

# Saving Grace

*An imperilled historical home is rescued from ruin and faithfully restored in a pastoral new setting*

WRITTEN BY ELLE MCGEE • PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILSON BAKER

In a town as notoriously preservation-minded as Charleston, it's difficult to imagine that the new millennium might see an historically important structure—a bona fide architectural treasure—slated for demolition. But three years ago that seemed the inevitable fate of the iconic William Alston House. The circa-1817 Adams-style home, though a modestly proportioned wood-framed abode, features an imposing façade dominated by a two-story pedimented portico, and its interior spaces are lavishly appointed with some of the finest examples of Southern neoclassical



**Home to Stay:** After a comprehensive two-year restoration effort that rescued it from demolition, the William Alston House exudes its original Adamesque refinement in its new—and presumably final—location at Cedar Hill Plantation.

woodcarvings and ornamental plasterwork. Wealthy Georgetown rice planter William Algernon Alston built the home as a peninsular pied-à-terre, where his sons could sojourn while availing themselves of the various soirées and fêtes on offer during Charleston's high social season. In the 20th century, however, the house was moved an extraordinary three times by its owners St. Francis Xavier Hospital and the Medical

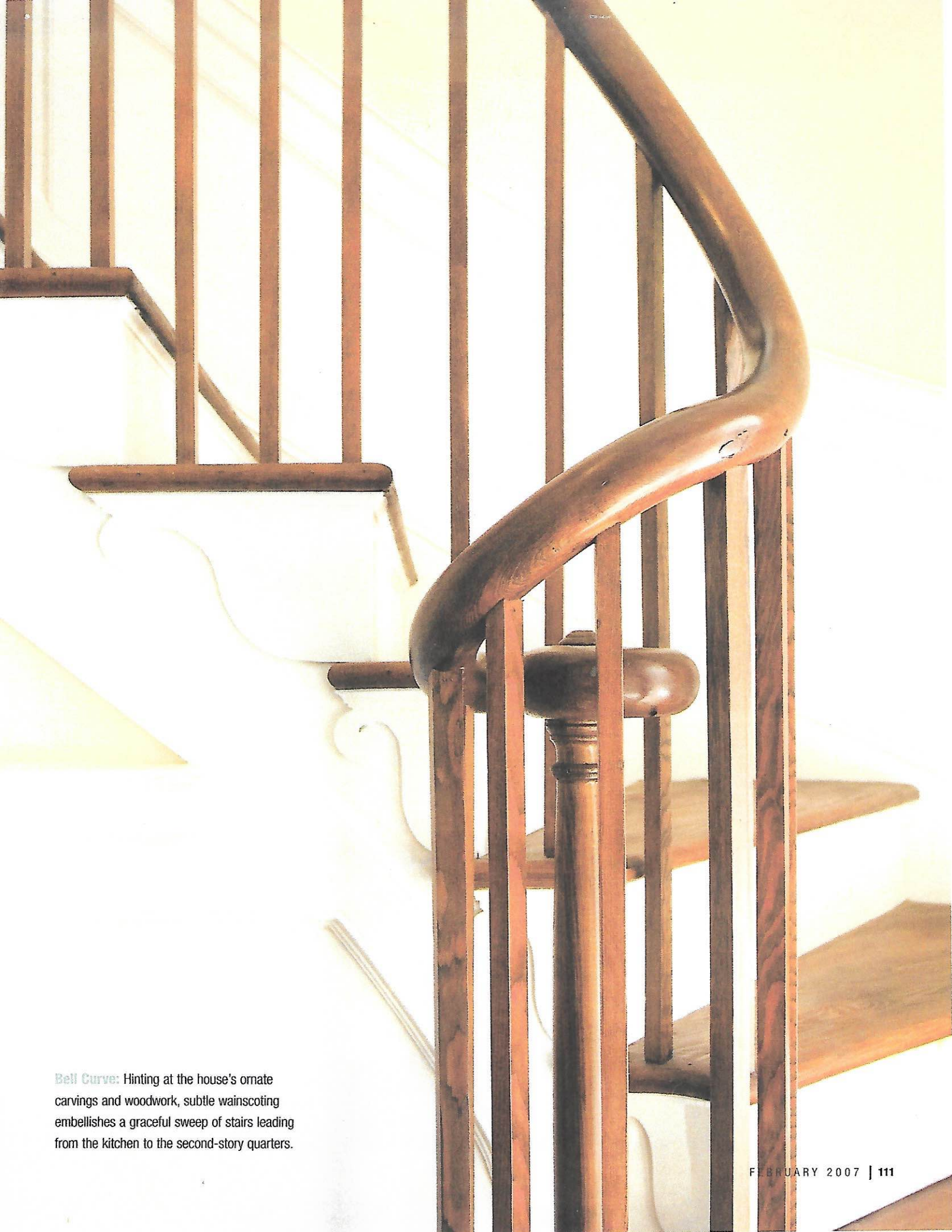
University of South Carolina before finding its last address at 141 Ashley Avenue.

