

stylish Lowcountry living from charleston magazine

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Brighten Up

Vibrant color and eclectic art reign in the free-spirited digs of one local painter

Plus:
Fresh Breads
Art Deco Downtown
A Family-Friendly Garden
10 Tips: Outfit Your Guest Room

BEFORE & AFTER

Firmly Rooted

A mid-1800s planter's cottage is relocated to tiny Pumpkin Island, reassembled and restored, and dubbed Neil's Cottage for its late owner



Nearly planted up to the porches in cotton fields and situated near the crossroads of tiny Clio, South Carolina, a mid-1800s planter's cottage sat unused for decades. In 2002, the landowner decided it was time for the 900-square-foot house to go and asked Neil Kruse of Mount Pleasant if he would like to buy it (the two had met through involvement with Sertoma Club).

Of course Neil was interested. In his early 40s, the dentist-turned-developer

was known for his passion for old buildings. When he and his wife, Janie, moved from Texas to Mount Pleasant in 1996, they'd bought a 19th-century home on Mary Street in the Old Village and later helped to renovate the circa-1912 former county jail on Morrison Drive (just under

The Kruses bought the planter's cottage, built more than 140 years earlier with mortise and tendon joinery, six-inch diameter pine timbers, and detailed wainscoting, in 2002 and immediately set out to salvage as much as possible for their Lowcountry retreat.



BEFORE

THE OLD COTTAGE WOULD HAVE TO BE DISMANTLED, CARRIED BOARD BY BOARD ACROSS THE FOOTBRIDGE, AND RECONSTRUCTED ON THE ISLAND SITE.



What formerly comprised a wide hallway (beginning at the transom in the far corner) and two bedrooms in the original cottage is now the Kruses' living room. "We furnished it to feel like an early 1900s getaway," says Janie, pictured above with daughter Claire, 16, adding that she and interior designer Sidney Wagner mixed old pieces with new finds.

the old Grace Bridge). They were also partners in the purchase of a tract of land on John's Island that included an eight-acre undeveloped island just across the marsh on Bohicket Creek, marked on old maps as "Pumpkin Island." But the Kruses had yet to build a house there.

Then came the "opportunity" to drive the 175-plus miles up through South Carolina's Pee Dee region—up near Blenheim and Society Hill—for a first look at the historic

but neglected cottage that Neil had been offered. Janie says her husband immediately began to imagine how the cottage—built more than 140 years earlier with mortise and tendon joinery, six-inch diameter pine timbers, and detailed wainscoting—would fit in on their share of Pumpkin Island. "We need to do this right now," he told Janie, meaning before their son and daughter, then in their early teens, grew much older.

Neil asked Bob Fleming, president of John's Island-based Classic Remodeling, to drive up to Clio with him on his next visit. Bob recalls, "It was so overgrown you could hardly see the cottage. We knew it would be kind of a crazy job."

But Neil could see the possibilities. By then, Janie says her husband had already begun to clear a place for the house on the island, along with planting another 25 oak trees. And the Kruses had already constructed a 1,000-foot footbridge connecting the island with their property at Hopkinson Point, about a mile from the entrances to Kiawah and Seabrook islands.

The biggest challenge would be to get building materials across the six-foot-wide bridge that traverses the marsh. On that bridge, the building couldn't be transported whole, or even in portions. The old cottage would have to be dismantled, carried board-by-board across the footbridge, and

"WE KNEW THAT NEIL WANTED TO SAVE AS MUCH AS HE COULD TO PRESERVE THE CHARACTER OF THE BUILDING...." —BOB FLEMING



Above and left: The slim set of double front doors once marking the entryway of the old cottage were stripped of their paint and restored for use in the updated structure, with original surrounding transoms.

Fleming says the builders would confer with Janie going forward, but mostly they proceeded based on everything Neil had already told them. "We knew that he wanted to save as much as he could, to preserve the character of the building, and to rebuild it with the rustic feel of a hunting lodge."

