Then there were coffins and urns and shoeboxes of ashes with numbers and codes on them. The building project could not go forward until the remains were placed into the proper hands. All of that was done, Stirling said.

Possibly the strangest finding, at least to one well-known local man, were three bronze busts with the likeness of David Oreck, patriarch of the Oreck vacuum cleaner company. They were all different sizes and all designed to hold ashes. Oreck, of course, is very much alive -- and had no knowledge of who did this or why it was done. Stirling gave the busts to Ryan to give to Oreck, which he did.

"He was flabbergasted," Ryan said. Blame it on the ghosts.

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