



## Turning Back The Hands Of Time On Rose Hill Plantation

A look at the remarkable post Civil War restoration of this architectural masterpiece in Bluffton, South Carolina

**By Mary and Hugh Williamson**



The actions and investments of generations of residents have made Bluffton, South Carolina, a model for respecting the past, adding greatly to the present and guiding the future. What is required for the inspiration to do just that is provided in this southern community of architectural value; significant historic structures in all levels of repair. Factor in individuals who have the interest, the tenacity and the resources to make an impact and who are true visionaries, and wonderful things can happen. These Blufftonians have led the efforts to make the opportunity for historic preservation, restoration and renovation a reality. The town has also invested in the ongoing effort, and real estate developers have warmed to the theme. The town has continued the spirit, charm and character established in the mid-nineteenth century, as plantation owners sought reprieve from the summer heat and mosquitos of nearby Hilton Head Island to the breezy bluffs above the May River.



### **A Little History**

Bluffton's antebellum history lives on in the downtown area overlooking the May River, where Union forces launched the fateful Civil War "burning of Bluffton" on June 4, 1863. Most, but not quite all, homes were decimated. Of the surviving structures, several remain private residences, one a museum, and one until 1999 operated as a bed and breakfast. Two serve as headquarters for ministries of the Church of the Cross. Thought to be spared because of its beauty, the ca.1857 church itself is an important architectural treasure in the Carpenter Gothic style, designed by acclaimed South Carolina-born architect Edward Brickell (EB) White (b. 1806). His book of work includes Market Hall and the Huguenot Church in Charleston, South Carolina, as well as landmarks in Savannah, Georgia. However, most of the surviving Bluffton buildings are less elaborate in design, being of the simpler farmhouse or summer cottage styles. These antebellum structures are more than enough to set the tone for the low-country South Carolina town where this burgeoning, charming community continues to give a nod to nineteenth century local vernacular with the town's recent, thoughtful development and restoration. Happily, it is sometimes difficult to tell the new from the old pre-Civil War edifices.

## And Life Goes On



Following the Civil War and beyond, some of these remaining summer retreat homes were painstakingly restored to period accuracy. Others evolved to meet the changing needs of the modern family. One home connected the detached “summer kitchen”, originally meant to sequester the heat and cooking smells from the main house. Now, with modern technology it is integrated into the living space. There are other examples of alterations that some preservation purists would perhaps dismiss as ill-advised. However, those types of changes, as American lifestyles evolve, mean that historic and maybe simply “vintage” structures can realize reinvention and a new life that is feasible in the American community, while ensuring their longevity and relevance in our modern world. So – a careful balance of restoration and renovation can yield interesting, sustainable outcomes.

## A Fascinating Example

A stellar model of adaptive reuse, restoration and renovation is found in the **Rose Hill Plantation House**, some 12 miles from historic downtown



Bluffton, though a part of the same 1718 Devil’s Elbow Barony, or the tongue of land extending from the May River to the Colleton River. Built along the banks of said Colleton River, the plantation house (ca. 1858) is an amazingly beautiful example of the Carpenter Gothic style, sharing many characteristics with the Church of the Cross. Likely also designed by Edward Brickell White, the mansion has a very compelling story. Originally occupied by planter John

Kirk and his wife Carolina, the stunning and then nearly complete plantation house was abandoned by the family in 1862 as the rumblings of war threatened the state. The Civil War is also called the War Between the States, or in the deep south “that recent unpleasantness”. And unpleasant it was. Current Rose Hill Plantation House owners Robin and Robert “Rusty” White have uncovered many relics on the property surrounding the mansion, including belt buckles and Union force buttons from many states. These finds seem to support the theory that the mansion was occupied by Union officers, as the troops camped on the grounds. It also explains why the home escaped the fiery fate of so many structures in the Bluffton area. And why not? The beautiful newly-built but abandoned abode offered comforts, and the Colleton River afforded easy transportation to other battlefields in Beaufort County, a hub of the war.

TIMELINE	
1718	Earliest known date of existence. Granted to Sir John Colleton. It was then a part of the Devil's Elbow Barony
1790	The plantation came under the ownership of John Rose
1799	Upon Rose's death, the plantation was inherited by his stepson, James Kirk
1830s	The plantation was given to Dr. John and Caroline Kirk as a wedding present from James Kirk
1858	House began construction (completed in 1860) by Dr. John Kirk and wife Caroline
1862	Plantation House was vacated due to Civil War activity
1863	Bluffton area was targeted by Union forces
1865	Civil War ends
1946	John and Betsy (Gould) Sturgeon purchased the house and completed it
1979	John Sturgeon passed away
1981	Rose Hill Plantation Development Company, a David and John Welton pursuit, purchased the land for development of a planned residential community. Their rehabilitation team then spent nine months repointing and rehabilitating the house
1982	The house was opened to the public for tours
1987	A fire severely damaged the house, and it would sit empty for nearly a decade
1996	Rose Hill Plantation House was purchased by the Middleton-White Foundation and restoration as a private home began
2009	Rose Hill Plantation House achieved substantial completion by Rusty and Robin White of the Middleton-White Foundation
2017	The Plantation House continues to welcome the public and groups for tours and events

Following the war, the house remained vacant for decades, seeing squatters and more. It was then purchased in 1946 by John Sturgeon and wife Betsy, and was lovingly restored. After the death of Sturgeon in 1979, and a subsequent re-imagining by the Rose Hill Development Company, the property was met with another calamity as a long restoration project ended; faulty wiring caused a consuming fire in 1987.

Fast-forward to 1996, when Robin and Robert “Rusty” White, having seen an ad listing the Rose Hill home for sale in Historic Preservation Magazine fell in love with the grand

but distressed, burned out landmark. After purchasing the mansion, the couple began an astounding 17-year restoration that has resulted in a sought-after romantic wedding venue, tour destination, and a local organization event location. As the White's now embrace the value of sharing, it is greatly appreciated by local residents as well as architecture students from around the world. The White's courage, vision and passion have served the community well.

The Rose Hill Plantation House is not a museum. It is a vital and lovely private home, whose owners have afforded an opportunity for locals and tourists to experience a glimpse into the gracious South Carolina way of life in the mid-nineteenth century. The interior is punctuated by Gothic revival furniture and accessories, but it is not a total immersion into the style. It is a wonderful example of how an historic property can retain the magic of the era, while evolving to provide a comfortable environment for a family, and a valuable resource for the community.