

## MOTE-MORRIS HOUSE PRESERVATION PROJECT

The Mote-Morris House survives as one of the few original residential dwellings still remaining in Leesburg. It is also the only house currently listed in the National Register of Historic Places. This project seeks to preserve a portion of our Florida heritage, as well as the identity of our rapidly changing community.

### HISTORY

The Mote-Morris House was constructed by E. H. Mote at an approximate cost of \$9,000 shortly after the City of Leesburg was platted. Mote came to Florida from Washington, D.C. in 1881. The house was constructed in 1892 and early photographs indicate that minimal changes to the structure have been made since that time.

Mote was one of the early promoters and developers of Leesburg. He started in a livery business which he sold in 1885. Mote then constructed the Lakeview Hotel which he operated for several years. In an effort to attract more business to the City, he constructed the Mote Block. When built, this was the largest business block in the City and is still a part of the Leesburg commercial district today. Mote also dealt extensively in the citrus business and developed much of the grove property east of Leesburg. He served eight terms as City Mayor and one term in the Florida House of Representatives.

The house was later purchased by the Morris family, which occupied the home for approximately seventy years.

### PROJECT

This project essentially began on August 3, 1988, when the Mote-Morris House was purchased by the Morrison United Methodist Church. Their primary objective was to provide additional parking and expand their education and activity facilities to meet the future growth of the congregation. In an effort to save the house from being dismantled, the church offered to give the house to anyone willing to pay for the relocation expenses. Several private investors explored those possibilities, but found it to be economically unfeasible.

The City of Leesburg became involved with this project following public concern over the pending demolition. At the suggestion of the Leesburg City Commission, the Mote-Morris House Preservation Steering Committee was formed. This committee, comprised of various community leaders, formulated an overall plan to save the house. This plan included the selection of a relocation site, suggested uses for the house following the restoration, and an outline of revenue sources to finance the project.

The Leesburg City Commission ultimately agreed to pay for the relocation expenses if the community could raise the funds to purchase a relocation site within a six-month period. This arrangement was devised as a means to gauge the community's support for the project. The \$95,000 needed for the relocation site was subsequently collected in an overwhelming display of support and involvement by the residents of Leesburg.

### CURRENT STATUS

The house was relocated to the new site in September 1990. Prior to the relocation, approval was received from the National Park Service to retain the house on the National Register of Historic Places during and after the relocation. This distinction is usually lost following the relocation of property listed on the National Register.

The City of Leesburg has received a \$25,000, 50/50 matching grant from the Bureau of Historic Preservation. These funds are currently being used for architectural services to develop plans and specifications for the restoration of the house. Restoration activities are being guided by a Technical Committee appointed by the Leesburg City Commission.

In June 1990, a "Special Category" grant application was submitted to request funds for the exterior restoration. Following the review by the Historic Preservation Council, our application ranked 9th out of 89 projects in the state. Based on this priority rating, \$160,000 will be proposed in the 1991-92 State Department budget for the Mote-Morris House.

If these funds are approved by the legislature, the exterior restoration will begin in the fall of 1991. The final project phase will begin the following year if, once again, grant funds are approved for the project.

Following the restoration, the Mote-Morris House will be used as a multi-purpose community center. Planned activities include: small meetings and receptions; classes sponsored by the Lake-Sumter Community College and the Lake County School Board; tours for school children and adults; art exhibits and displays of historic memorabilia. The remaining site will be developed into a park-type setting; envisioned as the host to weddings and group activities.

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The Mote-Morris House possess significant historical and architectural qualities. As a result of unprecedented community support, the house has been retained to symbolize the establishment of Leesburg. The restoration will complete the efforts to preserve an important landmark for the State of Florida, while providing a functional facility for the residents of Leesburg.

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Update: The Mote-Morris House was reopened on June 1, 2021.