



ROSE HILL *mansion*

A Gothic Romance Revived

By Diane McMahon PHOTOGRAPHY BY Rob Kaufman

It is a clear winter night, December 1860. Emily Kirk, shimmering with youth and excitement, declines the next dance to catch her breath. The rustle of taffeta and silk; the measured click of boot heels keeping time with lively music; the layered smells of fresh pine garland and ladies' eau de toilette mixing with the heat of a thousand lit candles—all of it is as intoxicating to her as the gentlemen guests' pocket flasks of whiskey. She surveys the exquisitely gowned women and their partners, noting potential suitors. She smiles remembering her

parents' dismay that she issued invitations without their permission—and with their house still under construction. Tonight all is forgiven. South Carolina's elite families, from as far away as Savannah and Charleston, are here at Rose Hill dancing at her Christmas Ball. Flushed with dreams of her future, Emily cannot conceive this is the first and last social extravaganza her family will host before fleeing Union soldiers; that the mansion will stand incomplete for nearly a century...or that she will become a tragic heroine haunting her home's past.



Rose Hill Mansion, now a private residence and living museum open to the public, houses 155 years of history and a story as richly embellished as its Gothic Revival architecture. On a bright winter morning Robin White, co-owner of Rose Hill Mansion and its surrounding 12-acre property, narrates her home's tale of romance, ruin and redemption, replete with a disastrous fire in 1987 that left it a "charred and empty hull." Perched on a carved wood chair in the mansion's sky-blue dining room, she seems transposed from a Southern Gothic novel: alabaster skin; delicate bones; spun-gold hair. Ethereal, almost otherworldly, she laughs, "I'm so pale I tell people I'm the ghost that haunts this house."

Robin and her husband Rusty (founder of the *Robb Report*) purchased Rose Hill Mansion on April 12, 1996, Robin's birthday. Their personal story layers on the Rose Hill legend with dramatic elements suited to the mansion's gothic character. Rusty, the younger brother of Robin's mother's high school friend and 22 years older than Robin, spent his early years acquiring experiences and possessions that positioned him (through the *Robb Report*) to personify the magazine's tag line: "The Best Of The Best." In fact, Robin and Rusty each have roots in Newton, Miss. and Robin has known about him since she was 12.

After she graduates from Berry College with a degree in art, Robin's aunt and Rusty's mother introduce the respective niece (who needs a job) and son (who owns several businesses including an art restoration company in Atlanta). She is hired on her birthday, April 12, 1991. Six months after she starts working for him, Rusty calls her and asks her to meet for a drink in Buckhead—which turns into dinner and a romance from that night forward.

It is 1995. They are engaged and living in Atlanta. Rusty's high-powered, fast track life has caught up, he decides that it's time to slow down. The couple determines they need

a quieter life. Robin flips through a copy of *The National Trust for Historic Preservation's Preservation* magazine and sees a classified ad for a Gothic Revival home in Bluffton, SC. She imagines a "cute Victorian Gothic gingerbread house." In May of '95 they drive up to Rose Hill Mansion to discover "a façade, like the outer shell on a movie set" shielding a ruined interior gutted by fire.

"I walked in and stood right here in this demolished dining room. Everywhere between the exposed floor joists I saw the 3.5-foot crawl space still filled with debris from the fire. Awful." Pensive pause. "Rusty was ready to turn and walk away, but I stopped him. I could feel the house's soul. I told him I

was sure we could bring it back to life."

They put a bid on the house. They face uncountable obstacles and resistance. Robin is diagnosed with cancer. They put their plans for marriage on hold. There are months of emotional depletion and depression mirrored in their challenge to buy Rose Hill. Then, the week before her last treatment, which leaves her cancer free, the sale is approved. It is April 12, 1996, Robin's birthday. One year later—Robin's 30th birthday—she wears her families' heirloom Christian Dior wedding gown (now showcased in the "Ladies' Parlor") and marries Rusty in the restored conservatory at 3 p.m. before 120 family member and friends.



She reminisces, "Most brides are worrying about their hair and make-up. I'm rushing around the house with a screwdriver putting restored door-handles on the refurbished original doors. The downstairs rooms are renovated just enough to make it safe for the guests." For the next eight years the Whites live in the caretaker cottage and continue the restoration on the 10,000 square foot mansion. "This was a sad house when we bought it and it just needed the right couple to take it on and give it new life. It was good for the house and it was good for us." What's more Rose Hill Plantation was originally a wedding present to the first owners of the mansion and White's wedding reveals fate's romantic fondness for symmetry.



