

home



First it was the happy hunting ground of the Houma Indians, and then in 1712 it was a land grant from Louis XIV, king of France, to Antoine Crozat, a wealthy French settler. By 1776 the plantation encompassed a vast 300,000 acres, and by the late 1800s it was producing 20 million pounds of sugar per year, making it the largest source of sugar in Louisiana. The colorful history of Houmas House Plantation and Gardens also includes the ingenuity of John Burnside, its owner during the Civil War, who saved it from the Union Army by declaring that as a native of Ireland, he had immunity as a British subject; and more than a century later, the filming of "Hush, Hush, Sweet Charlotte."

Houmas House, in the town of Burnside, is a place where the glorious past takes on the vigor of the present. The historic house and gardens recently underwent a multimillion-dollar renovation that respects the integrity of the original architecture yet still provides state-of-the-art electrical, plumbing and security systems. The walls now have rich, deep colors that are historically correct, and the gardens are springing to life with new plantings, fountains, statues and walkways. It's a metamorphosis that will attract tourists from around the world, as well as a magnet for design and history lovers throughout Louisiana.

"Houmas House is much more than a historic mansion that is open to the public," explains Kevin Kelly, a successful entrepreneur and investor from New Orleans. "It is also where I live and mingle with the guests – without ever letting them know who I am. Although I still maintain my home in New Orleans, I am a hands-on overseer of everything that goes on here."

Why would a busy businessman take on such a gigantic project? "Since I was a child, I have always loved to visit old homes," says Kelly, who grew up in several New Orleans neighborhoods, including old and new subdivisions. "I did over my present home on St. Charles Avenue near Gallier Hall. I have a great respect for history.

"When I heard Houmas House was for sale, I

Historic Houmas

A former Burnside sugar plantation is the site of an 1840 home and gardens by Bonnie Warren



Opposite page: Stately Houmas House in Ascension Parish was completed in 1840, and the property was once the leading sugar producer in the state. This page: Owner Kevin Kelly says many architectural styles were incorporated into Houmas House over the years, but his renovation attempted to return it to its 1840 glory, including the replacement of elaborate crown molding.

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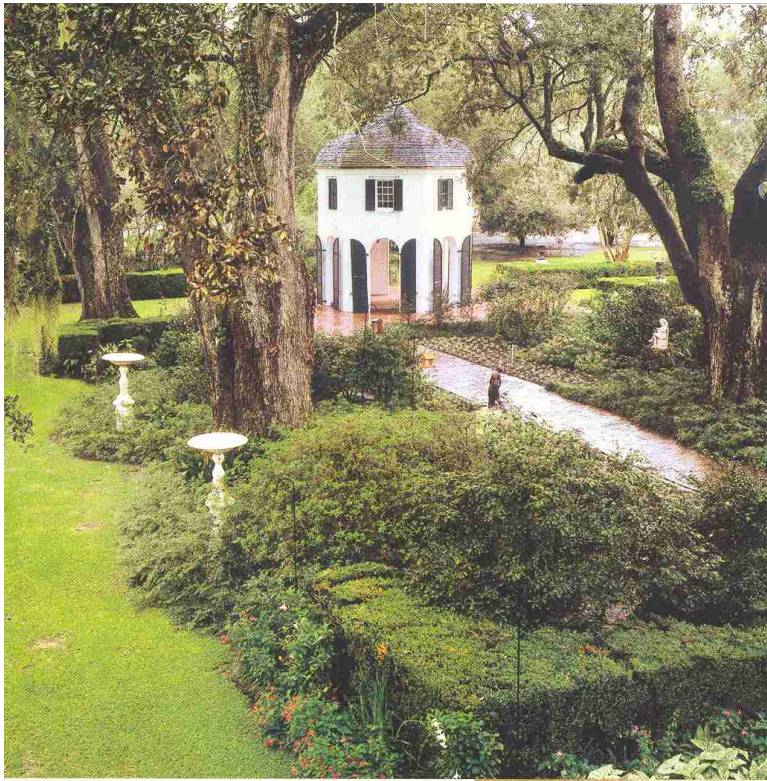
immediately called the listing agent, and said, 'I must see this house now.' The one-hour drive seemed much longer because I was so anxious. When we arrived, I walked into the house and said, 'I must have it - write the purchase agreement now.' Before we could sign the papers, another party in Baton Rouge attempted to get in a bidding war with me, and although it did up the price of the house, I was determined to have it."

The grand, imposing home on the east bank of the Mississippi River just above the Sunshine Bridge began its life as a much smaller home. "It appears that there has been a lot of blending of architecture over the years," Kelly

explains. "History records that Alexander Latil built a four-room, French country house on the property in 1780. And although there are records of other improvements by a sequence of owners, the grand mansion that stands today did not appear until 1840, when Carolina and John Smith Hampton opened the doors of what today is known as Houmas House. It is said that it took 30 years to complete the project."

Whatever the architectural history of house is, Kelly says he enjoyed discovering things about the house as the renovation continued. "It is fascinating to try to piece the puzzle together," he says. "We know that one of the owners took all of the





Opposite page: A freestanding stairway winds up to the third floor. This page, from top: When landscaping in the gardens is complete, Kelly plans to add statuary near the garçonnere; the sugar-cane mural in the front hall of Houmas House depicts the property's history, as well as the owner's pet dogs. The self-taught muralist, Craig Black, lives in Burnside and is also the property's caretaker, a position he has held for 27 years.

fancy molding off to give it a more Federal look. I replaced the moldings. All of the carpeting has been removed and floors [have been] returned to an unvarnished state, as they would have been in 1840. And there isn't any "puddling" of drapes on the floor. It just wasn't done back then."

"In time the gardens will be amazing and people will come from around the country just to see them," Kelly adds proudly. "We will have a staff of eight maintaining the gardens."

Jim Blanchard, noted archival artist and designer, worked with Kelly to restore the glory of the interiors. "It has been an exciting project, and I like to say my role with the house has been like a forensic pathologist working on a body," he explains. "It was a journey of discovery. We have attempted to present [Houmas House] as a home that has evolved over the years. There will never be a magic moment when Kevin will declare that he is finished. It will always be a work in progress."

Landmark, museum, architectural treasure: Houmas House has many roles in Louisiana history, but for Kelly the house has one central function. "I will always think of it as my home," he says. "I may share it with the public, but it's just home to me."

Houmas House Plantation and Gardens is open for tours from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Information, (504) 891-9494 or www.houmashouse.com.

