

If not for patrons
Candy and Bill Carden,
this once-Munsters-
macabre Victorian on the
Northern Neck would not
have survived. GARLAND
POLLARD finds a
museum-quality example
of a forgotten era.

Mount Pleasant

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Facing page, each of the doors in the house, including these double pocket doors, were removed from hinges and rebuilt. This page, a view to the front. Each of the fireplaces were rebuilt as well. The gasolier fixture is original, though rebuilt and electrified. The original methane came from a plant on site.



It's a typical summer day at Bill and Candy Carden's Mount Pleasant, up the hill from the Potomac in Westmoreland County. During a regular visit, architectural historian and consultant C. Dudley Brown notices that a rare Herter Brothers chair in the parlor of Mount Pleasant has its back cracked. Owner Candy Carden wonders why folks who visit just keep leaning back in their chairs. Brown, who has overseen much of the restoration of the house, dutifully takes the chair back home to D.C. to repair it. It's the second time around for the chair. The first time the Herter Brothers furniture arrived, it came in a minivan, looking like pile of sticks with no upholstery and thousands of tacks. Candy was worried then, too, but for other reasons. "I've got to take these inside and explain all of this to Bill." His reaction was just as expected, telling her that it was "nice kindling wood." Then, as now, Dudley Brown found an expert, and a piece of American design history was preserved.

Like the Herter chair, the story of the restoration of Mount Pleasant is about fate, faith, cooperation and compromise, what Bill calls the "journey of a lifetime." Way before the Cardens bought it, they had seen the house. But just the outside. As had just about everyone in the community, though none had ever been inside. "It looked like the Addams Family had abandoned it for years," says Candy.

"When Candy and I were courting and she would come up to see me from North Carolina ... she would ask me, 'Bill, I can see this big white statue of a house that seems to be going up through the trees into the clouds. Do you know anything about it?'"

Of all the decades that Bill Carden had lived nearby, he had never been inside. Reclusive owner Clarence Holding kept those stunning iron gates closed to the community.

"Candy continued to pursue the house. One Sunday after church, I guess it was in January because we had the annual meeting," recounts Bill, she asked if they could just "walk over there and see the house."

They thought it was abandoned, but then they were greeted by Mr. Holding's dogs. Mr. Holding was still around. A few years later, the local postman didn't see Mr. Holding picking up mail. And a few years after that, around October of 1994, Candy came into Bill's office. Bill remembers her saying, "You won't believe it. You won't believe it. Mount Pleasant is going to be auctioned."

Left, the front parlor. Victoria and Albert sitting atop the fireplace were a gift from Dudley Brown. The green Herter sofa set came as a set of sticks, without upholstery. Inset, a view of the front. All but one of the columns had to be re-milled.

"It created quite a stir in the community," says Bill. Before the auction, she asked to go up there and take a look. Bill was smitten. "When you suddenly see the expanse of ceilings and walls and moldings and wood, it takes you back, it takes your breath—you say, 'Good God, I haven't seen anything like this before.' It was an experience. Really. I had no idea that the following Saturday, my life and Candy's was going to change."

While Bill says some "thoughts may have transpired" about it, they had not spoken out loud that they would bid. Instead, Candy said that they ought to "ride up there and see what happens." Apparently, the rest of the Northern Neck had the same idea, too. "When we got here, I mean, it was like a state fair. People had come from far and near, and

there were probably a thousand people at the auction. Cars were parked up the road, down the road, in the churchyard, on 202, and—it was something going on at Mount Pleasant!"

The auction was in parts, first being Holding's household goods, the second being the land, then the house, and finally the land and the house if anyone wanted it together. Bill recounts, "At about five minutes to 12 he stopped the auction. He said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, I'll meet you on the VA-ran-duh at 12 o'clock. And so he got up there, and he got his old bull-horn and everything.'" But after the bids came in, Candy was saddened that no one wanted the whole thing. The farm was to be split up, and the house, perhaps, dismantled for salvage.

"At that point, we both realized that this was a special piece of property. In our subconscious it was starting to come forward to the front,"

says Bill. "You started to get these little vibes." The bids went up from \$99,000, slowly up and up. "It went boom boom. I said, 'OK, Candy, she's going away from here.' The next bid was \$121[000] and it slowed her down, just like that." He went '121, 122.' Then 123 came. The whole auction just slowed right down. What we didn't realize at the time, this antique bee—honey-bee, about [motions up] that long—three times the size of a regular one, flew down out of the gables. I smacked, and the auctioneer said, "HO! ALL RIGHT, 124, 124."

Candy shrieked: "What in the world did you do?" Bill wasn't worried. "She's going straight north. She's not slowing down here." But for 15 minutes, the auctioneer could not pull a bid from anywhere." The crowd began to look at the Cardens, who were squirming. The auctioneer finally said she's going three times. "Sold. Mr. and Mrs. Carden, come up on the veranda."

Candy could have died from embarrassment. It was almost as if Mr. Haynie of Hooterville had schmoored Lisa and Oliver, yet again. "The veranda was so broken down. There was an old ladder. They had to pull us up on the veranda. There were no steps coming up to it. They were all caved in." But they started up.

