

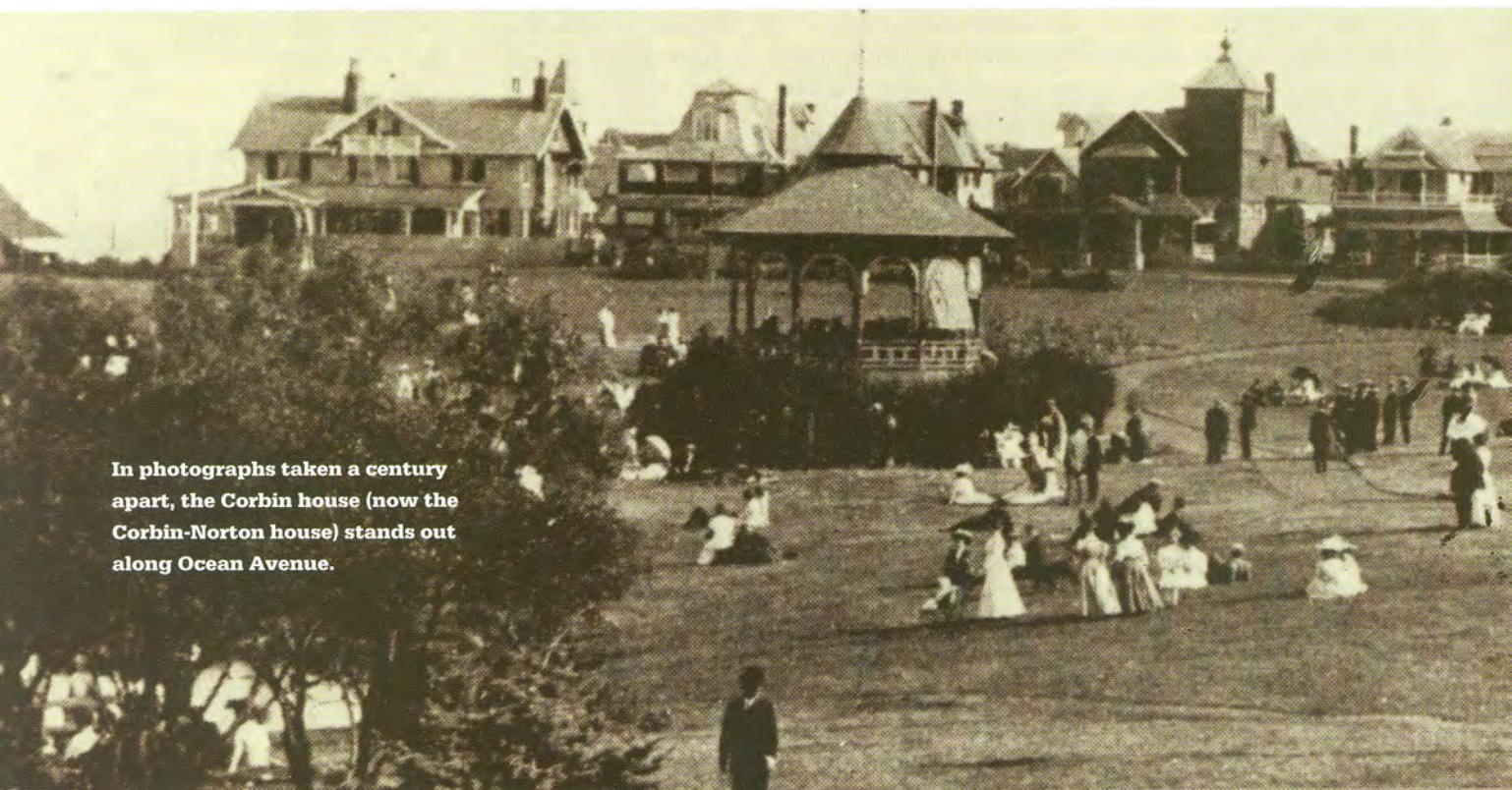
Island Retreat

Drawn to Oak Bluffs, a Massachusetts seaside resort rich in African-American culture, Peter Norton and his family revive a neglected Victorian house. **BY ALLEN FREEMAN**

