

On top of a hill just off of Main Street in Hiawassee, hidden behind trees and shrubs, you can see the roof line of a house peeking out. This house is easily one of Hiawassee's best-kept secrets and has been for decades. However, the historic Berrong House has finally come into the spotlight again as the City of Hiawassee announced that they had reached an agreement with the owners to purchase and save the house, offering management of the property to the historical society.

The historic Berrong-Oakley house in Hiawassee, GA is one of the few remaining historic homes left in the city. The home was built by J. Miles Berrong for his wife, Maggie Corn Berrong. Construction of the home began in 1900 where the home was built on top of a small hill, overlooking the city of Hiawassee and the Hiawassee River Valley, which was flooded in 1942 by the TVA when they built the Chatuge Dam. In 1905, Miles & Maggie moved into the home, however, construction was not fully complete until 1906.

J. Miles was born in 1860 to Jesse & Susan Chastain Berrong. J. Miles was a local merchant and dealt in real estate as well as being part owner of the local Berrong- Johnson Copper & Pyrite Mine. He received his education from Tallulah Academy in Rabun, GA. In 1895, a biographical sketch of his life was included in 'Memoirs of Georgia' and described him as a man of strong and forceful personality... (He is) likely to secure any office of distinction...he is already a conspicuous figure in politics and makes his influence felt.' In 1893 he was appointed United States Commissioner at Hiawassee. He was also a member of the Masonic Order, serving as Worshipful Master and Secretary of Unicoy Lodge No. 259.

Miles first married Ms. Lillie Jane 'Kitty' McConnell (born 1862), sister of the Rev. Dr. FC McConnell and daughter of William Ross & Jane Christine McConnell. They lived on Berrong St., just past the hardware. Together, they had three children, Fielding Pope, Olive Christine, and May Belle. Sadly in 1895, Kitty Berrong passed away during childbirth to their fourth child. She is buried at Osborn Cemetery.

After Kitty passed, J. Miles donated their home to the Hiawassee Academy, and it was used at the girl's dormitory building. He moved back to Visage (Hightower) where he would meet Maggie Corn. Mrs. Maggie (born 1870) was the daughter of John Heatherly Jr. & Sarah Dillard Corn. After their marriage in 1899, J.M. would build a new house in Hiawassee, now known as the Berrong House. Together, J.M. & Maggie had three children, with only one living past birth, Susie Berrong.

Maggie was also a notable figure locally. She received her education from several schools across the state, including Hiawassee High & Jr. College, Cox College, & the University of Georgia. Dr. Rev. F.C. McConnell (namesake of Truett-McConnell College & state religious leader) said Mrs. Maggie was the first woman from Towns County to attend college and further her

education. Mrs. Maggie started her education career at the age of 17. Following WWI, she led the illiteracy campaign in Towns County. She is most remembered for her home demonstration work, which she took over in 1920, helping further the education, resources, and knowledge of the poor farm families of NE Georgia.

The house was built by local contractor Bart Lochaby. Mr. Lochaby has a noted style on the houses he built, having been inspired by the homes he saw during his travels. His homes always included gables, gingerbread trim, and horseshoes. He built most, if not all, of the historic homes that once stood in downtown Hiawassee. However, due to a lack of local historic preservation, the Berrong-Oakley house is the last home still standing that he built the includes its historical elements - both interior and exterior. The plans for the home were purchased from Radford Ideal Homes and is plan #73. The original blueprints ordered by Lochaby were still in family possession and have been donated to us to help guide our preservation efforts. According to family history, the cost of construction for the home was around \$400. Local men in the area set up a mobile saw mill in what is now the back yard and harvested trees from the surrounding areas to build the house. The siding, for example, was hand cut out of old growth, heart poplar wood, which has proven beneficial in the home's testament to withstand time. The local men who cut and milled the wood for the house were paid \$13 - this was for their entire labor of work.

The house was also ahead of its time. At the time it was built, the plans called for 1 ½ bathrooms to be installed. Miles & Maggie added these features, however, it would be several more years before the indoor plumbing was used. Miles was part of a local group of men who helped start the city's first 'water department'. A reservoir was built on Whiskey Mountain, which overlooks the city, and the natural springs on the mountains were used to fill it up. From there, the water was fed via gravity through pipes to those in town who could afford the luxury of indoor plumbing.

In addition to having indoor plumbing, the house also had 2 common sources of lights that were only available to the elite of the area. First, carbide lights were installed in the house. These were provided fuel by a gas tank that was located in the ground behind the house. Many of the original gas lines in the house still exist. Then, a mill was built over the Hiawassee River just below town. Besides providing the usual grounding of corn & wheat, it also provided the first electricity for the city, long before the TVA came in to build Chatuge dam. In fact, based on a photo of the house from the 1920's, electricity had already been installed. The cost to upgrade the house to electric at the time of installation was \$200 - including wiring and fixtures.

Following J. Miles' death in 1939, Mrs. Maggie would split her time between her home in Hiawassee and her daughter's home, Susie Oakley, in Washington D.C. After Mrs. Maggie's

death in 1961, the home was then used by the Oakley family. Tom Oakley Jr. & his family, Cathy, Jenni, & Laura, lived in the house during the 1970's-80's. Then, Tom Sr. and Susie moved into the house. Following their passing, the house was left to their daughter, Mary Sue Oakley Nelson who used the home as a vacation residence. Following her passing, the house slipped into abandonment.

For the past decade, many people have tried to purchase the historic home, whether for private residence, a business, etc. The City of Hiawassee was able to complete this deal with Nelson Family in the early spring of 2023, with the understanding and agreement the Towns County Historical Society would have first rights to manage the restoration project, as well as the property after restorations are completed, to ensure the house is kept as a keepsake for community.