"That really began one of the greatest journeys in our life," says Bill. Today, the 50-acre setting is spectacular, each outbuilding lovingly restored and every inch of the house put back to where it was in the 1890s. Carden even has a woodshop in the barn, milling all the missing pieces on site. But getting there wasn't easy. Dudley Brown was brought in soon after the restoration was started. Bill Carden called him, ironically, when he was at a meeting of the Victorian Society in Richmond.

When Brown arrived in 1995 at the start of renovation, it wasn't the same idyllic scene as now. "You couldn't move in this house," says Brown, an expert in period houses. "This house had so many people in it. It looked like a lumberyard in a windstorm." When Brown first met Bill Carden on that May 29, he wanted it finished for Christmas. Brown told him no. "Bill, God himself could not finish this house by Sept 15." They talked, and Brown came away impressed.

But when Brown got back to D.C., he found in the house folder he brought back a piece of torn-off place mat Bill had slipped in. "Written very nicely and stuck in was 'Sept. 15.'" Brown thought that there would be no way he could work with Bill Carden. "This is a strong, impulsive







Facing page, the dining room. Daughter Charlotte spent a summer re-making the thousands of prisms on the chandelier, which is original to the house. The fireplace is unique with window on top; the flue goes on both sides. This page, from top left, a view looking past the front parlor into the dining room. The carpeting is from J.R. Burrows & Co., and is a period design. A closeup of the dining room table; the paper is Mount Diablo's Texarkana Floral Strie. Bill Carden with Little Man. The baby chair he sits on is period; it converts into a stroller.



Clockwise from top left: The smokehouse, completely rebuilt. It sits to the east of the house, closest to the Potomac. The north elevation; it took eight months to remill and reglaze the windows. Candy and Bill on the front porch. A loading shed; it will be replaced by a new barn now under construction.





man," Brown recalls thinking.

But by the next week, they were working together. Bill recalls sitting down with Brown, who had been recommended by friend Susan Bullock. "He said 'Bill, you've got a lot of energy and you've got a lot of drive. We can either make this one of the most enjoyable experiences, or it can just be a nightmare,'" They took it one element at a time, Bill calling Brown his professor. "It then became a true journey. Dudley came and told stories every week about what we were going to do."

The process became a team effort—all three had to agree before taking each next step. Through it all, everyone compromised in favor of the house, and Candy too became a hands-on expert in the building trades. "Dudley would come once a week and he and I would work all day," she says. "And Bill would come home at night ... and review the work and the plan that we would carry on."

On the property, the smokehouse was rebuilt, as was the barn, where Bill Carden ran all the timber and built it over again where it was rotten. Dudley Brown taught a crew of laborers how to carefully strip the paint off the inside of the house. A firm of Long Island plasterers recreated the plaster moldings. Bill even found a brass company to recreate the missing (and ornate) door hinges. "We were going to do it right, and make those that had gone before us proud."

There was one thing Bill Carden would not compromise on. Perfection. "Bill Carden wants it perfect," says Brown. "He will see to it that it's perfect. And that's kind of the standard. It's up to any of us who work for him to get it like that." The Cardens were a singular match for Mount Pleasant. With Bill Carden's standards and his ownership of Potomac Supply, they went so far as trying to replace the cypress porch columns with cypress, though could not because the wood kept splitting when the columns were turned.

The choice of Brown, an interior designer, was not the obvious pick.

"Architects want to leave their mark," Candy says. "We wanted whatever we did to be secondary, not primary, cause the house was here before we were." The project turned out to be mammoth. Spanning three years and 13,000 square feet, every piece of rotten or broken lumber was matched. All of the doors were removed and put back together. All of the plaster was patched or replaced. The marble mantels, grained to match the woodwork of the house, were repainted by Malcolm Robson, who did graining at Mount Vernon.

While they were doing the house, they went on a voyage of discovery about its original owner, Baltimorean John Crabbe, who built the house around 1886, and found that much of the pattern book materials came directly from Baltimore through the town of Kinsale. "The gentleman who built it was from Hague," says Candy Carden. "He wanted to retire back here, so he built this house." They even found Crabbe's Baltimore house. Looking through the research, they found that Crabbe wanted to bring the railroad to the Northern Neck. But he died on the way back to Baltimore, and his family moved back to Mount Pleasant. The children inherited the house, but it passed out of the family.

Lucky for Crabbe's legacy, the Cardens found Mount Pleasant. Or, to be more precise, Mount Pleasant found the Cardens. "We don't feel like we own this home," says Candy. "It doesn't really belong to us."

At first, Candy Carden was not a big fan of Victorian. "My memory was kind of like 'grandmother,' and everything was in an oval or a circle, red velvet, and it brought back kind of depressing memories. Lace—and I'm not a lace-y type person. So [friend and appraiser] Betsy Bullock and Dudley said no, it doesn't have to be like that."

Her transformation of taste spoke of larger things, of a change in herself, too. "That's when all of a sudden you open your eyes.

This page, bedroom of daughter Lauren, with an antique faux-finished pine bed. A new bathroom inspired by period fixtures. The master bedroom, with king mattress tucked on top of a Victorian double bed.



Clockwise from top left: The front porch with oversized hickory rockers. Second parlor showcasing Mt. Pleasant's signature multicolor window lights. The piano was crafted in Baltimore by Wm. Knabe & Co. A view through the front door into the main hall. The corbel brackets near the ceiling are plaster; the ones that did not survive were meticulously reproduced.

