

Mid-Atlantic Living: People & Places

A BONUS SECTION FOR OUR VIRGINIA, MARYLAND, D.C., & DELAWARE READERS

# Southern Living<sup>®</sup>

MARCH 2002

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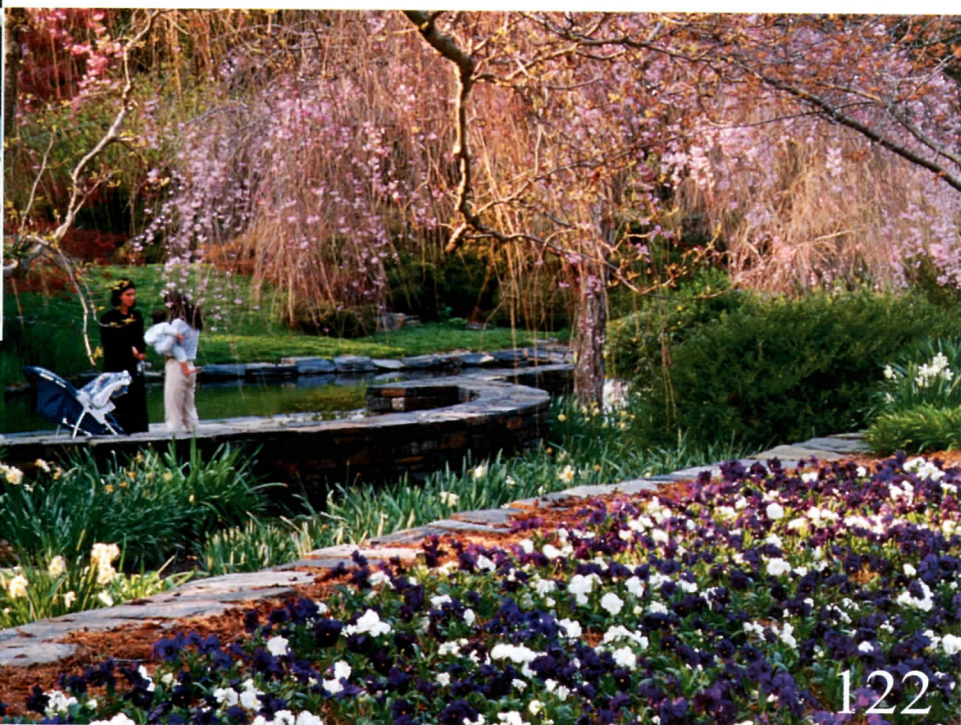
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## Renewed Spirit in a Small Town

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Life is good—and getting better—in Petersburg, Virginia. Let us introduce you to a few of the reasons why.

## Mid-Atlantic Living: People & Places

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In this special section for our D.C., Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia readers, we spend a busy day with Elaine Rogers, president of the Washington, D.C., chapter of the USO; go back in time with Annapolis archaeologist Al Luckenbach and his wife, historian Donna Ware; visit with Willie Drake in Virginia as he gives new life to old wood; and more.



## On Our Cover

Azaleas herald the arrival of spring in landscapes throughout the South. On page 76, we offer all the basic information you need to grow and care for this Southern staple in your own yard. Photograph by Ralph Anderson



# *Renewed spirit in a* Small town

As witnessed in Petersburg, Virginia, learn how new faces are maintaining the architectural heritage of this quaint town along the Appomattox River.



## **A Remarkable Legacy**

Located just 23 miles south of Richmond, Petersburg boasts the distinction of being one of this country's oldest cities, having celebrated its 250th anniversary in 1998. During that broad span of time, a veritable Who's Who of legendary Americans has graced its shops, homes, and thoroughfares. While the phrase "George Washington slept here" may seem overused, in this case it's true. Thomas Jefferson, another Founding Father, is credited for giving design advice on the home of his friend and first mayor of Petersburg, John Banister. Banister's house, Battersea, still stands as a wonderful example of Palladian architecture.