Years of meticulous research, creative imagination and the Whites' collectors' passion fueled the restoration of the mansion, now their residence and open to the public by reservation. Several of the mansion's original pieces have found their way home via donation by the descendants of the families who lived there. Retrieved artifacts, found on the grounds—coins, buttons from Union & Confederate soldiers' uniforms, Indian arrowheads—are all on display. The Whites have travelled extensively

to purchase rare period pieces that create the authentic interior. Robin quips, "We don't have children, but she is my 154 year old, high maintenance daughter. When she's difficult we call her *the money pit*."

Rose Hill Mansion, a Gothic Revival (also called Carpenter Gothic) architectural gem, is located on the Colleton River, several miles north of Hilton Head Island. The white four-story cruciform building, with its steeply pitched copper roof, clustered piers and spires, and arched windows

rises behind stands of live oaks draped in Spanish moss.

In 1838 Rose Hill Plantation (sans house) was a wedding present from James B. Kirk to his daughter Caroline who married her first cousin Dr. John Kirk. Construction on the mansion began in 1858. Cynthia Glendinning, lovely fourth great-granddaughter of James B. Kirk and director of Rose Hill Mansion, greets visitors and guests and guides them through the downstairs rooms, sometimes joined by Robin in period costume.



JOHN MELLENCAMP'S *"Now More Than Ever"* MOMENT AT ROSE HILL MANSION



Photo by Kurt Markus

With rounded dark sunglasses, collar-length hair, an earring and a shoulder tattoo, John Mellencamp steps through the doorway of Rose Hill Mansion and surveys the panorama of live oaks before him. Then as the opening chords of "Now More Than Ever" fill the air, a group of cheering children materializes. Mellencamp's band appears on the front porch and we are transported back to that sunny day in 1992 when the Grammy-winning rocker implored believers "to raise your hands." And they did. For four minutes the screen fills with clapping, dancing, air guitar-playing folks of varying ages, singing and bouncing—sometimes solo, or in impromptu chorus lines and groups—on the front lawn. Yet another magic moment in Rose Hill's history, this time immortalized on YouTube.

Rose Hill Mansion is open for guided historical tours, as well as luncheon tours for 10 or more, by reservation. The mansion's lower level and grounds are also available for weddings, fundraisers, parties, meetings, photo shoots, and other events.

ROSE HILL MANSION
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To view more photos and a historic timeline of Rose Hill Mansion, visit www.coastalisesles.com

The Whites have revived a history of wine making, producing "Rose Hill Mansion" wines in Ridgeland under their private label. Their selection includes a variety of reds, whites, Muscadine, and an historic wine using vines brought to this area in the 1700s by the French Huguenots. Guests are invited to sip their wine and stroll while Robin and Cynthia, both skilled raconteurs, revivify the lavishly appointed rooms and somber ancestral portraits with flesh and blood stories of its past.

Plans for the mansion were conceived on Caroline's and Dr. John's honeymoon. Traveling in Europe, they fell in love with the Gothic Revival architecture popular in Victorian England. Cynthia says, "We think they had architectural plans drawn over there. Some of it [the house] may even have been pre-fabricated, transported here and re-

assembled by shipbuilders." It took 20 years for "labor" to commence. Construction began in 1858 and proceeded until Christmas 1860. Emily, the Kirk's headstrong (and of course beautiful) 21-year-old daughter, invited friends to celebrate the yuletide season in her new home—initially without parental permission and despite the house being unfinished. The Kirks conceded, hosting a social extravaganza that drew people from Savannah and Charleston, and featured "tall, handsome gentleman and smiling ladies in hoop skirts, dancing to the tunes of merrymakes" according to an archived letter.

It was a fortuitous and final celebration at the Kirks' mansion. By November 1861 the Northern Fleet fired on Callawassie and Sherman's advancing troops forced the Kirk's to flee to Grahamville, S.C. near today's Ridge-

land. The house was occupied by Union troops throughout the Civil War. The Kirks were never able to complete the mansion, although it stayed in their family until 1928.

Cynthia, a literal *kin*-dred spirit, recounts the lore and history of Rose Hill Mansion; Robin and Rusty inhabit it. Together, through tours, and public and private events, they infuse this reincarnated home with living history and "jollification"—a word that leaps from one of the historical letters posted on their website. Robin takes a breath, "This house doesn't just belong to us. It's a touchstone for so many people, and we feel honored and obliged to share it. This is a time capsule of history...but I still want celebrations and special events to happen here. If people take away anything from their visit to our home, I want them to know how much we genuinely *love* this old house."