

Vintage homes luring buyers to Trenton

Victorian-era details and low prices tempt Princetonians

By Greg Forester, Staff Writer

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TRENTON — Laurent S'Chevalier stands in the front room of his newly-acquired house on Centre Street in South Trenton. There are power tools, debris and piles of construction materials thrown indiscriminately around the room. "This house has really good bones," he says, smiling as he looks around what he says will someday be a beautiful living room.

Mr. S'Chevalier's house in Trenton is an example of people electing to relocate to New Jersey's capital city, opting to move into what they see as beautiful homes with workmanship and prices unseen anywhere in the Princeton area.

Like Mr. S'Chevalier — who is a Princeton Montessori School teacher — some residents of these neighborhoods have worked in Princeton, played in Princeton, and may have even owned a home in Princeton.

But when they begin the search for their next home, some of them apparently stumble across something that gets less play in the media than Trenton's crime or poverty — the city has some of the highest quality construction anywhere, for bargain-basement prices.

"I would probably have paid \$800,000 to a million for the same house in Princeton," said Mr. S'Chevalier of his home, which was listed at \$150,000. Princeton Coldwell Banker residential brokerage agent Howard Young agreed, and said it's all about the quality of Trenton's housing stock and its affordability.

"I think the biggest attraction is that you have some very high-quality houses there that are nothing near as expensive as in Princeton," Mr. Young said.



Princeton Montessori School teacher Laurent S'Chevalier bought this brick Italianate home in South Trenton.

Staff photo by Greg Forester

He runs a Web site all about Trenton real estate, redevelopment projects and other Trentoniana at www.TrentonLiving.com, and makes part of his living showing people the high quality houses that still exist in many parts of Trenton.

Some of the neighborhoods — like Mill Hill and Cadwalader Heights — are more well known than others, but the constant theme in most Trenton neighborhoods is the amazing workmanship that was exercised during construction in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, according to Mr. Young. "Some of the brickwork can be 150 years old, and it's very high-quality workmanship," said Mr. Young. "The houses are very stylish."

Mr. S'Chevalier's work-in-progress at 106 Centre St., is an example of the attraction of superior architecture and workmanship that Mr. Young said is increasingly hard to find in modern construction.

"This home is a perfect example of Italianate architecture," said Mr. S'Chevalier of the home.

Looking at the front of his home, he praised the workmanship of the early 20th century craftsmen who built his house. "Look at this beautiful glazed brickwork," he said.

Four blocks away from Mr. S'Chevalier's house on Centre Street sits 111 Jackson St., the Mill Hill home of David Croft. It sits with other brick Victorians and newer construction along one the Mill Hill's handful of streets.

Also, like Mr. S'Chevalier, Mr. Croft smiles too when he looks at his home. It is a brick Victorian — typical of Mill Hill houses — with a side porch, small backyard, and large green shutters.

"I remember seeing the first photos of houses online, all really cool Victorian houses," said Mr. Croft. "They all looked amazing and they were so affordable compared to Princeton."

Like Mr. S'Chevalier, Mr. Croft has Princeton links. His wife is a graduate student at Princeton University and the couple lived in a university apartment for a year before they found the three-story house that they call their home today. They loved what they saw in the houses of Mill Hill.



Former Princeton resident David Croft in front of his brick Victorian on Jackson Street in Trenton's Mill Hill district.

Staff Photo by Greg Forrester

"It was also definitely the neighborhood and the architecture, and the general ability to walk out and be in an urban environment and not have to drive everywhere," said Mr. Croft.

"Living in Princeton was fine but we were a little far away, so that was a big plus for us." There was also the convenience factor, with both the Mill Hill and Trenton Ferry neighborhoods within walking distance of the Trenton train station, one of the busiest on the Northeast Corridor.

All this added up to another sale in Trenton for Coldwell Banker. Mr. Young said that part of the reason for the continuing trend of Princeton residents looking and buying in Trenton is that people are listing quality real estate in Trenton with Coldwell Banker right alongside of Princeton-area homes.

"The important thing for Trenton is that people who are looking for quality housing are actually being dealt with by real estate agents in Princeton," said Mr. Young. "We have built up a good reputation with people who are selling a nice quality house." He added, "Like most firms we don't have a Trenton office so Trenton business does tend to come through here," said Mr. Young.

"They like having it listed in Princeton because often Trenton gets a bad rap, but listing their home here means a nice house gets presented alongside other nice houses," said Mr. Young. "There is a good branding here, so sellers of nice homes in Trenton like to list with us."

For Mr. S'Chevalier, the negative reputation of Trenton was partially negated by the opportunity to take part in what he believes could be the beginning of Trenton's resurgence.

"It is fun to live in an urban area, and I also wanted to be part of a renaissance of revival," he said. "It has unrivaled accessible architecture and it is very buyer-friendly." As a former resident of Houston, he is used to urban problems, Mr. S'Chevalier said. The ex-Texan's home happens to be located in an area that is being marketed by Mr. Young and others as the new Mill Hill.

Called Trenton Ferry because of the neighborhood's recent historic district designation, the area, includes several renovation projects that are currently listed by Coldwell Banker.

“The important thing is there is the Mill Hill, which has a very good brand and track record, and people ask where is the next Mill Hill and this is the clear answer to that,” Mr. Young said.

The renovations in Trenton Ferry, located two blocks south of Sovereign Bank Arena, are being conducted by a group of architects and developers who saw the potential in the Mill Hill neighborhood in the 1980s and initially began renovating homes in that historic district.

What Mr. Young is calling the new Mill Hill, includes a Phase 1 — which happens to be adjacent to Mr. S’Chevalier’s home — called Everett’s Corner, in the area of Ferry and Centre streets. Coldwell Banker is listing the properties for the builders, HHG Associates.

Phase 2 is a renovated industrial complex nearby at the intersection of Centre and Furman streets, known as the Cracker Factory. While the Trenton Ferry district project includes 26 apartments and 12 single-family homes, these two areas are made up of stylish apartments that have been completely renovated and are now being sold for prices unlike anything seen in the Princeton area, according to Mr. Young.

The condominiums range from \$119,000 to \$281,250, but these costs do not truly reflect the value of the home prospective buyers would be receiving, Mr. Young said. Through the New Jersey Home and Mortgage Finance Agency’s CHOICE program, state funding has been applied to the properties to bring the sticker price down significantly, from between \$60,000 to \$75,000, depending on the property.

“It really helps to engender confidence in people who are considering purchasing a home here,” Mr. Young said.

Similar prices would be difficult to find elsewhere in the state. “There is nothing within 100 miles of here where you get that nice a unit at that price,” Mr. Young said.

His belief is that these renovated homes could be the perfect place for any people looking for an affordable, quality home in New Jersey’s pricey real estate market.

Mr. Young said Trenton Ferry is a perfect opportunity, especially for young people having trouble finding something they can afford in the area.

“Houses that are built today could not cope with what some of these properties have gone through when they were abandoned for 20 years,” said Mr. Young of the properties, some of which experienced extensive water damage and exposure to the elements. “When these properties were built, they were really built well,” he said.