And the list of notables goes on. Edgar Allan Poe and his new wife, Virginia Clemm, spent their honeymoon on Petersburg's East Bank Street in 1836. During the final months of the Civil War, the besieged and weary city saw the likes of Generals Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant, along with President Abraham Lincoln himself. Actor Joseph Cotten (now deceased) was born and raised here.

Today, new faces work and live in this city, adding their own personal histories to its fabric. While time and events have taken their toll, much of Petersburg's Old Towne and surrounding neighborhoods remain intact. The following cases demonstrate how this design and cultural legacy is being preserved by residents in a labor of love.



BY ROBERT MARTIN / PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN O'HAGAN

**A**t a glance, Petersburg, Virginia, may look like any other well-established, shady-laned community across the South. In many ways, it is. Likewise, this small city of 34,000 residents, nestled along the banks of the Appomattox River, has witnessed the same struggles confronting many places affected by progress. Its inner core of businesses and older neighborhoods tries to remain vibrant, while the modern forces of urban sprawl, fast food strips, and shopping malls continue to push outward.

But take a closer look here, and you'll discover a community that is awakening not only to the wealth of its rich architectural past but also to the rewards of preserving and maintaining these cherished structures for both present and future generations to enjoy. Walk down any residential street in Petersburg, and you're bound to find excellent examples of just about any design style. Colonial, Greek Revival, Federal, country Gothic, Victorian, Queen Anne, Italianate, Second Empire, Arts and Crafts—they are all represented in some of the most intact housing districts found anywhere in the South.



before

### Living Proof on High Street

Just a few decades ago, these refined brick row houses, built between 1837 and 1859, were inhabited not by people but by trees, weeds, and pigeons. Whole sections of metal roofing were missing, exposing the bare rafters and interiors to whatever the weather had to offer. Likewise, thick vines had weakened the masonry walls, while the elegant Federal-style woodwork was left neglected and unpainted.

Although these structures seemed doomed for the wrecking ball, there were a handful of citizens who shared a more optimistic outlook. Thanks to the Historic Petersburg Foundation, particularly members Florence Cabiniss and Shirley VanLandingham, the row houses were reclaimed and restored one by one. Today, they constitute some of the most desirable housing in the entire city.



after

A 1970s photograph of the row houses along High Street shows their dilapidated condition. Note that some of the trees in the foreground are actually growing *out* of these structures. Now restored and updated, the row houses have become some of the most desirable housing in Petersburg. Signs of daily life can once again be seen in and around the High Street row houses. The restrained, elegant exterior details are characteristic of the structures' Federal style.



**left:** Homeowners Gil and Carolyn Entzminger pause for a brief but well-deserved rest while working on their Jefferson Street residence. **above:** A dismantled tub, removed from one of the four apartments that once comprised this home, sits alone in what will likely become the Entzmingers' dining room. **below:** The couple works to meticulously reconstruct the front porch of their 1850s Italianate-style home.

### An Ambitious Starter Home

When Carolyn and Gil Entzminger first laid eyes upon the sagging, partially burned house on Petersburg's Jefferson Street, they were hooked. Both architects from Alexandria, Virginia, the couple immediately looked beyond the faded wood trim and peeling columns to envision a home with character, charm, and presence. "The house dates around 1850," Gil explains, "and after many years of neglect and haphazard add-ons, it was a mess. Our main challenge after buying the place was and is to restore its original character, while updating it for modern living."

Consisting of a two-story, wood-framed structure designed in the Italianate style, the Entzminger home had been divided into four apartments sometime around 1940. Kitchens were also added in a rear extension that serviced the tenant spaces. In converting the house to a single-family residence, Gil and Carolyn removed all the appliances, electrical systems, and plumbing networks, along with the tenant separation walls.

Presently reconstructing the front porch, the couple is also considering a host of alternative building features. "I plan to use innovative materials and systems wherever possible," Gil explains, "while staying true to the historic integrity." Once the renovation is complete, the couple will permanently move to Petersburg.





after



before

**left:** This “before” shot of Jeannie and Craig Tidy’s future home fully indicates the scope of restoration that lay ahead. **above:** Now tidied up, this 1850s house on Petersburg’s Harding Street is a remarkable testament not only to the homeowners’ hard work but also to Jeannie’s skills as a “blight house specialist.” What better way for these homeowners to advertise their expertise than by restoring their own home?

