

Long-ago political boss's Daytona home now a zombie house



James Newman and other Daytona Beach historical preservationists worry that the onetime home of Depression-era Mayor Edward Armstrong could fall into disrepair now that it's unoccupied and its ownership is under dispute. - News-Journal/NIGEL COOK

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Nobody ran the city like Edward H. Armstrong.

DAYTONA BEACH -- Nobody ran the city like Edward H. Armstrong. He was “like a Daytona version of Mayor (Richard J.) Daley in Chicago,” says history professor Leonard Lempel of Daytona State College.

And when Armstrong was still building his wholesale grocery business, eight years before he became mayor in 1928, he built an imposing home at 217 Arlington Ave., just around the corner from what was then sleepy, oak-lined North Ridgewood Avenue.

Now that home is what's sometimes called a zombie house, a property in pre-foreclosure with no

clear owner and nobody living inside. Neighbors and historical preservationists are concerned. The three-story, wood-frame house has a coquina porch and chimney (there have been unsubstantiated whispers that the rock had been diverted from the Bandshell's construction in the 1930s) and a tile-roofed coach house built in 1937.

Virginia creepers grow up the house's wall and weeds and wildflowers dominate the yard.

Ligustrums grow out above the property's cast-iron fence.

In front of the house is an imposing, several-hundred-years-old live oak, taller than the house, with limbs thick as telephone poles resting on its roof.

"That's the Armstrong Oak. It's a legacy tree," said James Newman, who lives around the corner on Mulberry Street in a 1936 stucco house.

Newman, who chairs the Daytona Beach's Beautification/Tree Advisory Board, says he and other neighbors keep an eye on the house, occasionally mowing the lawn and cutting back weeds.

"Barbara always said the tree was here before the house and the tree will be there after the house," Newman said.

He was referring to Barbara Holley, the owner of Classic Fabrics, a Daytona Beach fabric store, who bought the house with her husband, Robert Mark Holley, in 1991 for \$75,000, according to Property Appraiser's Office records.

Neighbors say she worked tirelessly fixing the house up and loved the oak-shaded lot and giant tree.

But then there was a bankruptcy in 2010, a divorce in 2011, and in 2012, Holley, by then using a wheelchair to get around and suffering from multiple sclerosis, was found dead of a gunshot wound.

Bank of America filed a pre-foreclosure notice in 2013 but has not taken further action in circuit court, except to establish Holley's death, according to court records.

"It's a great house in spite of its age and the fact that nobody's living there," Newman said. "It's still restorable."

He and other neighbors are concerned that with no clear owner and in legal limbo, the deserted house could decay, start falling apart and create more blight in one of the city's older neighborhoods.

He argues that the home's association with Armstrong make it an important local landmark.

Nancy Long, president of Heritage Preservation Trust, the group that bought and restored Lilian Place, the oldest home on the Daytona Beach Peninsula, agreed. "It really is a significant historical site because of its connection with Mayor Armstrong," she said. "It definitely should be preserved."

Her group had looked into finding someone to purchase the house but was discouraged because of the lot's murky legal status.

"We'd love to help," she said.

Armstrong is best remembered for clashing with Florida Gov. David Sholtz, a political foe in Daytona Beach before his election as governor. A clash that came to head New Year's Day 1937 when armed police and city employees in City Hall faced off against armed National Guard Troops surrounding the building. Meanwhile, officials busily destroyed documents.

"CITY HALL AN ARMED FORTRESS ... COPPERS HOLD RIOT GUNS AT WINDOWS," was the headline in The News-Journal, a strongly anti-Armstrong publication.

The mayor had suspected the governor would try to remove him so he had turned the office over to his wife, Irene, who acted as mayor on his behalf.

The governor called out the troops to forcibly remove her, but because this happened in the last days of Sholtz's term, Armstrong believed he could run out the clock and see what the new governor would do.

It worked. The standoff ended after five days as the new governor took office, reassessed the situation and decided he had no interest in interceding in Daytona Beach politics.

"The guy is a character," said Lempel, who has written scholarly articles on Armstrong and the City Hall standoff. "He comes across as a typical Northern big city boss only transplanted into Daytona, into the South.

"The politics was a sewer in this place and he was at the center of it. But he did some good things," Lempel quickly added. "Getting the New Deal money that built the Boardwalk and Bandshell ... giving blacks a say in government."

Armstrong died one year after the confrontation, just before starting his fifth term. His wife remained at the Arlington Avenue house until her death in 1946.

"Whether or not he was the scoundrel he's made out to be, he really did a lot for the city," agreed Newman.

"I would love to see this made into a museum, but I'd like for someone just to buy it and give it the care it needs."

And not just because of Armstrong. "It would serve Barbara's memory well if the house could be fixed up," he said.

"Even though she was in a wheelchair, she never gave up on working on the house. Her ghost, if it's around, would be very pleased with it being saved."



Former Daytona Mayor Edward Armstrong built his Arlington Avenue home in 1920. Now unoccupied and in pre-foreclosure, the property is a so-called zombie house.