



HOUSE OF HIS DREAMS

By Patti Nickell / Photos by Lee Thomas

Jon Carloftis makes ownership of historic Botherum a reality

When Jon Carloftis first laid eyes on Botherum, the 1851 antebellum cottage in Woodward Heights near downtown Lexington, nearly 30 years ago, it was love at first sight. “I was a junior at UK, and I tended bar at a party there,” he said. “They set me up in a tiny hallway, which had these amazing, tall ceilings. I couldn’t believe it. I think I

decided that night that someday I was going to live in this house.”

Like many grand amours, however, the road to eventual harmony was long and rocky.

Carloftis graduated and moved to New York to begin making a name as a garden designer, creating gardens for such high-profile clients as Google and an assortment of A-list celebrities, ranging

from Julianne Moore to Mike Myers. Through it all, memories of Botherum haunted him.

“Every time I’d come back to Kentucky, I’d find myself driving by the house and fantasizing again about living there,” he said.

As for the object of Carloftis’ fascination, it appeared more haunted than haunting. Obscured by a six-foot wall and a jun-



gle of overgrown vegetation, Botherum would have been more at home in the pages of a Southern Gothic novel than in the pages of *House Beautiful*.

It seemed to be waiting for just the right person to give it the TLC it needed to regain its former glory. That day came in May 2012 when Carloftis' friend and soon-to-be neighbor Fran Taylor phoned him with the news that the house was on the market.

"As I recall, she told me 'this house is going to change your life,' " he said with a laugh.

While Carloftis was ready for a life change and could peer over the wall at Botherum and envision "the coolest house ever," his partner in life and business, Dale Fisher, wasn't quite as enamored.

"I just didn't think it was the right time to take on such a monumental responsibility," acknowledged Fisher.

With good reason. Along with the high-profile clients for whom he designs gardens, Carloftis has parlayed his family's successful garden and landscaping business, Rockcastle River Trading Company, into a national brand, taking him to speaking engagements and garden events around the country. In addition, the couple already maintained homes in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and Lexington's Chevy Chase area.

Still, after Carloftis' client and good friend Linda Bruckheimer, wife of television producer Jerry Bruckheimer, told him, "You buy it or I will," he convinced Fisher to take the plunge.

Botherum was constructed in the mid-19th century as a memorial to Madison Conyers Johnson's wife, Sally Ann. The house blends many architectural styles, mostly notably Greek as reflected in the Corinthian columns at the front entrance. Though the renovation is complete, the house and grounds still keep Carloftis (above) busy.

A house with a history

Perhaps no other house in Lexington has a historic pedigree to rival that of Botherum. In the mid-19th century, Kentucky's attorney general, Madison Conyers Johnson, an intimate of Abraham Lincoln, collaborated with distinguished architect John McMurtry to build the house as a memorial to Johnson's late wife, Sally Ann, the sister of famed abolitionist Cassius Marcellus Clay.

Often referred to as "Kentucky's Taj Mahal," because of Johnson's devotion to his wife, who had died in childbirth some years earlier, the name Botherum itself has a more whimsical derivation.

"It came from a popular play of that time about two lawyers named Bore'um and Bother'um," said Carloftis. "Since Johnson was a lawyer, I guess it's safe to say he had a sense of humor."

When the house was built, it was something of an oddity in Central Kentucky. McMurtry had combined Greek, Roman, and Gothic influences into the design, with Greek the most easily identifiable style in the form of classic Corinthian columns at the front and on either side of the house.

Through the years Botherum has had several owners, including Dr. John Cavendish, from whom Carloftis purchased the property he described as being in a state of "glamorous decay" for \$675,000.

"Dr. Cavendish hadn't lived in the house for many years, so naturally it had deteriorated quite a bit," said Carloftis, who, neverthe-



An antique mirror and chandelier provide design links to the house's history.

less, is quick to credit Cavendish for saving the historic property. In a time when preservation often takes a back seat to progress, Carloftis said Lexington owes Cavendish a debt of gratitude.

"He could have split it up and rented it out," he said. "Thank goodness, he didn't."

Carloftis' euphoria at owning the house of his dreams was tempered by his angst over the amount of work that lay ahead.

"To put it mildly, there was nothing that didn't have to be done," he said.

Electricity, plumbing, and wiring all had to be brought up to code. The roof, a patchwork of leaky asphalt shingles, had to be torn down, and Carloftis and Fisher decided to replace it with a copper one, similar to the original.

