



Can you tell me a little about the history of the St. Francis Inn:

The building was originally a home to Sergeant Gaspar Garcia, a Spanish soldier who was garrisoned in the Fort in 1791. It dates from the Second Spanish Colonial Period and its architecture reflects the residents' early concern for their own protection and safety. The building stands directly on the street with the main entrance through a courtyard and gate. In 1838 it became the property of Colonel Thomas Henry Dummett of Barbados, an officer in the British marines and a sugar plantation owner. Escaping an insurrection in Barbados, Colonel Dummett and his family arrived in St. Augustine and moved into the home. After his death in 1845, his daughter converted the house into a lodging establishment so she would have a means of supporting herself. In 1888, John Wilson, a prominent philanthropist purchased and renovated the inn, adding the mansard roof and a third floor. This is the structure as it now stands.

What made you and Margaret decide to open a bed & breakfast in St. Augustine?

We met in St. Augustine in the early 1970's when we both relocated here to work at the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind. We fell in love with the city and with each other. However, a job opportunity took us to Philadelphia several years later where I became the Headmaster of the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf. We didn't regret the move but it became very clear to us that the place we really wanted to live was here. We had already decided that our "retirement plan" would be to run a B & B; This was due in large part to our personal travel experiences and love of the unique lodgings offered by a variety of inns, guest houses and B & B's. So, buying the inn felt like an exciting pathway to both a career change and to returning to St. Augustine.

How did your travels inspire the St. Francis Inn?

As I mentioned, we travel extensively and love to try out different types of lodging...Although large resorts and hotels can be great fun, we enjoy the personal care and unique offerings of small independent establishments. Each B & B offers a glimpse of the owners, their unique take on hospitality. Each is different from the last and all offer something special to their guests...perhaps a specific theme, a regional activity, a menu item, etc that can't be found in other places. There is a personal touch that identifies each owner and connects them with each guest.

What is it like to run a business out of a building from 1790's?

It's a constant caretaking project! Anyone who owns their own home understands that the continuous upkeep of the building is necessary to keep it sturdy. But a building like ours is no different! Old pipes, plumbing, wooden floors, stairs and bannisters, fireplaces, heating, cooling in a two-hundred-year-old plaster and coquina building is a challenge! For example, our building has no right angles like we routinely find in all homes today so even laying carpet is not routine. Every window in the building (and there are many!) is a different size so replacing glass, sashes, and sills must be done by a craftsman one at a time.

Have you ever encountered anything interesting during renovation?

There have been a number of items that were of interest to us: the horse hair that was used as building insulation, for example. Probably the most unique find was an old sign "The Graham House" which was the name of the inn during the 1920's. The sign was completely intact with the paint clear and undamaged but with a small hole in the middle which was used as a peep hole so the owners could watch what was happening in another room.

How do you balance maintaining the historic charm with providing modern amenities for guests?

Well, the City requirements of our zoned Historic District assure that the exterior of the inn remains true to its original presentation. Consequently, the building maintains its Spanish Colonial appearance even on a street full of craft homes and Victorian buildings. We try to provide amenities around the building that complement it and still encourages comfort and a welcoming atmosphere.

We cultivate a garden, provide a swimming pool, and encourage sitting in the rocking chairs or porch swings. Inside, it is more difficult to maintain that balance. Everyone wants big televisions, hot tubs, internet and modern bathrooms and we are committed to make that all available for our guests while maintaining the integrity of the building. This means we have to "hide" some items so they are not immediately visible or make them invisible when they are not in use. An example of this is the stereo system which provides music to the inn...guests cannot see the system itself although they enjoy the music daily.

Do you have any fun guest stories or ever have guest who come from interesting places?

Yes, that is probably the most engaging part of owning an inn...the guests. We host folks from all over the world and many of them become part of our inn family and return year after year. There have been musicians who share their talent on our old piano, writers who share their stories or poems with their fellow travelers and a famous baseball player for the Boston Red Sox stayed with us when a family member was married at the Inn. Several years ago, James Michener's secretary stayed at the Inn while planning a trip to St. Augustine for the famous author. If Mr. Michener returned to St. Augustine, he didn't stay with us!

I saw a story on the news about St Francis Inn and its affiliation with local ghost stories. Do you have any ghost stories from your building?

The answer is a definite YES! Her name is Lily and she was well known even before we bought the inn. If you are really interested in her full story, you can find her in almost any book written about ghosts and spirits in St. Augustine and more broadly, Florida. Guests and staff members have all had encounters with Lily and most report her behavior to be that of a "playful poltergeist" ...She likes to move small things about, start the shower, turn the lights off and on. In the 37 years we have owned St. Francis, we have never had any report of her causing any damage or exhibiting any frightening behavior.

How has the community supported you as a business owner?

A great deal of our support has come from others who own small businesses involved with the tourism industry in town. And the Visitors and Convention Bureau has also been very supportive. We find that when we are involved with the community and invest in the community, it reciprocates This is a wonderful place to own a small business in this industry which is significant to the quality of life for all local residents.

What is your leadership philosophy in leading a successful business?

My philosophy is to respect and serve our customers, and to hire, train, respect and fairly compensate high quality team members who are the face of the business. If the team is happy (enjoy their job), then our guests are happy.