### All Tidied Up

“If you can’t find someone to fix it for you, then fix it yourself,” states Jeannie Tidy. And she lives up to those words. Known as a “blight house specialist,” Jeannie initially helped revive several historic districts in New Orleans until she was summoned to Petersburg for a command performance. Now she’s executive director of the Landmark Resource Center, a nonprofit organization that’s dedicated to revitalizing Petersburg’s neighborhoods by recycling abandoned or neglected properties.

Upon relocating to Virginia, Jeannie and her husband, Craig, began house shopping. “There was this one brick residence that I just couldn’t find anyone to buy and

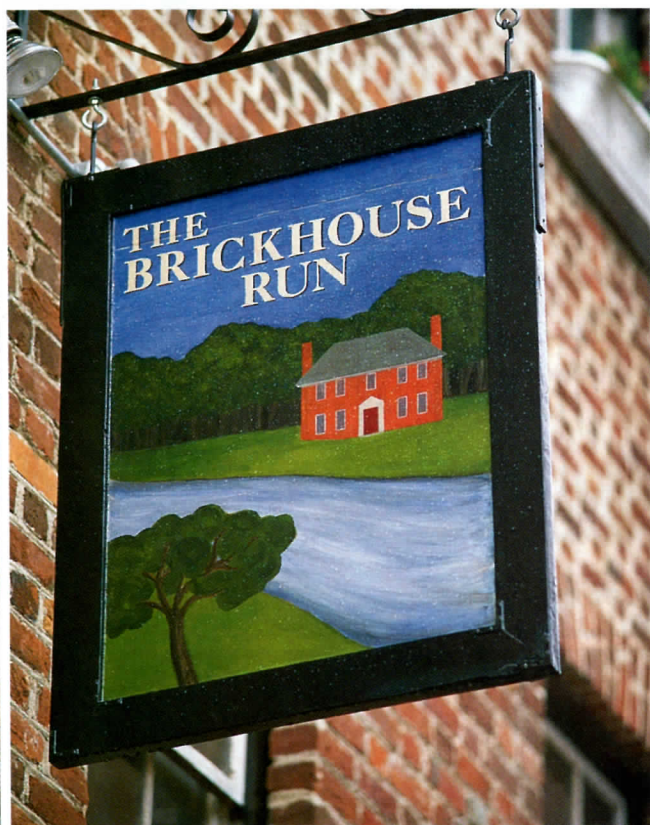
restore,” she remembers. “It had been abandoned for 15 years, and for two of those years the city had slated it for demolition.” Finding no takers, the Tidys took matters into their own hands: They bought the property.

Located in the Ravenscroft neighborhood of Petersburg, the home was built around 1855 and is considered one of the finest antebellum houses in the city. The place looked far less impressive, though, when the couple first purchased it. Black-painted plywood covered all the windows, and in the back of the house, much of the hand-pressed brick was missing or collapsing. Even the entire main staircase in the central hall had disappeared.

Jeannie, Craig, and his brother Jerry began the arduous task of putting the house back together. After much toil and effort, the Tidys’ home is once again restored to its original charm.



**left:** Ella and Steve Dickinson stand proudly with executive chef Cary Snow outside their British pub, The Brickhouse Run. The cobblestone street of Cockade Alley (seen in the background) was revealed only after Steve and some friends removed years of asphalt and dirt layers. **below:** This colorful hand-painted placard hangs outside the restaurant and living quarters. **below, left:** A sun-filled glow permeates the Dickinsons' loft home above The Brickhouse Run.



devoid of windows, interior walls, mechanical systems, and, in some cases, floors,” remarks Ella. “Thus, with the help of architect Terry Ammons, our first year was spent doing structural work that included repointing 50% of the brickwork, along with installing steel supports and replacing the roofs.”

