

GREAT GIFTS | LOCALS GIVE BACK | BLUFFTON'S HISTORY

HILTON HEAD MONTHLY

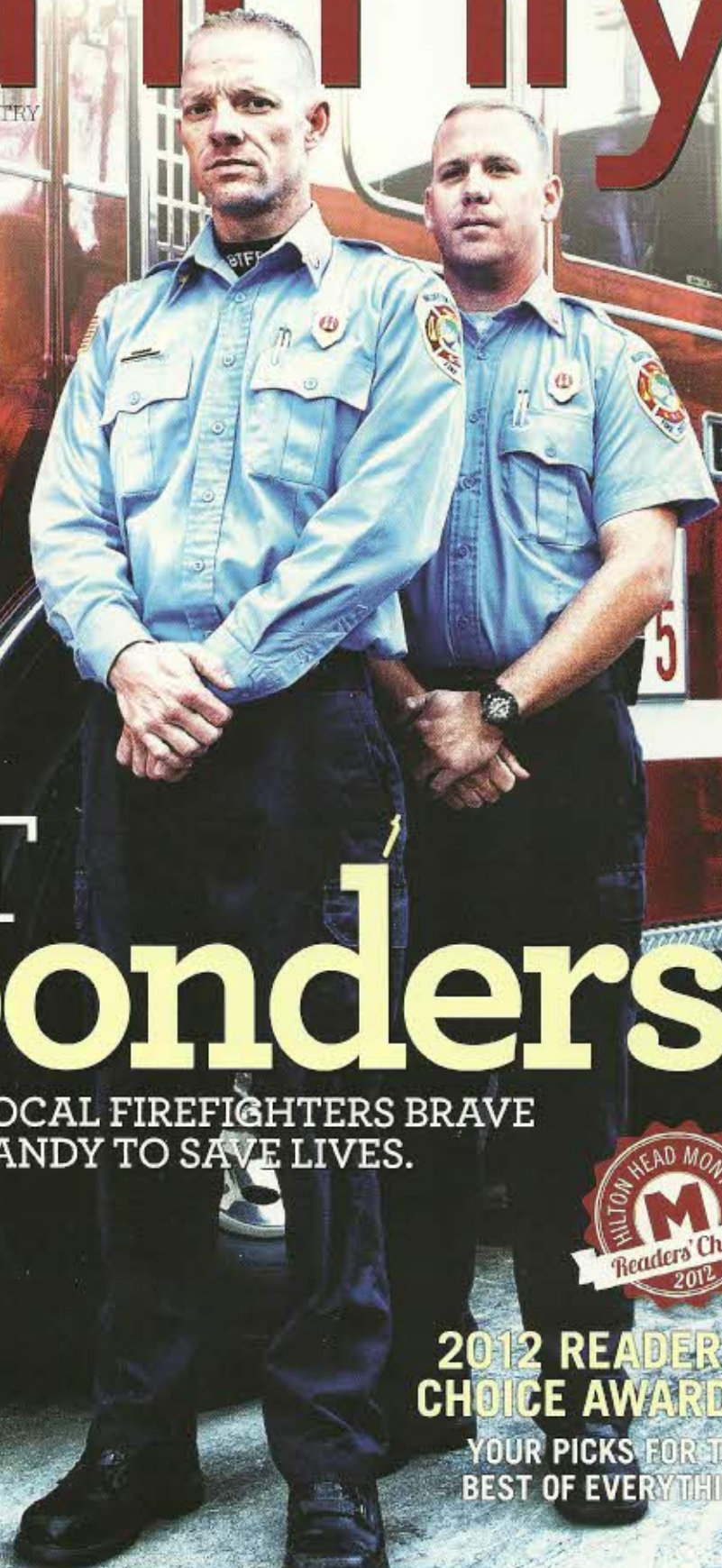
# hilton head Monthly

DECEMBER 2012 | THE VOICE OF THE LOWCOUNTRY

BLUFFTON TOWNSHIP



FIRE DIST.



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history | ROSE HILL

## THERE IS A HOUSE IN **BLUFFTON**



**T**UCKED AWAY IN THE GATED COMMUNITY THAT BEARS ITS NAME, HIDDEN BEHIND TWISTING LIVE OAKS AND GENTLY SWAYING SPANISH MOSS, THIS HOUSE HAS WATCHED THE TOWN OF BLUFFTON GROW UP AROUND IT. THE MAN WHO BUILT IT NEVER SAW IT FINISHED, BUT HE STILL PUT HIS STAMP ON HISTORY. THEY NAMED THE COMMUNITY ROSE HILL, AFTER THE HOUSE. THEY NAMED THE TOWN KIRK'S BLUFF, AFTER ITS OWNER. THE KIRK MAY HAVE VANISHED FROM THE MAPS, DRIFTING THROUGH HISTORY AS BLUFF TOWN THEN BLUFFTON, BUT THE HOUSE STILL STANDS.

