

Magnolia Plantation: A “Treasure” in Every Way



Article by Patti Morrow & Photos by Kerry Kern

Nestled on a side street near the heart of downtown Gainesville, the historic Victorian Magnolia Plantation Inn closes its bed and breakfast services during the months of January and July to become a vacation rental while the owners are away. Surrounding the manor house are six charming fully-equipped cottages that are vacation rentals year-round.

Cindy and Joe Montalto first met in 1971 on what Joe calls his “first and last blind date.” They married 41 years ago when Joe was a senior at the University of Florida in Gainesville. After spending thirteen years in Texas after graduation to pursue careers, they felt a magnetic pull back to Gainesville, and returned.

In 1990, they purchased the old Baird Mansion in the historic district which was filled with once stately Victorian homes. But the neighborhood had fallen into disarray. Over the span of 30 years, many of the homes had become run-down and taken over by college students and hippies and transformed into a haven for raucous parties, under-age drinking and drugs.

The History

Constructed in 1885, Magnolia Plantation is known locally as the Baird Mansion, named for the family that owned and lived there for almost 70 years. Emmett Baird was a local businessman who owned and operated a crate company and a sawmill before suspiciously acquiring his wealth.

The Montalto's hunted for the treasure during in the immense 1990 restoration, but alas, to this day it has not been found.

Taking Back the Neighborhood

"People thought we were crazy for attempting this," said Joe. "The whole thing just kind of evolved. Originally we just wanted a six-room inn, but it became more about restoring this neighborhood. We were the first to come here and make a significant investment. If you'd seen this neighborhood 27 years ago, you probably wouldn't have stopped past University Avenue."

For a bed and breakfast to be successful, the guests must have a quiet place to sleep. This was a problem in the drug-infested neighborhood. In 1992, to help the Montalto's efforts, the city passed a new noise ordinance. As soon as a wild rumpus began, the police came and shut it down. From that point on, the people who were throwing the rowdy parties did not want the police there because there because of the illegal activities, so the revelries stopped.

Due to the 24/7 policing by the innkeepers and new residents, it's become one of the quietest neighborhoods in Gainesville, a big advantage when the Montaltos are doing the vacation rentals and they are not onsite.

After opening on May 3, 1991, the inn became a big success. Since then, guests of the inn, friends, and family of the Montalto's began – at Joe's urging – buying up other properties in the area, now operated as the Laurel Oak Inn, the Camellia Rose Inn, and the Sweetwater Inn, as well homes for private use.

Much has been done much to assist in helping to develop the historic bed and breakfast neighborhood. Gainesville Regional Utilities buried the street's utilities underground; the city made a major investment in the beautiful 32-acre Depot Park – an eight minute walk





the first 10 years we had to buy all the surrounding property,” said Joe. “Because if you try to reason with drugged-up college students at 1:00 in the morning, they’ll tell you things about your mother that you never knew.”

The city managers understood the dilemma. They could not make a living unless people are able to sleep. So after the noise ordinance was passed, the Montaltos were able to buy the surrounding cottages, one by one. It gave a whole new dimension to what they could offer guests.

The six surrounding buildings were built at various times and in different architectural styles to reflect the era, e.g. colonial, craftsman, and cracker cottage, some with private courtyards or intriguing secret gardens.

“Guests can choose their favorite time period,” said Cindy. “If they like Victorian, they usually stay in the main house or the carriage building. If they like craftsman architecture and furnishings we have those from that time period.”



Gainesville's Magnolia Plantation Bed & Breakfast Inn and Cottages offer a variety of accommodations and packages.

[Click here for more information and to book your stay.](#)

from Magnolia; the family of Dr. Robert Cade, the chemist who invented Gatorade, has invested \$40 million for the [Cade Museum for Creativity and Invention](#).

“Gainesville is a quaint college town. It is less than a 10-minute walk from Magnolia Plantation to reach the hip, eclectic downtown with 30 restaurants and frequent live outdoor performances, not to mention the nearby university campus and popular football games,” said Joe. “People who initially thought we were stupid now recognize that this is a great neighborhood to be in,” he added with a smug smile.