NEWCOMERS TO MARTHA'S VINEYARD take delight in discovering the Victorian village of Oak Bluffs, where gingerbread architecture embodies the sometimes-conflicting uses of a religious retreat and a seaside resort. Since the 1920s Oak Bluffs has attracted middle-class African-American families, and among those who have put down roots there recently are the Peter Norton family of Santa Monica, California. He is the computer-software multimillionaire, a white man who married a black woman with whom he shares concerns about social issues affecting children. Peter and Eileen Norton selected Oak Bluffs in part because they want their own two school-age children to rub shoulders with the offspring of accomplished black people.

The house they chose to buy and restore at a cost estimated at more than \$2 million was the grand dame of Queen Anne-style summer cottages in Oak Bluffs when it was first built in 1891. But the house had been neglected in recent decades, and it entered its second century as an ungainly structure stripped of its historic character by a failed condominium conversion. Norton says the house was "one of those things that was calling out for some

In photographs taken a century apart, the Corbin house (now the Corbin-Norton house) stands out along Ocean Avenue.







By early in this century, right, the Corbin family had already repainted the house white and enclosed part of its veranda.

Peter and Eileen Norton purchased the structure, above, in 1991 after its original exterior surfaces and windows had been replaced. Restoration to its prime condition, top, required extensive detective work. The Nortons, opposite, pose on the veranda.

