

Restoration & Reuse Plan

Berrong-Oakley House Hiawassee, GA



Towns County Historical Society
Keeping Towns County History Alive

With consultation from: the City of Hiawassee Government, Hiawassee Downtown Development, Hiawassee Economic Development, Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce, Georgia Department of Community Affairs, Georgia Trust for Historic Places, US Department of the Interior, Simo Community Designs.

Summary

The Towns County Historical Society seeks support for the continued restoration and adaptive reuse of the historic Berrong-Oakley House, a 1905 Victorian Queen Anne home located in Hiawassee, Georgia. As the last remaining example of Victorian residential architecture in the county and one of the most recognizable historic landmarks in Towns County, the Berrong-Oakley House represents an important piece of the community's architectural, cultural, and social history. The Society is leading a phased restoration of the house to preserve its historic character while transforming it into a functional public space that serves the community. Once restored, the Berrong-Oakley House will operate as a community event center and cultural heritage resource, providing space for exhibits, school programs, educational activities, lectures, meetings, genealogical and local history programming, and small community gatherings. It will also be available for appropriate rentals and events, helping generate revenue for long-term sustainability while supporting heritage tourism and local economic activity. This project is not simply about saving an old building. It is about preserving a visible connection to the past, reducing environmental waste through the reuse of a historic structure, expanding educational opportunities for youth and adults, and creating a welcoming place where community and heritage meet.

Organization Background

The Towns County Historical Society is dedicated to preserving, protecting, and promoting the history, culture, and heritage of Towns County, Georgia, and the surrounding areas. Through museums, exhibits, educational programs, preservation initiatives, publications, and public events, the Society works to ensure that local history remains accessible and meaningful for both residents and visitors.

The Society has demonstrated a strong commitment to preservation through projects such as the restoration and operation of the Old Rock Jail Museum, preservation of the Presley Post Office, cemetery restoration efforts, archival preservation, oral history work, and the digitization of historic records. The restoration of the Berrong-Oakley House is one of the Society's most significant preservation efforts to date and reflects its long-term commitment to safeguarding local historic resources.

Statement of Need

Historic buildings are irreplaceable community assets. Once lost, they cannot be authentically recreated. The Berrong-Oakley House is a rare surviving landmark in Hiawassee and a direct link to the city's early twentieth-century development. Its preservation is vital not only because of its age and architecture, but because it tells the story of the families, craftsmanship, and community patterns that shaped Towns County.

Without continued investment, the house remains vulnerable to deterioration from age, weather, and deferred repairs from past decades. Significant restoration work has already taken place, but additional funds are needed to address ongoing structural and water-management concerns, install climate control, complete interior rehabilitation, and prepare the building for regular public use.

The need for this project extends beyond historic preservation. Rural communities need spaces that support education, cultural engagement, and community gathering. Once completed, the Berrong-Oakley House will help fill that need by serving as a flexible public space where history can be interpreted, local stories can be shared, and future generations can build stronger connections to place.

Historical Significance

Constructed in 1905, the Berrong-Oakley House is a significant example of Victorian Queen Anne architecture in North Georgia. It stands as the last remaining Victorian residence of its kind in Towns County and is one of the few surviving structures that reflect the design and craftsmanship of that era.

The house is associated with prominent local families and offers a tangible representation of early-twentieth-century domestic life. Its architectural features, including original porch details, historic windows, woodwork, and overall form, make it especially valuable as a preservation project. The property is also important for community identity, as it occupies a visible location and has become a symbol of local pride and preservation efforts.

The National Register process for the house has been initiated, further underscoring its significance and the need to preserve it according to sound historic preservation standards.

Project Vision

The vision for the Berrong-Oakley House is to create a place where community and heritage meet. The restored house will function as:

- A cultural heritage center interpreting the history of Hiawassee and Towns County
- A venue for educational programs, school visits, workshops, and youth activities
- A meeting and event space for community gatherings and small rentals
- A site for exhibits, lectures, storytelling, and local history research activities
- A catalyst for downtown heritage tourism and economic development

This vision combines historic preservation with practical public use. Rather than preserving the building as a static object, the Society is restoring it to become an active community resource.

