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Return to Park Gate *by Mary Ellen Polson*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM COGILL

GAIL NIEDERHOFER always has homemade cookies in her freezer, makes jackets out of quilts she sews herself, and hand-paints fine china for fun. As her kids like to say, Gail was Martha Stewart before Martha Stewart was cool. But this is also a woman who resingled a steep roof in the dead of an icy winter, routinely whipped up batches of mortar along with Saturday breakfast, and taught her children how to glaze windows. Given that Park Gate has 27 of them, the kids were experts before they were out of high school.

If Gail is the doer in the family, husband Dean is the visionary. An engineer by training, he successfully planned and carried out the restoration of a landmark status, ca. 1750 colonial dwelling teetering on the edge of disaster. He made measured drawings and designed new heating and electrical systems for Park Gate—no small feat in a 250-year-old house.

The Niedermhofers began restoring their Tidewater colonial on 40 acres near Manassas, Virginia, years before it was trendy to fix up an old house. They bought it in 1975, when *Old-House Journal* was still a newsletter for brownstone owners. In fact, Gail wrote about the early years at Park Gate in a 1977 issue of OHI. While her narrative is full of can-do attitude, it's easy to read the stress between the lines.



For Gail and Dean Niedermhofer, restoring an old house was a natural progression from refurbishing vintage cars and antique furniture.



Built from virgin timber, Park Gate is perfectly suited for southern weather. Its splits-of-decades-of-neglect, only one of the original sill beams failed.

"Some of the materials in the house could have come upstream, because the beams upstairs are enormous—mortise-and-tenon oak and walnut"

—DEAN NIEDERHOFER

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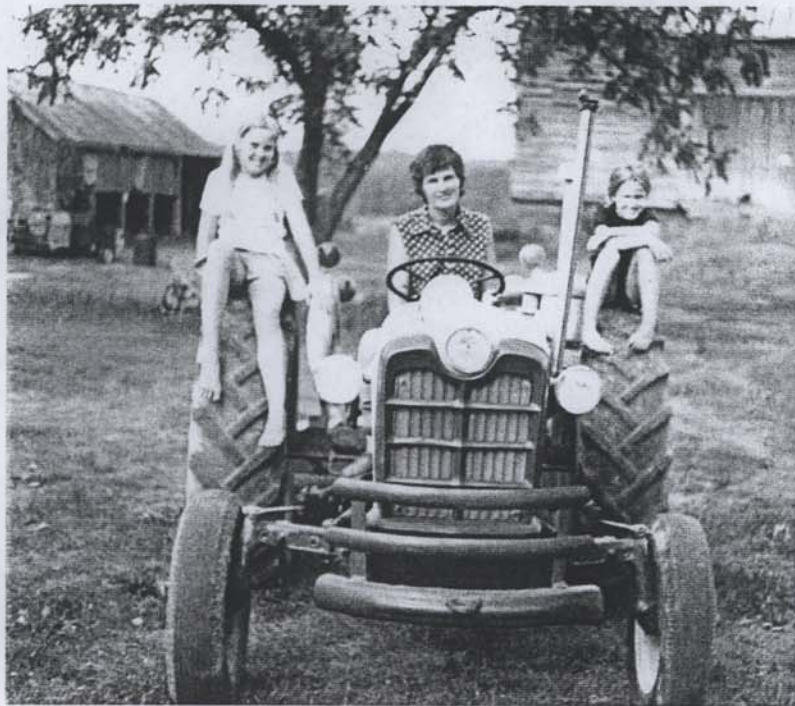
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From left: Gail wrote about the first years at Park Gate for *Old-House Journal* in 1977. Meanwhile, Dean kept the driveway plowed with the help of a vintage tractor, a fixture around Park Gate for years. Laura, Gail, and Nancy found farm work rewarding, but tiring.



"We had no idea how extensive the work would be. It was like walking around with the bottoms of your pockets cut off." —DEAN NIEDERNHOFER

TIDEWATER COLONIAL

OWNERS: Dean and Gail Niedernhofer

KIDS: Laura, John, and Nancy, now grown

LOCATION: Nokesville, Virginia

DATE OF HOUSE: Ca. 1750

ON-GOING PROJECTS: Maintaining a 250-year-old house gives the Niedernhofers plenty to do.

OF INTEREST: Park Gate is a dead ringer for a much older Tidewater colonial, Susquehanna Plantation, now part of the Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village near Detroit.

Twenty-two years later, Park Gate is fully restored. The modest plantation house is on the National Register of Historic Places and an honored Virginia landmark. If there was such a thing as an Old-House Hall of Fame, Dean and Gail would be charter members.

From the comfort of their home, glowing with mellow wood and period color, the Niedernhofers view their experience a little differently. "We were idiots," Gail admits candidly. "Naïve doesn't begin to cover it."

"We had no idea how extensive the work would be," Dean says. "It was like walking around with the bottoms of your pockets cut off."

When the Niedernhofers discovered their diamond in the rough, plaster and lath were falling off the walls in sheets. There was only one toilet and sink in the entire house, and the couple couldn't even get homeowner's insurance.

"We'd see the agent driving by," Gail says. "The car would slow down, and suddenly speed up. Next thing we knew the policy would be canceled."