Tied up for years in legal and contractual quagmires that kept it from being preserved, the Alston House stood derelict and crumbling in the shadows of MUSC's ever-expanding facilities. Then Hurricane Hugo delivered its devastating blow, with further damage rendering the historical home all but a lost cause. In what appeared the 11th



**Country Roads:** Cedar Hill's manicured, tree-lined entrance gives way to acres of dense scrub, flourishing maritime forest, and lush oak stands, the results of Wayland Cato's extensive timber revitalization efforts.





**Bell Curve:** Hinting at the house's ornate carvings and woodwork, subtle wainscoting embellishes a graceful sweep of stairs leading from the kitchen to the second-story quarters.





**Commanding Presence:** Like many neoclassical townhomes built in Charleston during the early 19th century, the façade of the house features an imposing double portico accented by octagonal fluted columns and topped with a carved pediment. Left: A sun-filled breakfast nook off the kitchen is a 20th-century addition.

hour before this landmark was lost, a serendipitous turn of events brought local philanthropists Marion and Wayland Cato, Jr., to its decrepit doorstep. “The house was so sad, like an abandoned child,” explains Wayland. “It was on the verge of ruin; another few years of neglect and it would have been hauled off as trash.” His wife seconds the dire state of the building, saying, “The first time we saw the house, it was in such bad shape that we could only move





*"You realize just how special and unique these structures make our town when you go to other places and there aren't any; it gives you a real incentive to do something to save them."*

—Marion Cato

**Extraordinary Measures:** In order to relocate the Alston House from its downtown locale to Cedar Hill, painstaking methods were used to number, dismantle, transport, and reassemble each fragile brick and beam.

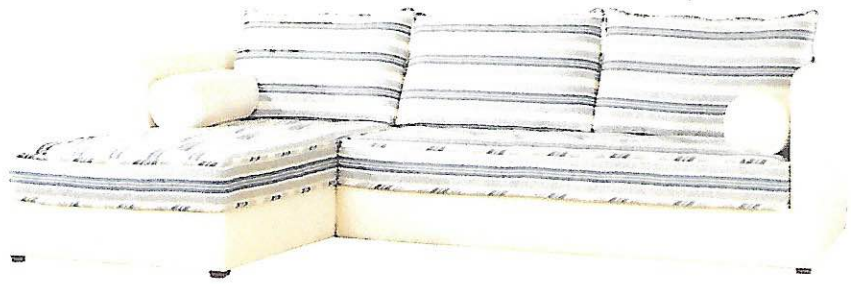
around safely in about 60 square feet. It was a real leap of faith—and imagination."

No strangers to the rigors of this kind of process, the Catos—both on the boards of Historic Charleston Foundation and the Preservation Society of Charleston—have undertaken similar projects, including an 1865 Palladian-style farmhouse in North Carolina and a circa-1874 Wyoming ranch. Even their magnificent East Bay house, pre-renovation, prompted Wayland's children to ask, "Why do you want that old ruin?"

For the couple, the answer is simple. "When you live in a place like this, it's almost through osmosis that you absorb these old beautiful buildings and feel the appreciation of being fortunate enough to live among them," says Marion. "You realize just how special and unique these structures make our town when you go to other places and there aren't any; it gives you a real incentive to do something to save them."

Not only did the historical importance of the Alston House call to the Catos, but the survival of meticulous documents and detailed drawings that would guide a

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*“We’re just stewards of this beautiful land and its important structures, hoping that like-minded people will come along after us and continue the gift of preservation.”*

—Marion Cato

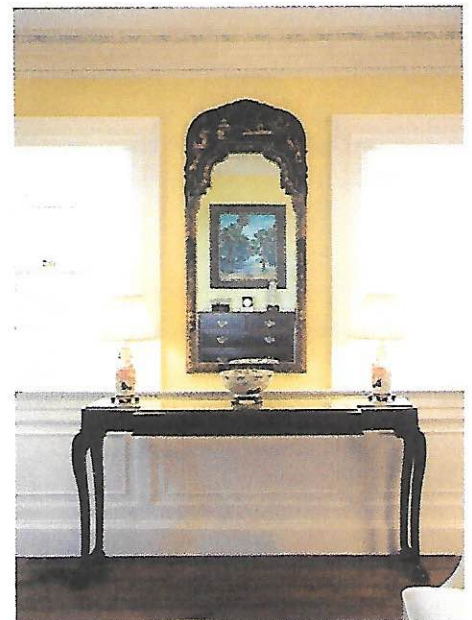
faithful restoration was very reassuring to them. “There’s a great deal of pleasure seeing something put back together authentically,” says Wayland.