Project Goals

The major goals of the project are:

1. Preserve a significant historic landmark through careful restoration and rehabilitation that respects its original character and materials.
2. Stabilize and protect the structure by addressing drainage, foundation, and climate-control needs that threaten the building's long-term condition.
3. Adapt the house for public use as a community cultural and educational center.
4. Expand educational opportunities for youth, families, researchers, and the general public through place-based learning.
5. Promote environmental stewardship by preserving and reusing an existing historic structure rather than replacing it with new construction.
6. Support community development and heritage tourism by activating a landmark property that will attract visitors and provide economic benefit to local businesses.
7. Strengthen community pride and engagement by involving volunteers, donors, civic leaders, and local residents in preserving a shared historic resource.

Educational Impact

The Berrong-Oakley House will provide significant educational value for the community. As a restored historic site, it will offer a hands-on learning environment where students and visitors can connect with local history in a direct and meaningful way.

Planned educational uses include:

- School tours tied to local and regional history
- Youth programs focused on architecture, preservation, community heritage, and traditional lifeways
- Public workshops, lectures, and interpretive programs
- Opportunities for genealogy and local history research
- Exhibits highlighting families, culture, and development
- Intergenerational learning experiences that connect older residents' stories with younger audiences

For youth especially, the house will provide a place-based learning experience that helps them better understand their community, their roots, and the value of preserving shared cultural resources.

Community Impact

The Berrong-Oakley House will become a shared space where residents and visitors can gather, learn, and engage with one another. In a rural community, spaces that serve both cultural and civic purposes are especially valuable. The house will create opportunities for community meetings, heritage events, educational programming, and celebrations in a setting that reflects the character and history of the area.

By creating a visible, active use for this historic property, the project will:

- Strengthen community identity and pride
- Encourage volunteerism and civic participation
- Provide a venue for nonprofit, educational, and cultural use
- Increase access to local history and preservation programming
- Support partnerships with schools, civic groups, and local organizations

The project also demonstrates that preservation can be an active investment in community life rather than a purely nostalgic effort.

Environmental Impact

Preserving and reusing the Berrong-Oakley House is also an environmentally responsible choice. Demolition and new construction generate significant waste and consume new materials and energy. By restoring this existing structure, the project conserves embodied energy, reduces landfill waste, and makes productive use of materials already in place.

Environmental benefits of the project include:

- Reducing construction and demolition waste
- Extending the life of an existing building rather than replacing it
- Conserving historic materials and craftsmanship
- Encouraging sustainable community development through adaptive reuse
- Demonstrating that old buildings can be rehabilitated for modern use rather than discarded

This project shows that historic preservation and environmental stewardship can work together. Saving the house preserves both cultural resources and material resources.

Economic Impact

Historic preservation is also an economic development strategy. The Berrong-Oakley House will contribute to heritage tourism by adding another meaningful destination in Hiawassee and Towns County. Visitors interested in local history, architecture, and Appalachian culture are more likely to stay longer, attend events, and spend money in local businesses when communities invest in authentic cultural assets.

The restored house is expected to support the local economy by:

- Increasing visitation to downtown Hiawassee
- Complementing other local attractions and historic sites
- Providing a venue for events that bring people into the community
- Supporting nearby restaurants, lodging, caterers, and shops
- Strengthening the cultural identity that makes the community attractive to residents and tourists alike

The project will help position the Berrong-Oakley House as both a preservation success and a contributor to community vitality.

Community Support

This project has already generated strong local support. Volunteers, board members, community partners, and donors have contributed substantial time, materials, services, and advocacy to move the restoration forward. Volunteer support from community groups has been especially important, demonstrating that the house is not only historically important but locally valued.