As their undertaking progressed, the Dickinsons’ schedule for completion lengthened. During the second year, the couple carved out a cozy arrangement of living spaces on the middle and upper floors. The next year brought the construction of the ground-level restaurant. Named The Brickhouse Run, the pub is outfitted with a new facade and a hand-painted wood placard. A colorful Union Jack flies outside as well, signaling to all its British appeal.

While work continues in the loft spaces above, Steve and Ella can enjoy a pint of ale or some fish-and-chips at the pub counter below. Along with executive chef Cary Snow, the couple relishes hosting guests with a unique mix of American and English cuisine. And if something’s needed from home—then it’s just up the stairs.

### Living and Working Under the Same Roof

Four years may seem like a long time to establish a home, but for Steve and Ella Dickinson, there were additional goals involved. Searching for a roomy place to set up housekeeping and a business, the Dickinsons discovered a series of unoccupied buildings along a narrow street called Cockade Alley. Originally from Buckinghamshire, England, Ella longed to open a British pub, and this area seemed like the perfect spot for a restaurant. “We fell in love with these buildings from the start,” Ella explains. “Not only did they have great views of Petersburg’s Old Towne, but the structures also appeared versatile enough to suit our needs.”

Constructed in 1816, the two brick warehouses, both three stories tall, had seen better days; one of them had remained abandoned since the 1920s. “The buildings were completely



Petersburg's city officials, members of the Historic Petersburg Foundation, and other diligent citizens involved in the revitalization movement gather outside one of the city's most prized homes, Battersea.

## JEANNIE'S TIPS FOR REVITALIZING COMMUNITIES

As a "blight house specialist" in Petersburg, Jeannie Tidy knows her stuff when it comes to saving valuable structures. She provides this advice.

**Marketing:** Jeannie stresses that marketing is the most important tool. To create interest, do the following.

- Make photo albums of the neighborhoods and all vacant housing stock.
- Set up a central location, preferably downtown, to distribute information on neglected, abandoned buildings, along with tax credits, tax abatements, and other incentives your city has to offer. If none are provided, then go to your city council for help.
- Create positive attention in your area by starting home and garden tours or festivals—any event that will bring people to your community.
- Deputize ambassadors of goodwill who will conduct tours and answer questions about the area.

**Financing:** "Have local banks on board to assist with renovation financing," Jeannie states. "It's good business; plus, it makes these institutions aware of what needs to be focused upon in their community."

**Code enforcement:** Start letter writing campaigns to blighted property owners and city departments to stop violations and enforce neglected property fines.

**Establishing historic districts:** You may qualify for grants to assist in your efforts. "National historic districts create economic development for communities, and many people need tax credits when taking on projects."

**front row** (left to right): Gerry Reames, Jeannie Tidy, Frances Johnson, Shirley VanLandingham, Jamie Caudle (with wife Dot behind), Suzanne Savory, Pam Covill, Leonard Muse

**back row** (left to right): Charles and JoAnn Dubois, Dr. David Reames, Kevin Kirby, Jim Davenport, Landon Wellford, Michael Packer, Lunsford Johnson, Chief Wallace, David Canada, Dulaney Ward, Dr. James Ryan, Vandy Jones, Jim Hester, Charles Cuthbert, Jr., Robert Walker, chief James Patterson

## A City in Action

Like all communities, Petersburg is a product of its residents. One organization, the Historic Petersburg Foundation, has made preservation its mission. Enacted in 1967 by the city's chamber of commerce, this voluntary group of citizens strives to obtain neglected properties with hopes of finding new owners who understand the structures' significance. Also, this group is well versed in tax incentives and federal grants that are available for funding such causes. To date, street after street of restored homes and businesses remain intact because of the foundation's diligence.

While the work is often tedious and the results long in coming, the benefits that these organizations provide cannot be denied. So the next time you're out and about in your own community, look around. Those buildings that you cherish and have grown so accustomed to seeing may not always be there. Houses and other structures of merit can't stand on their own indefinitely. Like people, they need nurturing, care, and frequent attention. And in response to the movement at hand in Petersburg, the question for the day is this: Have you saved a house lately?