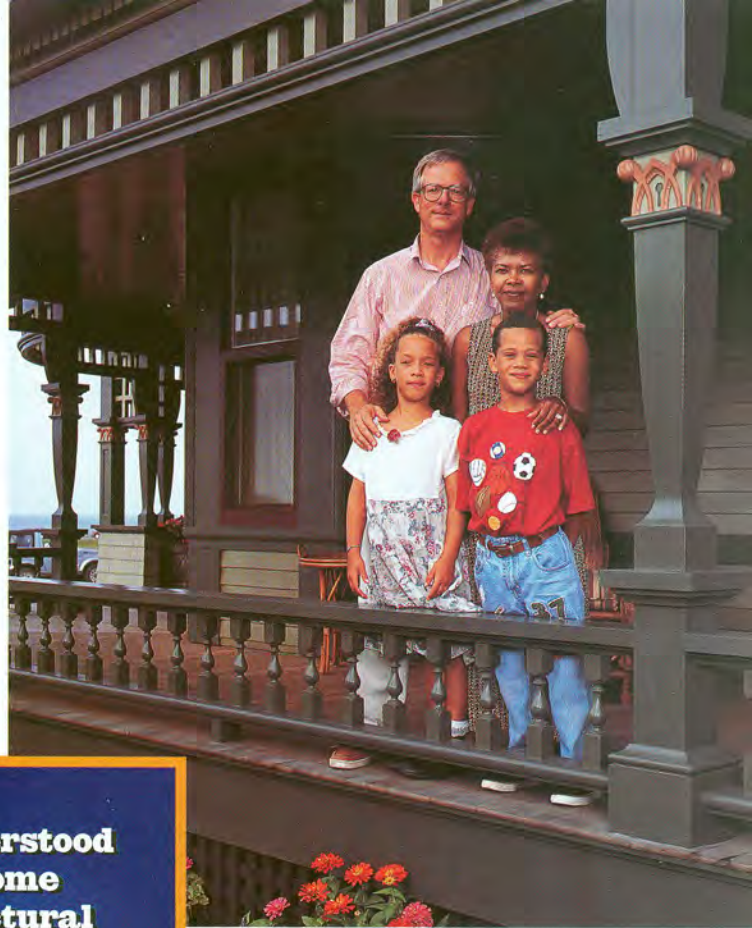


fool with more money than sense to take care of it.” But by “taking care” he did not mean restoration to museum standards. Norton believes buildings should be allowed to evolve through good times and bad, bearing the effects of changing tastes, uses, and fortunes. Historically correct restorations are, to him, “sterile, like costume dramas.” It was, in fact, uncharacteristic for the Nortons to restore anything, and this house, which they purchased in 1991 from the Resolution Trust Corporation for a reported \$350,000, even repelled them because of its condition. “I don’t want to [posture] ourselves as great friends of restoration,” Norton says. “We understood that some architectural treasures are preserved because somebody says, ‘Hell, I’ll do it.’ This time we were the ones.”

The Nortons probably would not have stepped up if the house had not been located in Oak Bluffs. They were drawn there, he told the *Vineyard Gazette*, by the idea of “having our kids kicking around with the sons and daughters of all these wonderful black families who are educated, prosperous, successful, excellent role models, people who are very comfortable about being black—people who have wrestled with America’s racial conundrum, have sort of won life’s game by being successful.” Sharon Kelly, an Ocean Avenue neighbor and Oak Bluffs boutique owner, estimates that the Nortons’ neighbors are black and white in equal numbers. She says that she and her husband have been delighted with the neighborhood and that the architecture that attracted them to Oak Bluffs in 1977 is now less important than a pervasive sense of neighborly goodwill. It is, she says, a place where you don’t hesitate to ask a neighbor for help, where you repair another’s screen door or broken window without being asked, where friends chat on front porches. Racial diversity is taken for granted or viewed as a bonus.

Since selling Peter Norton Computing Inc. in 1990, two years before he turned 50, Norton has devoted his time to his family, art patronage, and philanthropy in California. (The *New York Observer* reported in March that he was funding a Vineyard-based think tank for African-American scholarship, which would be called the Oak Bluffs Institute; a Norton Foundation spokesman says the report was premature.) A reflective person who says he abhors “the world of masculine breast-beating and ego clashes,” he insists on his own privacy. Yet he solicits a certain attention. His photograph is stamped on Norton products, and in 1988 he posed in a sweater and penny loafers for a Dewar’s Profile, which listed his “latest accomplishment: Seeing his name in lights. At the Museum of Neon Art where he’s on the board of directors.”

The Nortons selected a community that began in 1835 as Wesleyan Grove, a Methodist camp meeting where families spent summers in tents, partaking of religious revivalism. In 1879 the Methodists built a large, unenclosed iron structure they called the Tabernacle, and by then most of the tents had been replaced with Lilliputian wood cottages. The centrally located Tabernacle and the simple, variously colored, two-story



“We understood that some architectural treasures are preserved because somebody says, ‘Hell, I’ll do it.’ This time we were the ones.”

structures endure. Larger than children’s playhouses but considerably smaller than normal houses, the cottages are spaced only inches apart. Individually they caricature the notion of a Victorian house; collectively they play a diminutive riff on a theme of neighborhood.

On land next to the evolving Wesleyan Grove a planned community was laid out in 1867, and within two decades the new resort, Oak Bluffs, was largely in

place. Its houses were grander versions of the camp meeting cottages, and the wood-frame hotels, dance halls, boardwalk, and roller-skating rink that sprang up made incongruous neighbors to the Methodist camp meeting. Oak Bluffs’s day as a Vineyard Atlantic City was short-lived, its end hastened by the suspected arson of several hotels in the 1890s. Today the aura of a faded resort clings and gives Oak Bluffs a distinct character. But it is its gingerbread architecture, its unassuming little commercial center on Circuit Avenue accommodating several blue-collar bars and a restored 1884 carousel called The Flying Horses, and its high proportion of African-Americans that set Oak Bluffs apart from other Vineyard towns.