The project has benefited from:

- Local volunteer labor
- Donations and grassroots fundraising
- Partnerships with civic and community organizations
- Public engagement efforts, including tours, updates, and fundraising campaigns
- Collaboration with the City of Hiawassee, which owns the property and has entrusted the Society with restoration and management responsibilities

This support reflects widespread community belief in the project's value and long-term potential.

Project Timeline

While the exact timing of future work depends on funding, the restoration is envisioned as progressing in the following sequence:

Short-Term

- Complete drainage and foundation protection improvements
- Install gutters and stormwater controls
- Continue exterior finish work and window restoration

Mid-Term

- Install HVAC system
- Stabilize interior climate conditions
- Begin plaster repair, painting, and floor restoration

Long-Term

- Complete interior rehabilitation
- Install exhibits and furnishings
- Open the house for expanded public programming, tours, rentals, and educational use

Post Restoration Sustainability Plan

Once the Berrong-Oakley House is fully restored and operational as a community event center and cultural and heritage center, the Towns County Historical Society will implement a diversified funding strategy to ensure the facility's long-term sustainability. This plan will combine earned income, community contributions, and municipal support, creating a reliable revenue stream that covers ongoing operating costs while allowing for continued programming and preservation.

1. Facility Rental Revenue

The restored Berrong-Oakley House will be available for rental as a venue for private events, including meetings, workshops, weddings, receptions, small concerts, and cultural programs. Rental fees will be structured with tiered pricing to accommodate both private clients and nonprofit groups, ensuring accessibility while generating consistent income.

- Estimated Use: 3-4 rentals per month during peak months; 1-2 rentals per month in off-season.
- Projected Annual Revenue: \$8,000+ based on market rates for comparable venues in the region.
- Rentals will include access to the main meeting/event space, kitchen facilities, restrooms, and exterior grounds, with optional add-ons for setup, cleaning, and equipment use.

2. Donations & Membership Contributions

The Historical Society will maintain an active donor engagement program, encouraging one-time and recurring contributions from individuals, businesses, and philanthropic organizations.

- A "Friends of the Berrong-Oakley House" membership program will offer benefits including discounted event tickets, early booking access for rentals, and recognition on a donor wall.
- Special fundraising events, such as heritage festivals, concerts, and historical tours, will not only raise revenue but also strengthen the community's connection to the site.
- Projected Annual Revenue: \$5,000+ from combined individual donations, membership fees, and special fundraising events.

3. City Contributions for Utilities & Core Operational Costs

As part of the management agreement with the City of Hiawassee, the municipality will contribute toward essential operating expenses such as electricity, water, and internet service. This partnership ensures that core utility costs do not strain the Historical Society's operating budget, allowing more funds to be dedicated to programming, maintenance, and preservation.

- City contributions will be budgeted annually, with an agreed cap to maintain predictable expense management.

Financial Sustainability Measures

- Annual budgets will be reviewed quarterly to ensure revenues meet or exceed projected expenses.
- A maintenance reserve fund will be established, funded by a percentage of rental and event income, to address future repair needs without emergency fundraising.
- Operating policies will ensure balanced use between revenue-generating rentals and free or low-cost community programming to maintain the house's mission as a public resource.