But it was another of the couple’s properties and restoration projects where they envisioned a fitting location for the Alston House. In the mid-’90s, Wayland acquired Cedar Hill, a 3,400-acre plantation between the Wando and the east branch of the Cooper River near Huger, to create a weekend country retreat. Having been born near Edgefield and raised with a deep respect

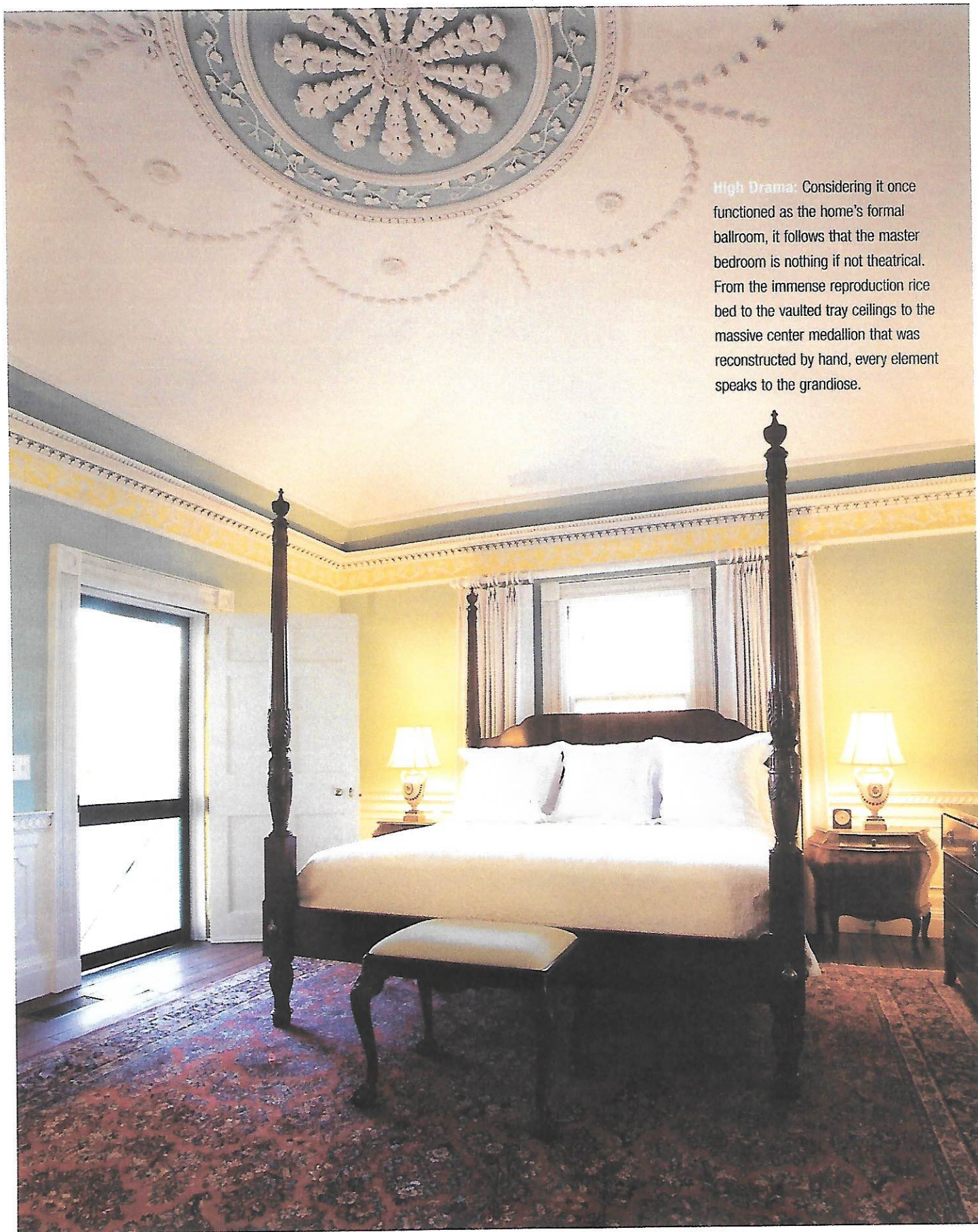
for the land, he initiated an intense reforestation and timber revitalization project at Cedar Hill, along with establishing duck ponds and other habitats for hunting deer, quail, and dove.