The copper roof stopped the leak, but the inside plaster ceiling and walls, after so many years of neglect, dried out, creating a spiderweb of cracks that took a plasterer the better part of a year to repair.

Paint, which had been layered over the original ash, poplar, and heart-pine floors, was stripped, and the floors were rubbed with tung oil to keep them looking weathered.

A resident family of raccoons had to be evicted and the basement and attic shored up to prevent their re-entry.

In what was perhaps the most controversial decision, Carloftis removed 70 trees that had become so overgrown the property had the appearance of an urban jungle. However he is quick to point out that he did keep the 185-year-old ginkgo, visible from the front window. "That tree was given to Johnson by Henry Clay and is one of the oldest and largest in the country," said Carloftis. "So, there was no question that we were going to keep it."

It took a year and six days and a million dollars to complete the renovation.



Carloftis had to persuade partner Dale Fisher that they should take on the Botherum project.

house of his dreams



Clockwise from bottom left, the drawing room includes a re-upholstered sofa that was a junk store find; the dining room table may have graced a Philadelphia hunt club; a portrait of a young Abraham Lincoln hangs over the kitchen fireplace; the main bedroom combines simplicity and high style.

Was there ever a time when they considered throwing in the towel?

“Never,” the two say in unison, adding that despite tribulations that would have challenged Job, it was the most rewarding experience of their lives.

A Southern showplace

Once Carloftis and Fisher got the house properly caulked and cauterized; deconstructed and reconstructed; plastered, painted, and polished; the fun started — decorating in a manner that fits the couple’s eclectic tastes.

Carloftis, whose Kentucky roots go back two centuries, wears his commonwealth credentials proudly, extolling Kentucky’s virtues — from bourbon to bloodstock to basketball — everywhere he goes. Fisher, born in Ohio, has become a convert to the ways of the Bluegrass.

“We consulted with experts and also asked the advice of friends we respected, but in the end we made our own decisions,” said Carloftis. The only rule, he added, “is that there were no rules.

Whatever we liked, we used.”

What he liked was lots of light (“Greek Revival is all about light”), and Botherum had light aplenty.

“During the day we follow the sun from one part of the house to another,” said Carloftis, noting how at the end of the day, the sunset faces the kitchen window.

“I love sitting by the kitchen fireplace with a nice bourbon and looking out the back window at the garden and just reflecting,” he said.

Both Carloftis and Fisher enjoy nothing better than scouring the country in their Toyota pickup in search of collectibles, and they don’t care if those collectibles are high-end antiques or whimsical curios that tickle their fancy. The house provides a setting for this eclectic style.

A portrait of Abraham Lincoln hanging above the kitchen fireplace shares pride of place with a favorite piece of Bybee pottery and two hornets’ nests recovered from their Bucks County farmhouse.

The antique mirror above the mantel in the guest bedroom is on

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A koi pond, statuary, and secret alcoves give the ever-changing garden a dreamlike quality.



permanent loan from Longwood Antique Woods while the brass chandelier reflected in it is thought to be original to the house. The 19th-century dining room table Carloftis found in an antique shop in New Jersey is believed to have originally graced a Philadelphia hunt club while the centerpiece sofa in the drawing room is a junk-store find that has been re-upholstered in a bold graphic print.

While the garden is in a constant state of evolution and Carloftis and Fisher are in the process of installing a pool near the carriage house guest quarters, Botherum, to paraphrase *Sunset Boulevard's* Norma Desmond, is ready for its close-up, and Lexington couldn't be more delighted.

Carloftis and Fisher are natural-born hosts and love sharing their home and its history with guests — whether a casual dinner with friends such as the Bruckheimers, a bourbon tasting for the trend-setters from the Limited Corporation, or a tour for the Blue Grass Trust.

"For the tour, the BGT told us to expect

15 to 17 people," Carloftis said. "More than 800 showed up, and you know what — we loved it."

They've even been known to invite total strangers in for a look around.

"When we're working in the yard, we'll often see people slow down and try to peek through the gates or over the wall, and if they seem really curious, we'll invite them in," he said.

Ensnconced in what he calls "our grand house on a small scale," Carloftis, Fisher, and their two yellow labs, Lily and Gertie, couldn't be happier.

"Bringing Botherum back to its former glory has taken over our lives," Carloftis acknowledged. "But in a wonderful and rewarding way." KM