The history of Rose Hill, not to oversimplify, is the history of Bluffton. It carries a soft echo of antebellum grace, the scars of war long healed but never forgotten, a new identity as new residents have come and gone, and a brighter future finally at hand. You could say that about either the house or the town.

### **BEFORE THE WAR**

The history of the house stretches back almost as far as the Lowcountry itself, first finding mention in a series of land grants from King Charles II. According to records, Sir John Colleton was granted (among other lands) a small parcel by the name of Rose Hill in 1718. It's not until 1823 that it comes into the possession of a wealthy

planter named James Kirk, who purchased the plantation as part of a deal that made him owner of much of Bluffton.

Construction began in the 1850s on a plantation house that would forever stand out as an architectural oddity. Far from the Greek revival-flavored plantation houses that came to define the look of the South, Rose Hill's plantation house echoed the churches of Europe with tall tapering eaves and a Gothic revival-inspired design.

It was James' son, John, who actually lived here with his bride Carolina. They ran a large plantation from the grounds, while construction continued on the main house. It would never in their lifetimes see completion.

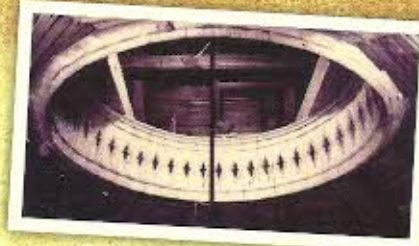
The events leading up to the

Civil War and its devastating effects on the South need not be repeated here, as they have rightfully become etched into our collective national memory.

But their effects on Rose Hill Plantation House were catastrophic. In 1862, with the drums of war nearing, John and Carolina fled to Granville, leaving their unfinished home to Yankee hands. Current owner Robin White still finds Union belt buckles, grape shot and artifacts on the home's property. More than enough evidence in her mind to prove that when the Kirks moved out, Union soldiers moved in.

After the war, John Kirk returned to a South he didn't recognize. His slaves freed, he could no longer see Rose Hill





as a viable plantation. The house sat and waited.

Decades passed. The last of the Kirks to claim ownership of Rose Hill sold the plantation's land off to a consortium of families from around the area. In the '30s, according to one-time owner and current historian Iva Welton, squatters made Rose Hill their home. In the '50s, White notes, the front parlor was used for housing chickens.

This flower of the old south had been scarred by war, and over nearly a century, its petals slowly withered on the vine.

Then, rebirth.

### JOHN M. STURGEON III.

John M. Sturgeon III and his wife Betsy (herself the widow of

Jay Gould, son of a family who had struck it rich in the railroad business) purchased Rose Hill in 1946. Photos from that time show a home in almost total disrepair. With the help of architect Willis Irvin, Sr., the couple took Kirk's dream of seeing the home finished and ran with it. Repairs were made, the interior finally finished, and a new Southern icon was born.

The house grew in notoriety as the social and hunting center for the Lowcountry. Its reputation grew enough that *Vogue* magazine came calling for a feature in its April 1955 edition. White still displays that edition on a wall of magazine articles, newspaper clippings and assorted mentions in media outlining the public's fascination with the house.

Their renovations were as extensive as they were exquisite, with

photos from the time showing a lush and romantic Southern home, where dogs playfully run through the gardens, horses await their next ride in the stables, and each room dazzles with some new visual treat. Handpainted wallpaper adorns the walls of the sitting room. A full-wall mirror creates a stunning effect in Mrs. Sturgeon's dressing room. If John Kirk had a dream, this was certainly its fulfillment.

But just as war once led the house to decay, now too so did its partner, death.

### IVA WELTON

Sturgeon died in 1979, and despite the national prominence to which Rose Hill Plantation House had risen, it would sit empty for the next three years.

A year after his death, Rose Hill Plantation Development Co. would purchase the existing land of the plantation for residential development, keeping the house separate from its covenants.

The company was formed by brothers David and John Welton. And as the brothers focused on creating one of the off-island corridor's most magnificent neighborhoods, David's then-wife Iva saw in the majestic plantation house a grand and enticing challenge.

"It was fascinating and it was intriguing because it was just sitting there on the banks of the Colleton River and it had been so well preserved," Welton said.

She began a ten-month rehabilitation of the house, uncovering many of its secrets along the way.

"We'd be pulling up wallpaper,



and underneath we'd find autographs from the workmen who had put it up," she said.

There was another tantalizing secret that has now been lost to the ages that Welton uncovered during her renovation: A grand rose-colored dome in the entry hall, covered up by the Sturgeons during their work on the house. As she explains it, the dome had been an original piece of the Kirks' architecture, but the Sturgeons had simply built a flattened ceiling over it. She didn't uncover the original dome until a trip up into the attic.

"It was very difficult to explain that on tours," Welton added.

