HISTORY RE-CREATED

Among the recent upgrades at the Audubon House is new, period-style carpeting throughout the house.

Audubon House exhibit receives preservation award

BY MANDY MILES
Key West Citizen

A family of five stood Thursday on the balcony of a stately Whitehead Street mansion. They squinted through the afternoon glare at the harbor that shimmered beyond railings and rooftops, listening as a tour guide described the life and legacy of the home's original occupants and the infamous industry that once made Key West the richest city in the nation.

The estate that would come to be called the Audubon House & Gardens has stood sentinel at the foot of Whitehead Street since 1832, when Capt. John Geiger stood on the same porch, watching the same water, waiting for the next ship to wreck on the shallow reef. A skilled mariner and successful wrecker, Geiger would race to the wrecked ship and save the stranded crew in return for

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Audubon House docent Greg Dunbar, left, shows off the work of John James Audubon to Donna and Tug Miller of Fort Myers and their friends, Betsy and U.S. Congressman Christopher Shays of Connecticut.
their cargo.
And though historic preservationists would later name the house-turned-museum for the famous naturalist and ornithologist John James Audubon, who never actually stayed there, Geiger, his wife and their nine children simply called it home.

While the captain and his family wouldn't recognize the view from their old porch, they'd feel very much at home inside the house, where the furnishings, draperies, rugs and other items have been painstakingly researched and re-created, so the house looks the same now as it did in the mid-1800s.

The Florida Trust for Historic Preservation last month recognized the efforts of museum employees and the Mitchell Wolfson Family Foundation, which saved the house from demolition in 1958 and turned it into a museum. The Trust bestowed the Historic Preservation Award for the accurate re-creation of the life and times of a Key West family in the 1830s to 1850s.

The award honors a new exhibit that shifts the focus of the property from Audubon to Geiger, and includes many of the family's original artifacts, such as an evening gown worn by Mrs. Geiger, and the captain's glasses.

The third-floor exhibit, called "At the Corner of Whitehead and Greene" includes original items as well as accurate re-creations of furnishings, draperies, rugs and dishware.

Researchers examined reams of documents and historic photos, while a team of archaeology students found pottery pieces and other items in backyard digs, said museum director Veronique Murphy, crediting her staff and the Mitchell Wolfson Family Foundation for their dedication to the project — and the past.

"The work these guys did to honor the Geiger family, and bring the focus to them, has been amazing," Murphy said.

The nonprofit foundation was founded by Mitchell Wolfson, who bought the property in 1958 when it was slated for demolition. The estate at 205 Whitehead St. represents Key West's first example of historic preservation, which ultimately allowed for the downtown historic district to boast the largest collection of historic wooden structures in the nation.