Rendering of a public meeting inside the house



Rendering of a community gathering in the garden park



Rendering of a community gathering inside the house



Rendering of a private event inside the house

Current State of Structure



Main Hall



Front Parlor



Formal Dining Room

Current State of Structure

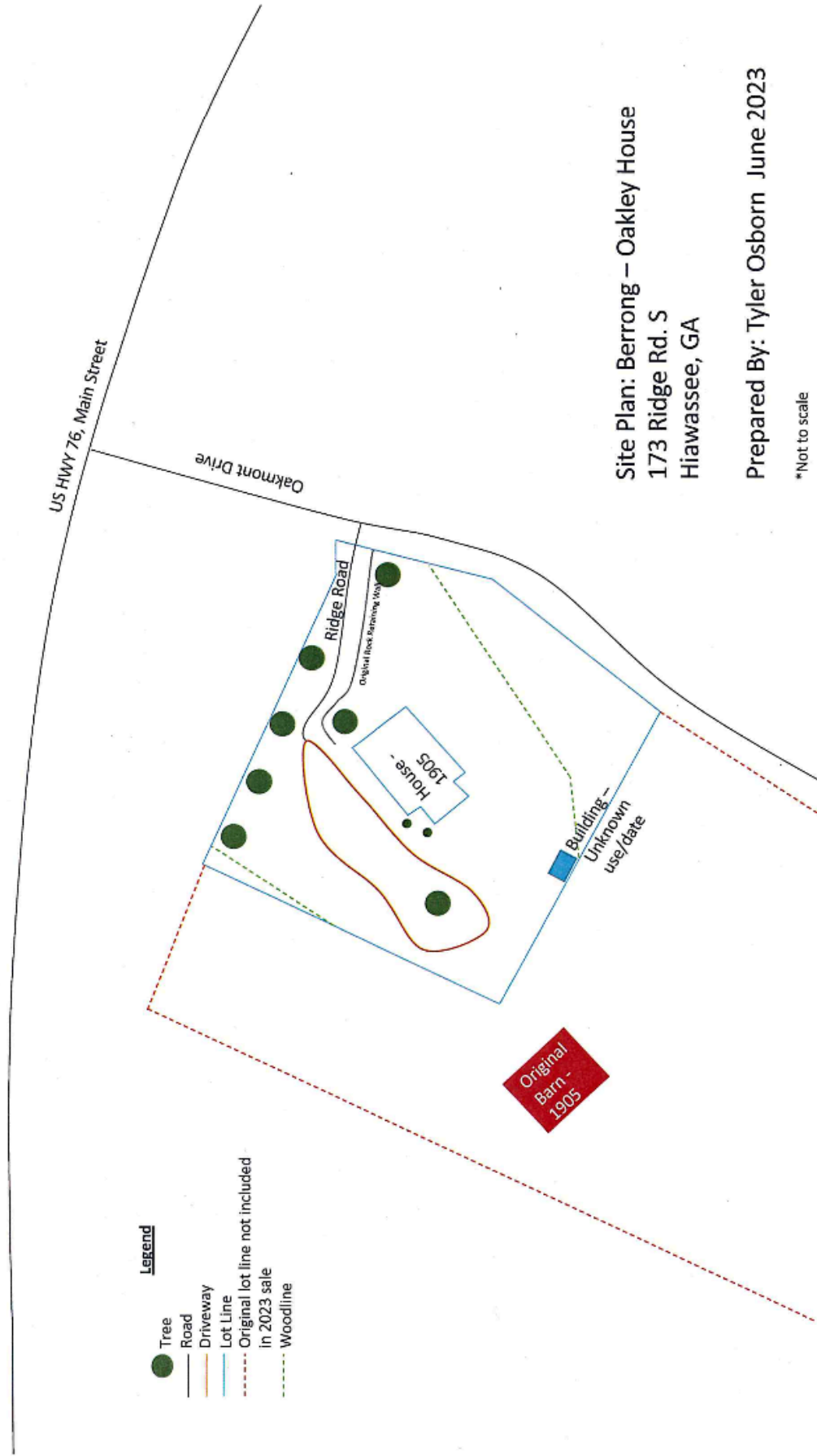


Front Exterior



Side Exterior

Site Plan



Legend

- Tree
- Road
- Driveway
- Lot Line
- Original lot line not included in 2023 sale
- Woodline

Site Plan: Berrong – Oakley House
173 Ridge Rd. S
Hiawassee, GA

Prepared By: Tyler Osborn June 2023

*Not to scale

Site Plan

