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Farris home sells for \$5.2 million, to be restored to 'original splendor'

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The estate of the late singer, actress and charitable stalwart Dame Celia Lipton Farris has sold her vintage house, once owned by Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan, at 319 El Vedado Road in Palm Beach for a recorded \$5.2 million, a sum \$300,000 below the asking price.

Palm Beacher Virginia "Gina" Mortara bought the six-bedroom, Georgian-style house with staff quarters from a trust administered by Wells Fargo Bank as successor trustee, according to the trustee's deed dated Feb. 15 and recorded Thursday by the Palm Beach County Clerk's office.

Agent Chris Deitz of Fite Shavell & Associates represented Mortara, a philanthropist who serves as president of a foundation named after her and her late husband, Michael P. Mortara.

"She is going to restore the house to its original splendor," said Deitz, who would not confirm his client's identity, citing a request for privacy. "It will be a beautiful project when it's done."

Agents Paulette Koch and Dana Koch of the Corcoran Group had listed the house for \$5.5 million in mid-December. That price was based largely on the value of the land, Paulette Koch said, because of the poor structural condition of the house, which is in need of a major renovation.

"We had entertained two other offers, and the buyer stepped up to a level the owner was willing to accept," she added.

With 12,406 square feet of living space, inside and out, the house stands on a prime Estate Section street three blocks south of the Everglades Golf Course.

Although the lot measures 20,000 square feet, it has only a partial water view because of its corner position on a basin just east of Tarpon Island in the Lake Worth Lagoon.

Several owners

Built in 1940 by developer Clarence Mack, the house's subsequent owners included Balsan, the former Duchess of Marlboro. She acquired it for use as a winter residence and lived there after selling her famous Hypoluxo Island mansion, Casa Alva, in Manalapan following the 1956 death of husband Jacques Balsan. Known as a skilled hostess, she redecorated the El Vedado house and another home in Southampton, [REDACTED], before she died in 1964 at age 87.

Farris, who died last March, moved into the house more than three decades ago with her late husband, Victor Farris. She entertained there frequently, especially in the years following the Farris' purchase of the house in 1978 from Alice Warfield Tyne, according to property records.

Scotland native Celia Farris was well known for her support of charitable and medical causes, including the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army and the American Cancer Society. She received the title of dame from Queen Elizabeth II in recognition of her patriotism and charitable achievement.

During its history, the house had other owners that included the late Audrey Emery, whose son, the late Paul Ilyinsky, served as a longtime mayor of Palm Beach; and the late portrait artist Channing Hare, who had bought it in the late 1940s from the family of the late John Wendell Anderson, a founding member of the Ford Motor Co.'s board.

House not landmarked

Corcoran's sales information described the home as "structurally unsound" and promoted the property to potential buyers as a "perfect [place] to build your dream home."

The house hasn't been designated a landmark by the town and is not protected against demolition or renovations to its exterior. Those who considered buying the house "looked at it from a restoration point of view as well as from a 'ground-up' point of view," said Paulette Koch.

Mortara's husband, who died in 2000, was a senior partner at Goldman Sachs. The family's philanthropic efforts have included underwriting teaching positions, scholarships, a lecture series and capital improvements at Georgetown University. Virginia Mortara "personally oversaw the creation and construction of the Mortara Center of International Studies," according to the university's website.

Other family charitable works include major contributions to the Taft School in Watertown, Conn., and Martha's Vineyard Hospital in Massachusetts.

Mortara, who could not be reached for further comment for this story, owns another Palm Beach residence on Australian Avenue, which she bought in 2005, according to property records.

The renovation of the El Vedado house will be handled by contractor Gary Greenberg of Palm Beach Construction and Management in West Palm Beach, Deitz said, who added that he had no further comment about the sale.