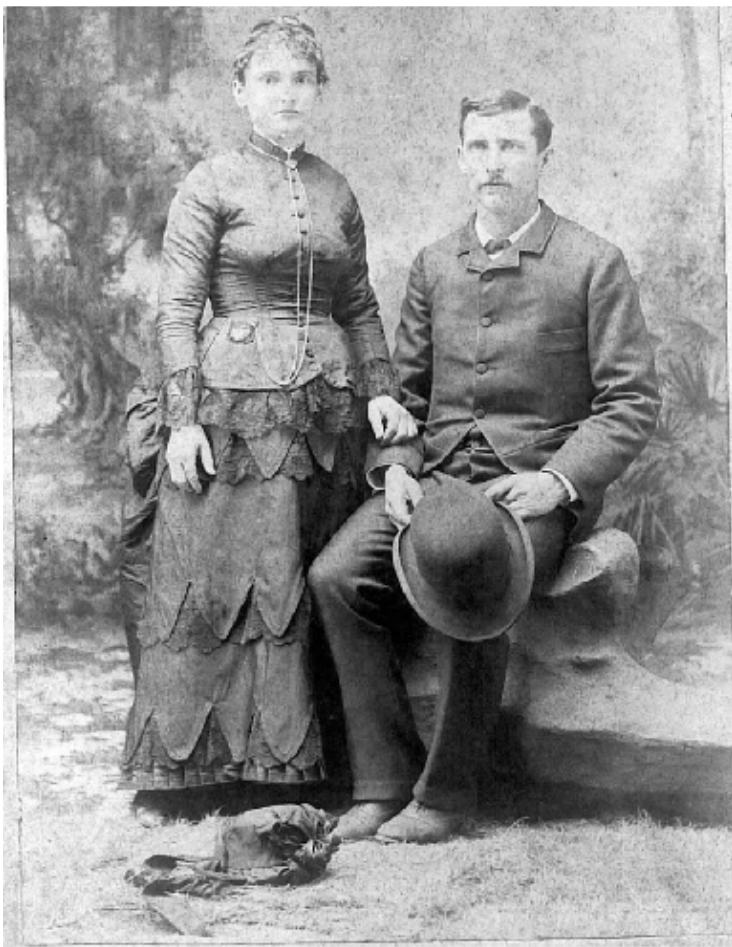
The Cottages

The Montaltos never planned to buy back the six cottages on the land that Mary Baird previously sold and convert them into vacation rentals. “For

Epilogue

“The national average for innkeepers is 3-6 years before they get out of it,” said Joe. “People who do B&B’s say ‘I want to live in an old Victorian house but I can’t figure out how to pay for it,’ or ‘I love entertaining,’ or ‘I love gardening,’ or ‘I love baking,’ but they never say ‘I love people.’” It seems this is the key to a successful career in the B&B industry. Two months off a year must help, too, and the Montaltos have been creative in using the vacation rental industry to give them much needed time off.

Magnolia Plantation has received many honors including: “**Best Bed and Breakfast in Florida**” by Florida Living Magazine and “**Most Romantic Bed and Breakfast in Florida**” by Most Romantic Escapes in Florida guidebook.



Emmett and Mary Baird raised seven children in the home, before Emmett died in 1925. Mary struggled financially, so to keep the estate together she began sub-dividing the property, and in 1927 she sold the first plot of land off. She continued to sell parcels through and beyond the depression, with the final of the six lots sold in 1958 when the last of the Bairds left the area.

The style of the house is Victorian Second Empire, characterized by the mansard roof and tall front tower. There are full three stories with a fourth level in the tower totaling 5400 square feet of living space. Cindy and Joe's restoration kept the home's original floor plan including the double parlors, five bedrooms, a dining room and butler's pantry. The colors on the house are historically-accurate colors, and the grounds were extensively landscaped, including the creation of a delightful pond with a bridge and gazebo.

The Legend

According to "[Suwannee Treasure Hunt](#)," June 2,



1945 in the *Saturday Evening Post*, in 1897 Emmett Baird acquired a treasure map of Fowler's Bluff from a dying elderly man he'd befriended. Emmett hired a few men to accompany him to the specified land on the banks of the Suwannee River, fifteen miles from where it flows out of dense Florida swamps into the Gulf of Mexico. After months of digging a deep hole laden with quicksand, Emmett slipped away from the site late one night. It is widely speculated that he found the treasure chest purportedly belonging to notorious pirate Jean Lafitte.

Baird was not a wealthy man, but after the "dig," he returned to Gainesville and established a bank, stock the largest hardware store in Central Florida, put up a big office building in Gainesville and purchase the splendid Victorian house. It is rumored that he hid the remains of the treasure somewhere in the house before he died.



Outdoor Fun Around Gainesville

From Patti Morrow

For three of the four seasons, Gainesville has the perfect climate for outdoor activities such as exploring state parks. But don't worry; when it gets hot, you can find relief at some of the natural springs nearby. There's a plethora of fun to be had outdoors in Alachua County, the Gainesville area is one of Florida's top tourist destinations.

Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park

Paynes Prairie became Florida's first state preserve in 1971 and is designated as a National Natural Landmark. The park covers a 21,000-acre savanna with eight trails. Visitors can climb a 50-foot-high observation tower for panoramic views of the preserve along with deer, buffalo, alligators, hawks, bison, deer, and other wildlife.

Ginnie Springs

Located on the Santa Fe River in High Springs Florida, Ginnie Springs is packed with things to do. The crystal-clear 72-degree water is chilly, but refreshing during the hot summer months. River tubing, swimming, snorkeling, and kayaking are a blast and there's a building to rent equipment and accessories. There are also areas for walks and picnics.

Juniper Springs

Juniper Springs is one of the oldest and best-known recreation areas on the East Coast. Nestled in the Ocala National Forest, it contains hundreds of tiny bubbling springs and enormous springs gushing out of crevices in the earth beneath a dense tree canopy. It's a fantastic place for swimming, and there are also picnic areas and trails.



Silver Springs

Silver Springs State Park in Ocala is a group of artesian springs that claims to be Florida's first tourist attraction. Visitors can't swim here, but kayaking and stand-up paddle boarding are allowed. The park is known for its glass bottom boat tours, where guests glide over the springs to view underwater life in its natural habitat. The park itself is pristine and contains a café and charming bakery/ice cream shop.

Micanopy

Population 600, Micanopy is Old Florida at its best. Laying claim as the oldest inland town in Florida, it has a historic town center dripping with Southern charm. This quaint town offers small independently owned antiques shops, outdoor cafes and bakeries, art galleries, and boutique shops. It's the perfect place for an afternoon al fresco lunch, and a stroll along the main street to hunt for unique antiques.