When the footprint of the original plantation house was discovered while clearing downed trees in the aftermath of Hugo, he began to think about a house for the property. “I thought about building a house since none of the original structures remained, but I had really wanted to put an existing historical structure there. That’s

Brand New View: Instead of its former cramped environs on the MUSC campus, the house now enjoys a picturesque setting overlooking an expanse of the Cooper River. Below: A japonesque painted mirror hangs above a Chippendale side table.

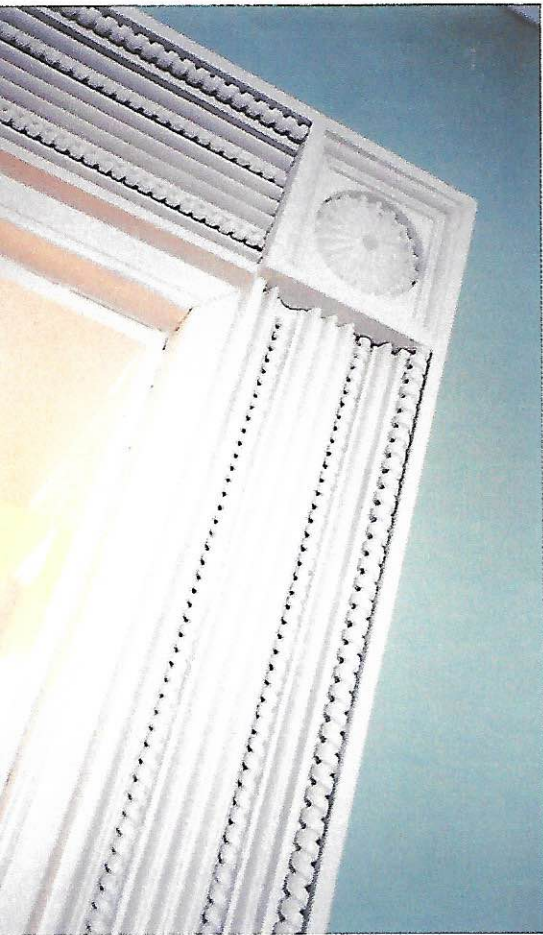






**High Drama:** Considering it once functioned as the home's formal ballroom, it follows that the master bedroom is nothing if not theatrical. From the immense reproduction rice bed to the vaulted tray ceilings to the massive center medallion that was reconstructed by hand, every element speaks to the grandiose.





**Element of Surprise:** Concealed under countless layers of paint applied over the last two centuries, some of the home's original intricate mouldings, like those on this interior door frame, were uncovered during restoration.

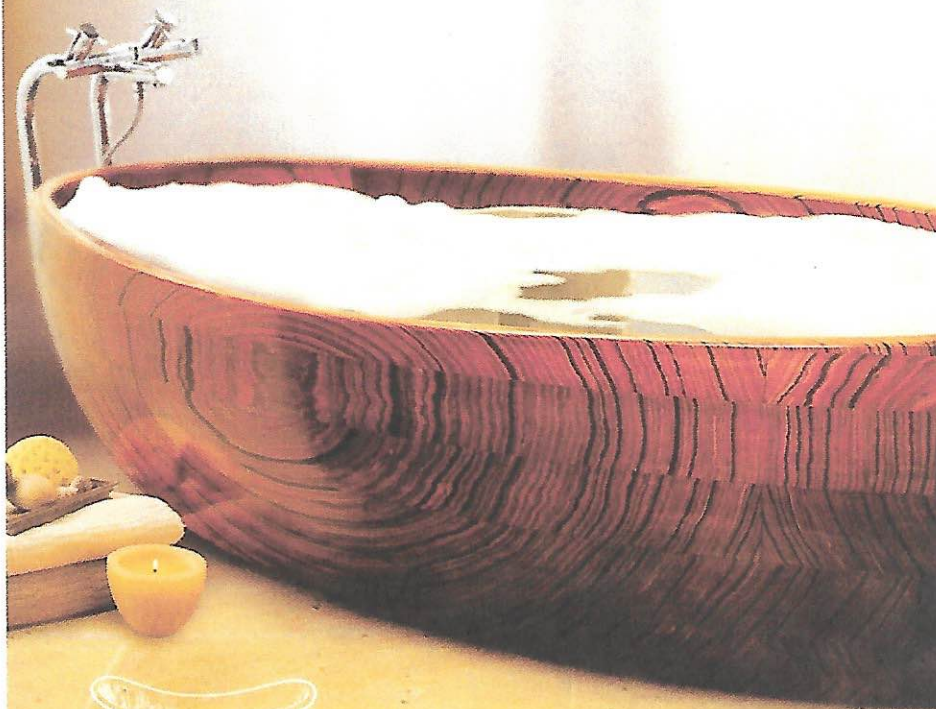
what I decided once we discovered the old house foundation," says Wayland. "Old buildings just have more character; often, their restoration is more trouble, but ultimately, it brings more joy. The hitch was that the right one had yet to come along."

