

## HOME BASE



# Loving Confection

Peter and Eileen Norton set about restoring a wedding-cake structure on Martha's Vineyard because it appealed to their sense of family and community

BY SUSAN HELLER ANDERSON

**T**HE CORBIN-NORTON House, as it is known on Martha's Vineyard, rises above the Oak Bluffs harbor with a flounce of petticoats and ruffles. At closer range, with its dizzying array of arches, balconies, and windows, it is a delicious-looking confection, basking in the afterglow of a caring restoration.

"By some inexplicable magic, we saw the diamond in the rough," recalls Peter Norton, who saw the house in 1991, with its original trim, windows, shingles, balconies, and veranda removed or covered over. "It was a house crying out



for a patron, some well-to-do fool with the money," Peter says.

Which he had. The previous year, he had sold Peter Norton Computing Inc. to Symantec for \$70 million. That summer, he and his wife, Eileen, a biracial couple from Santa Monica, California, visited friends in Oak Bluffs. "We liked the idea of Oak Bluffs, because it's where the black people are," Eileen says.

**GRAND DAME** The sign on the stair riser, above, notifies the public that this is A Private Home. The family's "Turkish pillow room," left, is in the turret.



**FELINE GRACE** The living room, above, has oak paneling that was original to the house. The trompe l'oeil chest with its cat motif was painted by a local artist.

They returned the following year with their two children and shopped for houses. They bought two in three weeks. The second, a charming cottage nearby, is now used as a guesthouse.

The Corbin house was built in 1891 and embodies the history of Oak Bluffs, a modest religious-camp-meeting site that grew into a seasonal destination priding itself on racial diversity.

In New England the Methodists developed the camp meeting for shared prayer. Martha's Vineyard's first, in 1827, rapidly became an institution, with people sleeping in tents around a campground. The encampment grew from 9 tents to 320 tents in 20 years. Houses replaced tents. Encouraged by the Methodists, the New England Black Baptist Association began camp meetings in Oak Bluffs. By the time the Corbin house was built, Oak Bluffs was becoming a popular black summer resort.

The house's owner, Philip Corbin,

was a Connecticut hardware manufacturer, and his house boasted elaborate metalwork: nameplates carved with flowers and leaves, hinges with swans and flowers, tiger-striped escutcheons. They have been reproduced by Cirecast Inc., of San Francisco.

Meg Prendergast, the interior designer, recalls that "Peter really wanted the feeling that his family had owned the house for a hundred years. We put together some cross-generational furnishings, combining upholstered pieces with yard-sale tables, an eighteenth-

century American pearwood dining table with rattan French bistro chairs."

Because much of the original exterior had vanished, the restoration unfolded like an architectural puzzle. Christopher L. Dallmus, president of Design Associates, notes, "in most restorations fragments of the building remain, but this



**FAMILY MATTERS** Although privacy is important, the family is much involved in the community of Oak Bluffs.

had been stripped of its skin and all detail."

The eye-popping colors of neighboring Victorians are eschewed for the house's original muted greens and ochers. An old fence was removed, opening the garden and west facade to public view. "We felt it would be wrong to build a high wall or hedge, because the garden is a view corridor to the ocean for our neighbors," Peter Norton explains.

Since his retirement, Peter has morphed from software entrepreneur into art collector. He and Eileen established the Peter Norton Family Foundation, which gives away about \$2 million a year, much of it to art-related causes. Peter, fifty-four, serves on the boards of several institutions. Eileen is a graduate of the University of California with a master's degree in bilingual education.

Since the house was finished, the family enjoys summer on Martha's Vineyard. "We had two ideas in mind about the house," Peter says. "We were doing it for ourselves and for the community."

**SUSAN HELLER ANDERSON** writes about culture and the arts.

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—EILEEN NORTON