A handful of blacks attended the Methodist revivals in the 19th century, but Oak Bluffs began to come into its own as a resort for prominent blacks in the 1920s. Entertainers Paul Robeson and Ethel Waters vacationed there, as did the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Sr. and his namesake son, the congressman from New York. Former Sen. Edward W. Brooke and Harlem Renaissance writer Dorothy West have selected Oak Bluffs as their year-round residences, and movie director Spike



Lee owns a place. Professionals from Washington, D.C., New York City, and Boston gravitate to Oak Bluffs during the summer months; Oprah Winfrey, Diana Ross, and the late Commerce Secretary Ron Brown have been regular visitors.

Oak Bluffs's Victorian houses are not, of course, as old as the Colonial, Federal, and Greek Revival structures elsewhere on the island. But any wood-frame building enduring New England's coastal climate requires renewal about once every hundred years if it is to last, says Christopher Scott, executive director of the Martha's Vineyard Preservation Trust. Scott, like Sharon Kelly and other islanders, is pleased about what he considers the Nortons' gift to the community. He believes that the idea of restoration can become infectious, that a prominent project like the Nortons' tends to stimulate the imaginations of other homeowners. After the Nortons began work, he says, at least half a dozen other houses facing Ocean Park on Ocean Avenue underwent some form of restoration.

The Nortons' house was originally built for Philip Corbin of New Britain, Connecticut, a manufacturer of household hardware. Corbin commissioned the three-story, eight-bed-

Ocean Park and Nantucket Sound are visible from the veranda. The side yard, opposite, was landscaped for the Nortons.

room mansion at 20 Ocean Avenue on a corner lot facing Ocean Park; beyond that large, mostly vacant crescent of grass, the Corbin house faced the broad panorama of Nantucket Sound. Even from the bandstand in the middle of the park it is easy to appreciate the Queen Anne design's large exterior features—overhanging roofs supported by carved wood brackets, an octagonal corner turret, balconies, bays, tall windows, and a veranda wrapping around three sides of the building. The cladding is patterned shingles and clapboards. The Nortons' principal restoration architect, Christopher Dallmus of Nantucket, is intrigued by the level of detailing applied to the house by Corbin's builder, Eli Leighton of Oak Bluffs—especially after discovering Leighton's inexperience in constructing houses in this elaborate style. "Who was whispering in Leighton's ear?" Dallmus asks. At one point in their research, the architects and their preservation consultants suspected that the Corbin house originated

as a moonlighting project by Stanford White, but they abandoned that tack quickly after checking with an authority on White's work. "Was this a packaged house that had been designed by someone in Hartford?" Dallmus asks. "It's possible that it was prefabbed."

The house's origin remains a mystery, but a more immediate concern to the architect and the preservation consultants was determining just what the house first looked like. They learned that 20 Ocean Avenue had remained in the Corbin family for about 40 years and then passed into other hands. As part of an attempt in the late 1980s to convert it into three condominium apartments, bits and pieces of the house—almost anything that could be liquidated—were sold. By 1991 every trace of the original exterior had been stripped away and replaced with redwood clapboards; all of the double-hung windows had been replaced with Andersen casement units; most of the multipaneled interior doors were gone; and little remained of the original Corbin hardware: the highly decorated, silver-plated doorknobs, escutcheons, and hinges with which Philip Corbin customized his cottage. The interior walls and ceilings of oak and chestnut paneling survived, however, and most had never been painted.

At the beginning of the restoration, a project that would last three years, Norton made up a story about the house, not one that anyone would believe but one that would provide a "guide star," as he puts it. He told his architect: "I am a descendant of the person for whom the house was built. It has been in our family for a hundred years. We have used and enjoyed it and always had enough money to maintain it. But while we like its architectural character, we have never wor-

**In the pursuit
of original
materials there
was a series of
"little eureka's.
Just one example
of everything,
and we were
home free."**

shipped it, never considered it precious. From time to time we did various renovations, at some point putting in new wiring, at some point rehabbing the baths and kitchens, at some point maybe building a deck. We never thought much about keeping the original character; we just used it as a summer home." Norton asked Dallmus to envision the house at the end of this story, and said to him, "Give me that house."

