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## The Charleston Home: Viva La Villa

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*A marquee mansion overlooking White Point Garden had been long neglected. Not any more. The Hammond family has rescued it from ruin, imbuing it with a colorful balance of contemporary and classic*



Villa Margherita, the newly revived manse on High Battery

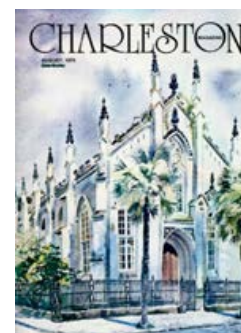
Many Charleston homes wow with their “good bones,” their strong architectural integrity and classic lines. Others boast a distinguished pedigree and historical gravitas, thanks to so-and-so-president or famous person who once stayed there. Some offer intrigue due to quirky tales or the colorful characters of former residents—the juicy fodder that fiction-prone tour guides love to embellish. But rare is the Charleston residence that can claim all of the above. And undeniably, the Villa Margherita is exceptional. The venerable columned manse, once a renowned hotel and now the newly spiffed up home of Stephen and Mary Hammond, has all this in spades, plus that truly rare Charleston element: a basement.

For the more recent decades of its storied 120-year history, however, Villa Margherita was perhaps most noteworthy for its wilting grandeur, its obvious giving way to the inevitabilities of time and entropy. While the primo properties surrounding this South Battery beauty were getting makeovers and TLC, the villa sat defiant in neglect. She whispered a reminder that there can be elegance in unvarnished reality, honor in wrinkled old age. We watched as her paint chipped, her columns crumbled, her once-proud, balustraded brow drooped and sagged. We recognized a bit of ourselves in her decline and wished it were otherwise.

“We were always drawn to this house—it had such mystery, such strong presence,” says homeowner Stephen Hammond. “We’d had our eye on it for years but were told the owner had no intention of selling.” A native New Yorker (“he’d only lived in apartments his whole life,” says his wife, Mary, noting the contrast to their spacious abode), Stephen had traveled regularly to and even lived part-time in Charleston, where his mother has a home and their family business, Lou Hammond and Associates, has an office. In 2011, he and Mary, now the marketing director for Garden & Gun magazine, moved here full-time, hoping to start a family and raise kids in a slower-paced place.

They lived on nearby Tradd Street initially, but kept searching for a home they could make their own and grow into. Again and again, they came back to this property, lured by its handsome stature and ideal location overlooking White Point Garden and the harbor, as well as by curiosity about what surprises it held inside (no one had seen it in years) and dreams of what it could be again.

The Hammonds made repeated inquiries, to no avail. Contrary to outward appearances, the villa had not been vacant all those years. The owner, Dr. Mary B. Wilson, a pathologist at MUSC who had grown up in the house and inherited it from her parents, lived there, but only in an upstairs apartment. The bulk of the house she had closed off—it was simply too much for her to keep up. Before going into medicine later in life, Wilson studied at Winterthur and



had a career in American decorative arts in Philadelphia. She knew and appreciated the artistry of her home and feared that if sold, it risked being chopped up and turned into condos or a B&B. In a way, she wasn't neglecting as much as protecting it, by the only means she could—by holding on.

But the Hammonds held on to their dream, too, and patience and persistence ultimately paid off. "We wrote her a letter, assuring her we would keep it as a single-family home and only wanted to return it to its original state, to raise our kids here," says Mary. In 2012, Wilson agreed to sell, and Villa Margherita changed hands for only the third time.

### A Few Surprises

Built in 1895 for Daisy and Andrew Simonds (we'll come back to them) and designed by Frederick Dinkelberg (an architect most famous for his work on the Flatiron Building in Manhattan), the turn-of-the-century Beaux Arts-style home is "a mere baby in this town," says Mary. But it's a big baby, complete with a grand ballroom; soaring 17-foot ceilings with dazzling original crown moulding; a courtyard with a pool (which the Hammonds removed, and which tour guides routinely and incorrectly claim was Charleston's first "indoor" pool); formal ante rooms; and despite its generous dimensions, an easy, natural flow. "That's been the nicest surprise, how comfortable and functional it is for family living," Mary adds.

But there were a few not-so-nice surprises too. Like the horrid mold totally coating the ballroom walls, thanks to water damage from skylight panes that had long been broken. And the massive Corinthian columns that required major repairs and the capitals that had to be completely reproduced. "Let's just say that being naive isn't a bad thing," says Stephen, admitting the enormity of the rehab project was more than he anticipated. "We were very fortunate to have some of the best artisans, right here in Charleston, to do the work."

On the brighter side, the "house had just been neglected, not duct-taped or chopped up or patched," he continues, so there were no hack jobs to undo. And the fact that the mansion had a full basement meant that updating and adding HVAC and plumbing, which the long-shuttered structure direly needed, was possible without significantly impacting ceilings or walls.