The answer would soon arrive in the form of the Alston House, an idea suggested by the couple's friend and former governor Jim Edwards. "From the beginning, we knew this house was much more than a preservation endeavor—it was more like a salvation effort," laughs Marion, a lifelong Charleston resident. "But the bones were good, and they showed enough of what it had once been to convince us it was the right structure

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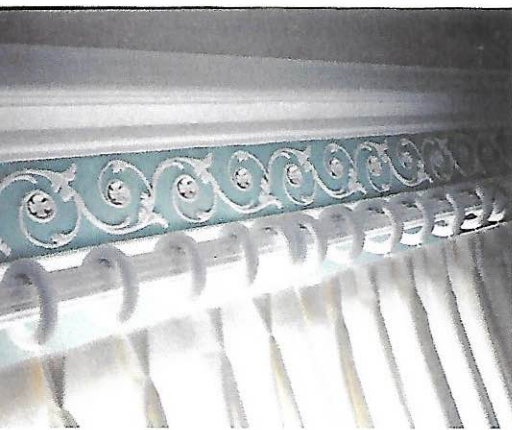
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**Local Color:** Discovered during the restoration, the palette of soft green and lively yellow was replicated from samples of early wall colors that had been obscured by subsequent paint jobs.







**Complementary Design:** A slender desk with ormolu mount fittings and a Sheraton armchair provide a harmonious silhouette that echoes the interior's elegant appointments.

for Cedar Hill. Plus, being from this area, you naturally love the idea of what an historical building represents. It's something ingrained in people from this part of the world," she adds.

With a collection of documents meticulously detailing the Alston House's components from the fundamental to the ornamental, Glenn Keyes Architects and Richard Marks Restorations undertook an intricate analysis that enabled them to number, disassemble, pack, and transport the house piece by piece, to be reassembled jigsaw-like on its new foundation on the bluff at Cedar Hill. To all involved, the project was not only fascinating as an exercise in preparing a significant piece of the past for a new future but also as an intimate discovery of the house itself: ghost marks of previous staircases, mantels, and

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deal of pleasure  
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authentically."*

—Wayland Cato, Jr.

obscured mouldings all revealed a part of  
the home's forgotten history.

The painstaking, two-year project  
yielded a faithful restoration and,  
because of the surviving documentation,  
any elements—including floor plans, fire-  
places, plasterwork, and paint colors—  
that had been lost or were unsalvageable  
benefited from a thoughtful reproduc-  
tion from master craftsmen's hands. And  
so, as in the days when it was used as a  
conduit to Charleston's cultural and  
social milieu, the house exudes the same  
grandeur in its barrel-vaulted and tray



**Past Perfect:** Thoughtfully furnished with a  
Regency-style table and Chippendale chairs,  
the dining room resonates with an appropriate  
period atmosphere.





**Wheel of Fortune:** Cedar Hill property manager Harvey Fort uncovered an old rice mill on the property, which he restored with the help of Glenn Keyes Architects and Richard Marks Restorations.

ceilings, highly ornamental wainscoting, and carved flourishes. "Aside from the modern amenities such as electricity and water, the Alston House is very much unchanged," says Marion.

But, of course, the view is a little different. Set between an oak grove and a bluff clearing, the stunning new vista encompasses a sloping lawn leading out to a wide blue swath of rippled river dappled with grass-covered marsh islets—no doubt one reason that spending time here is a priority for the Catos. And though this rural retreat and beautiful house is a gift in their life, it's something they very much want to share, making it open to anyone legitimately interested in enjoying its history.

"We're just stewards of this beautiful land and its important structures, hoping that like-minded people will come along after us and continue the gift of preservation," says Marion. Because of this kind of thinking, an important property with a long shared history in the Lowcountry is now positioned for the enjoyment of future generations—including the Catos'. With seven grown children and six grandchildren in the family, it seems the William Alston House is good and safe from the wrecking ball for a long time to come.

And the rest, as they say, is history.



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