Although Norton vetoed a slavish restoration, he was quite willing to allow his restorationists to attempt as accurate an exterior reconstruction as possible and to give them the luxury of time. The pursuit was doubly challenging because old photographs could not identify the

house colors or the exact way the sidewall shingles were shaped and displayed or the profiles of millwork pieces—the moldings, brackets, balusters, and window muntins. But there was a series of "little eureka's," as Dallmus puts it: "Just one example of everything, and we were home free."

Steve Roy, one of the preservation consultants, says the investigations proceeded on the presumption that the original builders were practical Yankee craftsmen who applied materials methodically and that those who modified the house through the years were like-minded and so would reuse good materials, perhaps overlaying them rather than replacing them. Therefore clues—paint lines, carving lines, layout lines—would be found at the intersections of building elements. A second assumption was that those who stripped the building for salvage were sloppy, perhaps carelessly casting off pieces useless to them and throwing them under the porch. Roy's partner David Adams discovered in a thicket of rosebushes the only known surviving porch baluster, a piece of the Gothic



wood carvings that served as capitals on the porch columns, and examples of the various shingle shapes. With those in hand, restorationists could match nail-hole patterns on the sidewalls. A local artist who had purchased an old window from the house allowed Dallmus to measure the muntin-bar profile. And a previous owner of the house provided examples of the fancy Corbin hardware from which to make reproductions.

In several instances the architect strayed from historical authenticity to accommodate the Nortons, making the kitchen a family room, relocating a back staircase, building a deck extending from the rear and the west side of the house, designing a lookout roof platform suppressed like a bathtub into the ridge of the highest roof, and adding a garage. He finished the third-floor rooms for the first time. And, although paint analysis identified the original exterior color scheme, the Nortons were dissatisfied with it and, with help from color consultant Roger Moss, chose alternative colors that a painter in 1891 might have selected. The colors approximate the originals in tonal values, so the house appears the same in black-and-white photographs taken a century apart.

In a public gesture Norton erected a sign in front of the house to satisfy casual curiosity seekers, but he later had second thoughts. "I have a knack, more than most people, for putting myself in other people's shoes," he explains, "and I imagined people walking by this project—large, prominent, and in its later stages good-looking—and scratching their heads.... I felt that they were owed answers to the very simple questions: What's going on here? Is this a hotel?

The architect strayed from historical authenticity to accommodate the Nortons, for instance making the kitchen a family room.

The entrance hall, opposite, is as welcoming as ever; below, the kitchen/family room.

A private home? Who are the people behind it?" To respond to that level of public curiosity he commissioned a sign featuring an image of the house as it would look after the restoration and identifying its original construction date, the original and current owners, the restoration architect, the general contractor, and their consultants. Norton found, however, that the sign encouraged intrusions into the family's privacy that continued even after the sign came down and the family moved in. He also concluded that such a sign implies "a certain self-importance, a posturing, a grandeur. If anything, this house, because it is large and imposing, needs to have its importance deflated

rather than inflated. While I don't deeply regret the sign, maybe it wasn't such a good idea after all."

Once the house was restored and the grounds were relandscaped, Eileen Norton, advised by an interior decorator, selected comfortable furniture. The family has since spent the better part of two summers in the house, apparently harboring no regrets about selecting Oak Bluffs as a place to put down roots, and having only minor reservations about taking on a high-profile home restoration. "Oak Bluffs met our needs as a family," Norton says. "If, in some ways, we would rather not be in such a prominent, grand place, we also obviously take a lot of pride in it. We've been the people who walk by a house like this, admiring it and wishing that we were the ones up there on the front porch. Now we find ourselves to be the people living in the house that everyone is admiring." Two admirers, in Florida and Washington State, learned of the restoration only after it was featured on PBS's *This Old House*. They are Philip Corbin's grandsons. **P**