Neil had even created a numbering system for the engraved metal tags that would be attached to each plank. Using this system, a four-man crew then spent nearly a month disassembling the cottage, carefully taking photographs along the way. "We were



The disassembled cottage had to be carried to the building site by way of this six-foot-wide footbridge.

reconstructed on the island site. For this, Neil had a custom trailer made, one that could be pulled by a small tractor.

Then, with extensive plans in place, one day the young father felt a lump on his jaw. He was diagnosed with oral cancer. "He was a dentist and knew about these things, so at first we thought we'd caught

it early enough, that he'd be okay," says Janie. The couple soldiered on, and when he asked, she told Neil that she didn't want to quit work on the cottage. "I told him that I wanted him to focus on the future."

And they did. Within six months Neil would lose his ability to talk, but he'd already described well his vision for the cottage.



AFTER

"WE CONSIDERED PLENTY OF NAMES FOR IT, THINKING OF THE NATURAL FEATURES, THE PEACEFULNESS. BUT IN THE END I ALWAYS CALL IT NEIL'S COTTAGE." —JANIE KRUSE



The kitchen was added to the original structure, where numerous windows afford Janie and her children expansive views of Pumpkin Island's marshy landscape.

able to salvage a lot of the structure—like the floors and walls—then rebuild all of the paneling and interior trim," says Fleming.

He recalls his fascination in seeing how the 1860s-era house had been constructed and then using those techniques in re-assembly. For instance, instead of being planed down into square timbers, many of the pine structural beams were simply raw tree trunks with bark removed, and then three-inch doweled and mortised.

To meet modern codes for building along the coast, Classic Remodeling raised the house (which also enhanced views of the island and Bohicket Creek), and incorporated the necessary reinforcements to protect the home from wind and storms. It took a year to reassemble and modify the cottage, including adding a kitchen, two bathrooms, and a wrap-around porch. They also re-configured the core room layout—the planter's cottage had



The original roof beams, left exposed in the living room, were reconstructed using a numbering system Neil devised that entailed attaching engraved metal tags to each piece of wood. The tags bore a number, room name, and a directional designation.

been only a center hall lined with four bedrooms. In the rebuilt version it would have two bedrooms and a larger front room.

During the year-long re-assembly, Neil's cancer worsened, and he passed away in 2003; he was 45 years old. The husband and father had survived to see the initial framing of the getaway house he wanted to build for his family, but not much more. As soon as she could, Janie got word to the crew, saying, "We're not stopping construction."

Work continued and the scope of the project was kept simple. Double wooden doors and the surrounding transoms were rebuilt. The original ceiling beams and roof structure were left exposed, creating vertical height and the sight (and clean smell) of wood everywhere. And most striking would be the tall plank walls with more than a century of various coats and colors of paint sanded away—but not completely—to show both the wood and the remnants of paint.

The results are light-filled and immediately comfortable, and Janie says she sees the cottage as a "joyful, peaceful place... I'm so glad the kids feel that way too." She and 19-year-old



Doors replaced windows on either side of the fireplace to allow access to the porch. The mantel is a version of the original, recrafted using the same wood.



The original front porch was hidden behind overgrown ivy and foliage. Son Jordan, 19, and pal Lilli relax on the updated version, which wraps around the house.

Jordan and Claire, 16, use the house as a weekend retreat, bringing along the bounding family dog, Lilli. Around them are special family photographs and objects, including a zebra-skin rug in the main room that Janie and Neil had purchased just before Neil was diagnosed with cancer, when they'd gone on a safari in Tanzania with the children.

Standing on the porch, Janie reminisces about the many days that they visited Pumpkin Island together, even before the cottage was rebuilt there. "When there was nothing here—no dock, no foot-bridge—we'd come out by boat, timing everything with the tides. We'd cook hot-dogs, read books, explore the island... sometimes even bring a propane burner and catch shrimp and crabs to cook."

Janie smiles at the memories. And when she's asked if they've given the cottage a name, she says, "You know, we considered plenty of names for it, thinking of the natural features, the peacefulness. But in the end I always call it Neil's Cottage. That's what it is."

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