Armed with a farm insurance policy that covered little more than the value of the land, the Niedernhofers and their three kids moved from their comfortable, five-bedroom house in nearby Fairfax, Virginia, in June 1976. The first year was a turbulent one, starting when they discovered that the drains for the plumbing went into the crawl space and stopped.

Most of the plaster was unsalvageable, so the Niedernhofers began ripping it out. Laura, John, and Nancy (then 12, 10, and 8) became demolition experts. Once the plaster was gone upstairs, light streamed into the bedrooms. Eldest daughter Laura woke up one morning to find a snowdrift in her room. "Not only that," Dean says, "it didn't melt."

Then there were the rats.

Attracted by corn mash in nearby chicken coops, healthy-sized specimens had tunneled under the house. Each night, they rampaged in the kitchen, using potatoes for bowling balls. The Niedernhofers declared war, inviting their neighbors over for rat shoots.



Left: The Niedernhofers didn't expect to find such an early house to restore. As a consequence, most of their antiques are a century later than the house. Gail bought the converted gaslights in the dining room with the money she earned from her OHJ story. Below: John hauls away old sheet linoleum.



Extracurricular activities for the Niedernhofer kids included patching foundations, repointing fireplace brick, and the occasional staple-gun fight. As daughter Nancy says, the lessons stayed with them.

For the kids, life at Park Gate was an adventure tempered by hard work. Living with black-plastic walls became an excuse to start staple-gun fights. As the youngest, Nancy Niedernhofer learned to duck—and run fast. Now a mature young woman, Nancy works in cultural preservation for the Army Corps of Engineers—a legacy of her indenture at Park Gate. She's frankly amazed that her parents managed to persevere in the face of so many obstacles. "There are a few points where I would have given up," she tells them over dinner one evening. "I'm surprised that you guys didn't."

"We did," Dean admits.

"Not so that we kids noticed," Nancy says.

"When we discovered the rats, I wanted to walk away, but we sank everything we owned in this house," Gail says. "We couldn't sell it because we'd started pulling the plaster off the walls, making it worse on its way to better. We simply had to go forward."

This grin-and-bear-it lesson was not lost on Nancy, John, and Laura. Like a lot of parents, Dean and Gail told their children that they could grow up to do anything they wanted. "Not

only did they tell us, they showed us," Nancy says. "They would go to work during the day, then come home, switch gears, and be parents and handymen."

That she works in the preservation field should speak for itself. "What they did stuck with me, and I haven't turned tail and run even as an adult."

The trick was to turn the hard work of restoring a house into an adventure. "I would make a huge bucket of mortar in the morning and give each of them a paint bucket and a trowel, and stick 'em on a section of the wall," Gail says. "And they would put the mortar in."

The kids may have been resentful at times, but they adapted. In one episode, John kept on eating cereal after a cloud of dust descended on the kitchen table from above. "He never broke stride," Gail says. "When I offered to get him a fresh bowl of cereal, he said, 'Mom, we sleep in dirt, we work in dirt, it's not going to bother me.' And he just kept going."

Plowing ahead often meant launching projects without knowing how long they would take or how much they would cost. Convinced that

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"We would say to each other, why did we leave that other house? The one thing we learned is that you can't both cry on the same day. You have to take turns." —GAIL NIEDERNHOFER

the original roof had been wood shingles, the Niedernhofers tore off a perfectly good metal roof, only to have the contractor disappear just before Christmas.

That left Gail to do the work. She hired the contractor's helper and nailed up the cedar shingles herself. "We had no choice. January, February, and March were coming, and there was nothing but a plastic sheet up there."

The work was slow, complicated by icy conditions and short days. "You resented the house a lot when it was so overwhelming," Gail remembers. "And then we would say to each other, why did we leave that other house? The one thing we learned is that you can't both cry on the same day. You have to take turns."

The Niedernhofers took a two-year break from work on Park Gate about 1980, when Gail went to work in the Reagan White House. Even though most of the major work had been done, realistically, the restoration wasn't complete for years. The final push took place just before Laura's wedding, held on the front porch in 1995.

As honest as they are about the trials and travails of restoration, the Niedernhofers know they have a treasure in Park Gate. The house was the home of George Washington's niece, Mildred Washington Lee, and Col. Thomas Lee, whose father signed the Declaration of Independence. Although it was built in Indian country 35 miles from the Potomac, it may not have been totally isolated.

In a row of trees behind the barn is a small creek, called a run in Virginia. "According to the early stories, that was navigable by sailing ships in the 18th century," Dean says. "Because of the silt from to-



Gail is proud of the fact that she shingled Park Gate's steeply pitch roof herself. She just wouldn't want to do it again.

bacco farming, you can walk across it now. That suggests to us that some of the materials used in the house could have come upstream, because the beams upstairs are enormous—mortise-and-tenon oak and walnut."

So protective that they usually arrange for a housesitter when they're going to be away for a few days, Dean and Gail nevertheless open Park Gate to visitors by the barrel full, even if they haven't called ahead. They know if they hadn't bought the house when they did, there's a good chance it wouldn't be standing today. "Now that it's done," Gail says, "we feel like we're custodians of a piece of local history." 