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Rebuilding a real thing Landmark gets new life

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In the place where the "pause that refreshes" began in Tallahassee, Dan Winchester wants to refresh local history.

The former Leon County commissioner (1998-2006) and construction-company owner has a contract to redevelop Tallahassee's original Coca-Cola bottling plant.

Right now, the brick building at All Saints and St. Michael streets is covered with graffiti, grime and vines. But Winchester envisions it as the centerpiece of a three-building complex of living and working spaces - replete with such historical touches as the original Coca-Cola logo over the door and a re-creation of the former nearby clock tower.

"We're trying to preserve Tallahassee's rich history while creating its future," Winchester said. "We're trying to keep where we've been so when we get where we're going, we'll know where we've been."

Clearly, Winchester has not lost his politician's gift for bouncy sound bites. But there's much to cheer if his plans come to fruition.

The All Saints neighborhood occupies a swath of downtown between Gaines Street and the railroad tracks. For the first half of the 20th century, it was a thriving industrial district because of its proximity to the railroad. Since then, it's been a fading if quaint district of old homes and small businesses.

Recently, developers have given All Saints a face-lift with upscale condos and "live-work" units, the trendy concept that allows a business owner to live and work in the same building.

Rejuvenation of All Saints is considered an important part of the rebirth of the Gaines Street corridor. Winchester wants to be a part of that rebirth - and do it in a historical context at the Coca-Cola building.

The site was the birthplace of Coke in Tallahassee. In 1904, Lewis Lively and H.O. Hill began bottling the soft drink at their Middle Florida Ice company on St. Michael Street. The Atlanta-

based Coca-Cola Co. had only recently started franchising independent bottlers, and soon every little town had a plant.

In 1940, the two partners built a separate bottling plant next door. During World War II, they amicably ended their partnership, with Lively taking the Coca-Cola company and Hill taking the ice company.

(It wasn't as bad a trade for Hill as it sounds: In the 1940s, Middle Florida Ice was supplying ice daily for home refrigerators and refrigerated railroad cars. It also rented cold-storage lockers to farmers for their butchered hogs and cattle. It would be another decade before widespread electric refrigeration turned ice companies into dinosaurs.)

Lively, a wealthy entrepreneur who founded Lively Vocational School in 1931, had already turned over the bottling operation to his two sons-in-law: Leonard Wesson (future Tallahassee mayor) and Wilson Carraway (future state senator). In fact, Wesson, educated as a civil engineer, designed the fortress-like bottling plant.

In 1949, Wesson and Carraway built a bigger bottling plant at 1320 S. Monroe St. In 1983, the family sold the plant to a Pensacola bottler. In 1986, the plant was sold to Coca-Cola. In 1994, Coca-Cola moved to a distribution plant on Commonwealth Boulevard. The advent of plastic and aluminum containers rendered small-town glass bottling plants obsolete; today's Coke is bottled in regional plants and trucked to surrounding cities.

The All Saints plant, used for decades by a meat-packing company, has sat idle for many years. This fall, the old ice house was demolished because it was an environmental hazard. But if Winchester is successful, the site will be reborn.

"If there is a use it can be put to, it would be a shame to tear down anything as solid as that (Coca-Cola) building," said Bill Carraway, Lively's grandson and longtime vice president of the bottling company. "It definitely has history. I'd love somebody to save it."

Winchester wants to restore the bottling plant to house a restaurant, community center and apartments. He wants to build two adjacent buildings, primarily for residential units.

He wants to re-create the famous three-story clock tower. It once stood nearby at 815 S. Macomb St., home of architect Calvin Phillips, who built the tower about 1911. It was demolished in the early 1980s.

Winchester expects to complete all the permitting in a few months, but it will be late 2008 or 2009 before construction starts. Like many, Winchester awaits the city's redevelopment of Gaines Street to spur economic investment.

But he is adamant the Coca-Cola building should be saved.

"This would be the signature and anchor for All Saints," Winchester said. "As best we can, we're going to try to make it happen."