Those tours helped Welton grow Rose Hill's reputation once again, until finally she was able to get the house placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1984. And as she worked to renovate, Welton was also researching the

history of the house, toiling away in stacks of ancient papers in those pre-Google days.

"I had to go to the county courthouse, I had will packets from lawyers, I had deeds — I still have all the coffee-stained notes from when I was trying to find who is who," she said.

With a caretaker immersed in its history and its reputation growing once again, the old plantation house breathed in new life. However, history has a nasty tendency to repeat itself and this new life would not last long.

On the evening of Feb. 10, 1987, a small malfunctioning electrical box started a blaze that Bluffton firefighters battled well into the night. Despite their best efforts, Rose Hill was nearly destroyed. The iconic copper roof was reduced to twisting wreckage. The interior was hollowed out. The secret of the covered dome was rendered moot as both were left in ashes.

"I went out there at 3 a.m. and I stood at the entrance, and you could look up and see the sky," said Welton. "The roof was just gone. And I just knew the spirit of John Kirk was gone. He'd said, 'enough of this' and was gone."

Once again, Rose Hill Plantation House sat empty. And again, new owners brought this rose into bloom once again.

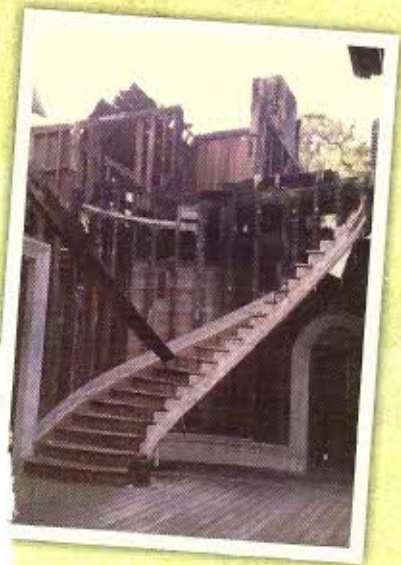
## ROSE HILL MANSION

According to the houses' website, After to the fire in 1987, the copper roof and the porch were restored to preserve the beautiful outer shell. The domed entrance hall and the spiraled staircase were restored and support studs were installed in the rooms. All other areas of the house were so totally damaged by the fire that a complete reconstruction of the interior would be required to make it safe and/or habitable. The

few original heart of pine floors on the lower floor that were not destroyed by the fire were damaged severely and would require extensive repair. The few walls downstairs that were not completely destroyed were scorched and paint was peeling from any intact wood. Only one mantel (in the dining room) survived at all and most of the huge doors, though heavily scorched, had been saved. The chimneys had collapsed so none of the fireplaces were repairable.

Enter the Middleton-White Foundation, spearheaded by husband-and-wife duo Robert and Robin Sumners White. The pair first learned about the house through a classified ad in Preservation Magazine (now framed and hung in the back hall along with that Vogue and numerous other articles on the house). They purchased the home on Robin's birthday in 1996 and began an extensive renovation that





would last for nearly 17 years.

"This was a total ground-up money pit renovation," said White. "We're in our 17th year. By 2007 we were at a point where we were safe enough to let people come in and start doing tours. We felt obliged to figure out a way to safely share it and live in it. My husband and I actually live here, but we get out of the way in the afternoons."

The tours bring people through a lushly restored plantation house

packed with history (some authentic, and some, like the grand cannons along the seawall and the 15th-century fireplace, just for mystique). And if John Kirk's spirit fled the house during the fire, his family's spirit is still alive and well within its walls.

"In 2006 through a connection at the historic society, we were able to connect up with the descendants of Dr. John Kirk," said White. "We became great friends with Bill Kirk of Overland Park, Kansas. The family have gifted back some of the original furnishings that were in the house during the Civil War."

Now, rooms are packed with antebellum furniture smuggled out before the advance of Union troops, and artifacts of Kirk's lineage from the Civil War onward. In what had been Dr. Kirk's office, a Kirk family descendant's World War II bomber jacket is proudly displayed. And the

Kirk family history is a living one at the mansion, as well. Director Cynthia Glendinning can trace her lineage back to the Kirks.

And with the family well represented, the house is full of life once again. Along with tours, the new proprietors of the house, rechristened Rose Hill Mansion, allow for weddings and private events along the 12 acres, along with Wine Wednesday events sampling their own private label wine.

## THE FUTURE

With the house now once again in the care of a family, and with renovations still ongoing, Rose Hill appears to have a less thorny future than its past.

But no matter what the future holds, its place in Bluffton's history is assured. Its current owners have taken great pains to keep the Kirk family spirit alive in its walls, and

Welton still carries with her that large stack of research she assembled during her tenure. She plans to one day write a book about Rose Hill's history, spilling her years of secrets, only a few of which she's shared with us here.

In the meantime, you can go see this majestic icon of the South for yourself every day at 2 p.m. **M**

