

# Why I live in VICTORIAN VILLAGE

By Scott Blake

Tucked between Memphis' bustling downtown and Midtown is the Victorian Village neighborhood named for the stately Victorian mansions that line Adams Avenue and were originally home to cotton barons and high society of a bygone Memphis era.

Victorian Village, or as the natives call it, VV, has been my home for the past 23 years. In 1998 I had heard a rumor that my current home, Laurelhill, was coming on the market. The home is an 1867 Italianate-

style townhouse with soaring ceilings and gracious rooms. I contacted the owner who then just gave me the key saying, "Keep it for a week and come and go as often as you like."

I felt like I was back in New Orleans with the massive crystal chandeliers and walled courtyard. It even had a rooftop swimming pool accessed through a hidden bookcase door. Of course I bought it and the rest is history.

Victorian Village was a different place back then.



Scott Blake at home at Laurelhill. Photo ©2017 Keegan Ward.

My friends thought I had lost my mind. Poplar Avenue was lined with bail bond and pawn shops. You would not venture out after dark. With a neighborhood population of 3500 folks, only three of us were resident homeowners.

My friend Eldridge Wright, who is now in his nineties, still lives on Adams Avenue. He and a handful of tenacious ladies from the Association for the Preservation for Tennessee Antiquities were the ones that saved the grand Victorian mansions from the wrecking ball during urban renewal in the late 1960's.

There are 21 places here listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and they are what gives VV it's unique sense of place. We are the home of St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral, which was the epicenter of the 1878 Yellow Fever Epidemic

and known worldwide as the home of the Martyrs of Memphis - Constance and Her Companions.

Collins Chapel CME Church was the first black congregation in Memphis founded as a mission by the First Methodist Church downtown. The Mallory Neely House and Woodruff Fontaine house are both house museums, and the newly renovated James Lee House is now an award winning Bed and Breakfast that was recently recognized for having the top Presidential Suite in Memphis. And we certainly cannot forget the Mollie Fontaine Lounge and the spirits that roam there - or are consumed therein. This is my neighborhood bar. I tell people I can walk over and crawl back.

In 2006 a group of residents and concerned businesses



Mollie Fontaine Lounge, exterior. Photo ©2017 Monty Shane.



Laurelhill, built in 1867, is now home to Blake, who bought the house in 1998 when it needed renovation. Photo ©2017 Philip Murphy.

started Victorian Village Inc., a community development corporation and I serve as the Executive Director. VVI earned a non-profit 501-c(3) status with a goal to create a vibrant, clean and prosperous neighborhood that treasures its storied past. The goal was to foster the idea of people moving back into this community who would walk or bike to work.

Ten years later, VV is experiencing an incredible renaissance. This is the result of intentionally active citizens leading the new urbanism movement. We have seen the resident homeowner population rise by 700 percent.

The City has announced that Jefferson Avenue will become the major bike and pedestrian parkway that connects the river parks to Cleveland Street and the Greenline, and the Parks Division is planning a million dollar renovation to Morris Park. The University of Tennessee has issued a request for proposal to build a major mixed-use development that would increase our residential apartment count by at least

250 units and serve the medical student and young professional community. Two new businesses opened this year on Jefferson, the Downtown Animal Hospital and soon, the Sunrise Memphis restaurant.

The creation of the Memphis Medical District Collaborative, funded by our medical institutional partners and the Hyde Foundation has accelerated this new growth to an amazing speed.

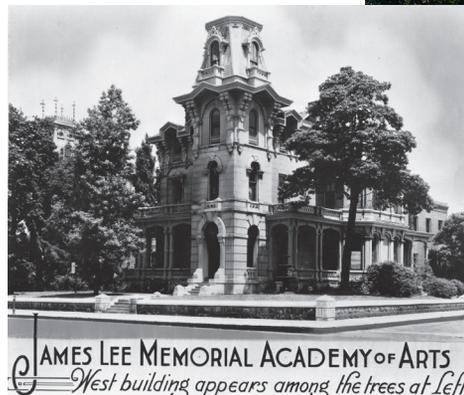
These days, if I stock up on groceries, I don't even start my car for four days at a time. My favorite time of day is cocktail hour at sunset on

the rooftop with a panoramic view of downtown. I try to walk the neighborhood every day and really enjoy talking to my neighbors. Life is good, and I think I'll get a dog next.

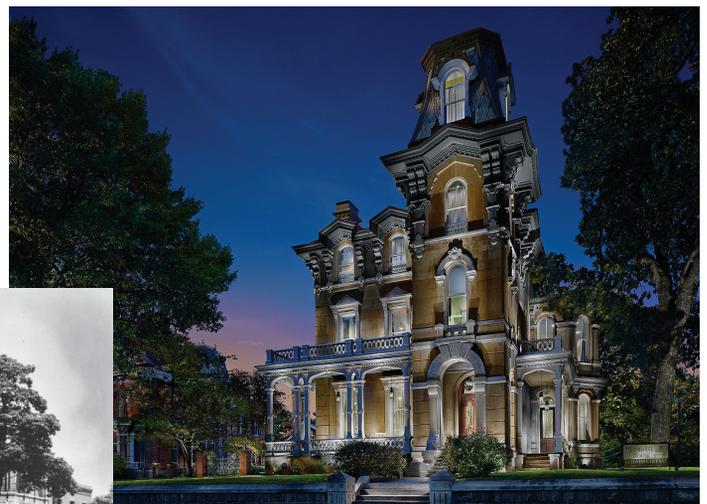
VV is proving that preservation and innovation energize one another and that

a fully diverse community of people of all cultures and incomes enriches us all.

**For more information on heritage tourism and community in our neighborhood, visit [victorianvillageinc.org](http://victorianvillageinc.org) and [originalmemphis.org](http://originalmemphis.org)**



**JAMES LEE MEMORIAL ACADEMY OF ARTS**  
*West building appears among the trees at left*



**Left: The James Lee house was built in 1872. In 1925 it became home to the Memphis Academy of Arts. After the academy moved to Overton Park in 1959, the home fell into disrepair, but has been meticulously restored. Above: It's now the James Lee House, a stunning bed and breakfast. Photo ©2017 Jeffrey Jacobs.**