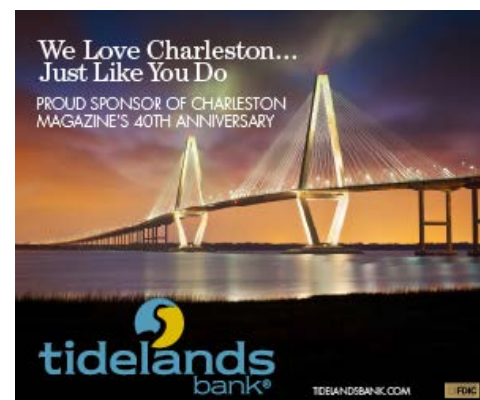
The Hammonds assembled a top-notch crew led by architect Eddie Fava and his team at e.e. fava architects, including NBM Construction, which handled the renovation of the Dock Street Theatre; Signature Kitchens & Baths for all the custom millwork; and an army of local craftsmen to do intricate repair of damaged moulding and plaster. Interior designer Carolyn Griffith refined color palettes; lighting (all new chandeliers, most from an antique dealer friend of Stephen's in New Orleans); and fabrics, including the lush fabric-covered walls in the bar and ballroom (which softened the room's acoustics). And outdoors, Sheila Wertimer transformed "an overgrown rainforest with bamboo 20 feet high" into a hydrangea garden on the east side and created a formal Italian-style courtyard of potted citrus where the shallow marble pool once was at the rear of the property.

"The team and I were grateful to be a part of this project," says Fava, who spent about a year in detailed planning before the crews officially began the 19-month overhaul. "There was such appeal to this building. There's something about it that commands attention, that makes people stop and look as they pass by. And everybody longed for it to be returned to its former glory," he adds. "To have had a hand in that, in making it a 21st-century home without losing its character, its formality and soul, was really quite special."

### To the Hilt

Now regarding the "soul" of the house—that takes us back to its original owners, to Daisy and her husband, Andrew Simonds Jr., who was vice president of the National Bank of South Carolina. Andrew's father, who lived a few doors down, was the bank president and, as a wedding gift, had given his namesake and new daughter-in-law a single house that formerly stood at 4 South Battery. But that house wasn't quite grand enough for Daisy. "She evidently loved to live life to the fullest," says Mary.

Indeed, "Daisy" was this New Orleans debutante's nickname. Her given name was Margaret Rose Anthony Julia Josephine Catherine Cornelia Donovan O'Donovan Breaux. And with a name like that, you almost have to live an outsized life, as Daisy did, in her extravagant outsized manor. She insisted on the finest (the home's classical frieze is vintage Morrison Brothers, who also made the decorations for New York's Madison Square Garden) and entertained to the hilt. "Seeing the ballroom for the first time blew us away. In its original



iteration, it was quite the party house," says Fava.

The Hammonds, too, love to entertain, but perhaps not quite on Daisy's lavish scale. "We hosted a dinner for Volvo execs here after their plant announcement, and we have an annual New Year's Eve party," says Stephen. But they're just as likely to be entertaining two-and-a-half-year-old Marilen and her newborn sister, Julia, in the snazzy orange attic playroom or enjoying a subdued evening with a few couples, having drinks on the front porch with its comfy contemporary furniture and unexpected blue trim. "That blue really pops off the white, doesn't it?" Stephen says. "We wanted to liven up the façade; those columns can make it feel austere."

Indeed, in the Hammonds' thoughtful revival of this Renaissance Revival landmark, warmth trumps austerity and comfort overrules formality. Marilen's Little Tykes car makes tracks around the ballroom; modern art hangs on traditional paneled dining room walls boldly painted bright red ("Stephen's idea; he's the color guy," says Mary, who was dubious but now loves the hue). Everywhere there's a balance of contemporary and classical—a sleek glassed-in solarium adds a new link connecting a totally redone kitchen/family room with the ballroom. Nothing is too highfalutin or stuffy, nothing is too sacred, except of course, room for family.

"It's hard to say what I love most about it," Mary says. "I love the sense of flow, of space, of light. I love watching our daughter play and explore in all the rooms. It makes me happy every day." And you get the sense that both Daisy and Mary Wilson would be happy too: one happy that the opulent gilt is once again gilded, and the other that a young family is putting down roots here, with a garden and a groovy playroom.

And the house itself even seems to smile, with the ironwork screen on the second-floor balcony repaired and restored, no longer languishing in a frown. Indeed, with plenty of TLC, plaster repair, and new plumbing, among other contractor miracles, ruin is averted and the Villa Margherita is revived and real again.

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## A Welcoming Past

### Daisy's Legacy

Daisy Breaux Simonds was known for entertaining lavishly and hosting high-profile guests, including President Roosevelt when he visited Charleston for the West India Exposition in 1902. However, when her husband, an alcoholic, died in a Baltimore sanitarium in 1905, she had to become resourceful and turned her home into a European-style upscale inn, naming it after herself—"Margherita" is Italian for "daisy." Daisy remarried a wealthy New Jersey banker in 1907 and moved to Princeton, then later to Washington, D.C., with husband number three, but her villa remained a hotel from 1905 to 1953, including a three-year window from 1943 to 1946 when the United Seaman's Service leased it to house seamen and their families.

### Notable guests who once stayed here include presidents and poets:

- William Howard Taft
- Grover Cleveland
- Theodore Roosevelt
- Eleanor Roosevelt
- Sinclair Lewis, who allegedly finished his Main Street manuscript here
- Gertrude Stein
- Henry Ford
- Alexander Graham Bell

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