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The Rose Hill Mansion in Bluffton was built by the Kirk family in the late 1850s and is open to the public for tours.

At Rose Hill Mansion, HISTORY RETURNS

Descendants donate Civil War, family heirlooms

By **JOSH DAWSEY**

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A dining room table that survived the Civil War and remained in the Kirk family for more than 150 years has returned home to the Rose Hill Mansion, along with other family heirlooms with historic ties to the Bluffton area.

The table has a burned ring on it caused by Union troops placing a hot pot on it after they broke into the mansion, said Robin White, the building's owner. The original owner of the mansion at Rose Hill Plantation, Dr. John Kirk, refused to have the burn mark polished out, "so that what had been done here would be remembered," according to White.

On Wednesday, Kirk's great-great-granddaughter sat among 25

members of a tour group near that same historic wooden table inside Rose Hill Mansion as she heard how a benefactor with family ties to the home recently donated the Civil War heirloom.

Kathryn Kirk was that benefactor, but no one knew. She played the unassuming visitor, walking through the house built by her family in the late 1850s.

About an hour later, the tour was over, and her identity revealed.

"This might be the most special tour I've ever given," said White, who restored the home over the past 14 years. "With us today, we have a great friend to the house, a great friend of mine, Ms. Kathryn Kirk, who has given this house so much."

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SARAH WELLIVER • The Island Packet: Kathryn Kirk, center, takes part in a tour Wednesday of Rose Hill Mansion in Bluffton. Kirk, who is the great-great-granddaughter of the original owners of the mansion, recently donated family heirlooms to the house.

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The group cheered and embraced Kirk. Over tea and snacks, they listened to stories and reveled in living history.

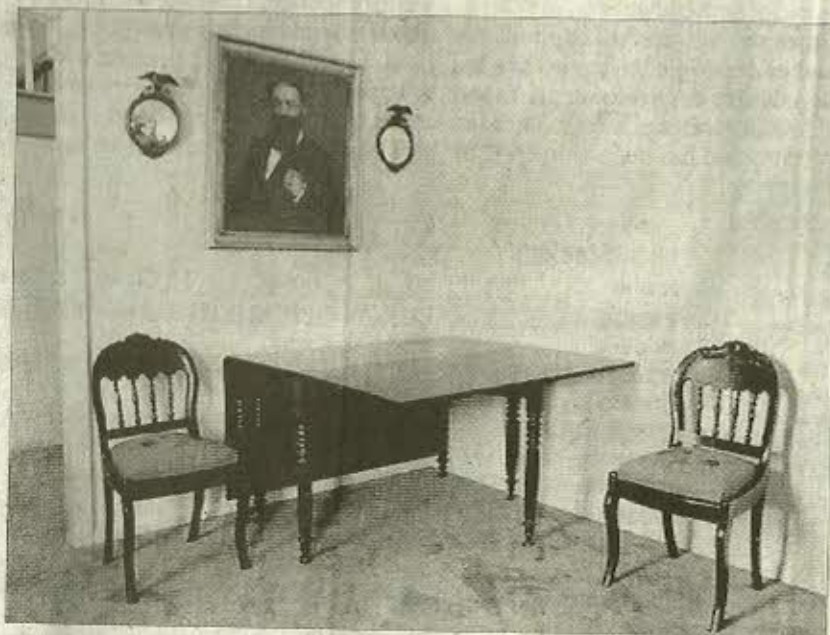
"This is stunning," she said of the restored home. "It thrills me, and it's letting Dr. John Kirk, my great-great-grandfather, live again."

Kirk's fourth visit to Bluffton from her home in Tierney, Mo., not only brought the table, but two hand-carved dining room chairs with needlepoint cushions; two original mid-19th-century portraits of William Kirk's in-laws (William was John Kirk's son); and a mirror that was in the house in the 1860s. The frame of the mirror is not original, but the glass is, White said.

Kathryn Kirk's brother, William Kirk, also donated items to the Rose Hill Mansion in the past, including a card table, watch fob ornament and cotton stamp.

"To have the items from the Kirks has been some of the greatest joys of my life," White said. "They have been so generous, and they understand how important it's been to us to connect back to the history of this precious house."

As she told of the house's diverse history, White often smiled and pointed to



Special to the Packet and Gazette
Shown above is the Civil War-era dining room table and chairs that were donated to the Rose Hill Mansion by Kathryn Kirk. Kirk is the great-great granddaughter of the home's original owner, Dr. John Kirk.

ornate mantles, windows and artwork inside the four-story Gothic Revival home.

White says being able to live in the house with her family is a great joy.

But no one was more excited Wednesday than Kirk.

"Robin has really brought this house alive and fulfilled my family's dream,"

Kirk said. "I don't have any children, so I don't have anyone to pass these things on to. This is where I'd want it to be."

Soon she will return home to Tierney, population 93, where she raises horses and great Pyrenees dogs.

But her heart resides in the Lowcountry, where her family settled more than 150 years ago.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ROSE HILL MANSION

- Rose Hill Plantation, once part of Devil's Elbow Barony, was granted to Sir John Colleton by King Charles II in 1718.
 - Construction on the mansion was started in the late 1850s by planter and physician Dr. John Kirk and his wife, Caroline.
 - The work was halted by the Civil War. The Kirks sought refuge in Grahamville. Although the house was occupied after the war, the economy made it impossible to complete the interior.
 - In 1946, John and Betsy Gould Sturgeon purchased the house and hired architect Willis Irvin to direct its completion.
 - In 1980, the Rose Hill Plantation Development Co. (the Welton family) purchased the land for development as a planned residential community. In 1983, the Rose Hill Plantation house was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The house was opened to the public for tours, and an extensive rehabilitation was completed in 1986.
 - In 1987, a fire damaged the house. The copper roof melted and caved in, and the second floor and attic were gutted.
 - After the fire, the copper roof was replaced and the porch's posts were redesigned to the Kirks' original wood and Gothic look, inside, only the central domed hall and spiral staircase had been restored and painted. The rest of the house remained charred and unfinished.
 - On April 12, 1996, Rose Hill Plantation house was purchased by the Middleton White Foundation and has been restored as a private home occupied by the White family.
- OPEN TO THE PUBLIC**
The house is open for tours, weddings, group events and private gatherings. Details: call Robin White at 843-757-6046, e-mail robinwhite@hargray.com or go to www.rosehillmansion.com.

Source: www.rosehillmansion.com