





Janice Hall Nuckolls hand-painted the diamond pattern in the foyer; the huge scale of the house allows for oversized pieces like the sconces Janice found at an estate sale.

A Touch of Whimsy

A Richmond couple revives a gem on "the handsomest boulevard south of Washington." By NEELY BARNWELL DYKSHORN

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Top: The Monument Avenue home built for real estate businessman Herbert Funsten in 1906 served as a doctor's office for 30 years before the couple bought it in 1993. Bottom: The sunroom was created by opening up a series of rooms where the original kitchen was once located. Janice designed transoms whose mullions matched those of the French doors. Inset: the master bedroom.

Janice Hall Nuckolls and Steve Nuckolls had high expectations when they first visited 1815 Monument Ave. in the early 1990s. After all, here was a stately brick home with a plummy location two doors up from the Lee monument. The house was not just on the best street in Richmond, but also on one of its most historic blocks. A century earlier, in 1890, the Lee monument's dedication had kicked off the development of a glorious new avenue to rival urban models in Boston and Baltimore.

It took more than 20 years—and one depression—for Monument Avenue to deliver on its expectations, as block after block of grand houses came to be built. It is every bit as marvelous today, and rarely does a visitor come through Richmond without being treated to a drive up and down the cobblestone avenue, much like the title character of Ellen Glasgow's 1916 novel *Life and Gabriella*, with her brother-in-law as her breathless tour guide: "I suppose you thought of us still as a poor folksy little Southern city, with a lot of ground going to waste in gardens and green stuff. Well, you just wait till you see Monument Avenue. It's the handsomest boulevard south of Washington ... Look at that house now, that's one of the finest in the city. Rushington built it—he made his money in fertilizer, and the one next with the green tiles belongs to Hanly, the tobacco trust fellow, you know, and this whopper on the next square is where Albertson lives. He made his pile out of railroad stocks."

The house that intrigued Mr. and Mrs. Nuckolls was designed by Richmond architect Claude Howell for real estate businessman Herbert Funsten, and built in the Allen parcel stretching from Lombardy to Allison Street. It was the first part of Monument Avenue to be developed. "The house helped to set the stylistic direction of the avenue," says Richard Guy Wilson, co-author of *Richmond's Monument Avenue* and an architectural history professor at the University of Virginia (thanks to him for the Glasgow quote, above). "It is red brick and white trim, and is what we might call Colonial Revival." He adds, "[It] shows still a certain trace of what I say is a Victorian sensibility—to show off wealth, pretention, prosperity."

However, what the couple actually saw, after walking through the door, had little sensibility at all. The house was a former doctor's office—and had operated as such for 30 years. The formal entrance hall was filled with a huge Formica desk and glass divider. "It was just as awful as you can imagine," recalls Janice Nuckolls.

"There was a 'Payment Expected When Services Are Rendered' sign," Steve remembers. What had been the back garden in an earlier incarnation was a blacktop 12-space parking lot.

Still, the pair decided to take it on: They had restored one Fan house and served on almost every neighborhood civic organization, but the appeal of living on Monument eclipsed all else. "We literally would walk up and down the streets and write down house numbers—this was back in the day when everything wasn't online, so we would go to city hall and look up the owners," says Janice. "The doctor that owned the house called us back and said he was retiring."

Steve, a Bank of America employee, and Janice, his interior designer and decorative-painter wife, snapped the place up. First, they sold a "perfectly lovely" house on Grove Avenue, says Janice. Then the couple invited all their friends over for the Easter parade, asking them, she says, "if we should have our heads examined."

The answer, it turns out, is no. In the 15 years since they bought the place, Steve and Janice Hall Nuckolls have created a fantastic home. There is nothing expected or slavishly period about it. What they have created within the historic home is a showcase for their talents, personality and flair. In the dining room, a glass chandelier in the shape of a ship sails above the table that Janice lovingly refurbished, and in the music room Steve's antique musical instruments hang on three walls, floor to ceiling.



After some 50 trips to the dump, the couple saw the house's character re-emerge. To their surprise, they found inlaid wood floors completely intact beneath a layer of vinyl tile. They found sealed-up pocket doors between what is now the dining room and the kitchen (the original front parlor and dining room). Another set of doors was found in the basement and re-installed on the intact tracks that joined the dining room to the library (now their kitchen and music room).

The house proved a perfect project for the two. Since not one square inch of the original wall treatment remained, Janice did all the painting herself, using a multi-layer wash in the dining room and applying paint with a spackle spatula in the kitchen. They have preserved a small swath of kitschy colonial scenic wallpaper in the foyer, although, in keeping with the Colonial Revival exterior, it is probably a later, 1940s or 1950s addition.

The biggest hurdle was what wasn't there: the house's grand stair. It was

The dining room chandelier was inspired by an antique one Janice saw at Sylvia and Dick Summers' house; she ebonized the table and hand-painted and glazed the cane chairs.



Janice Hall Nuckolls customized the emerald-green faux bois kitchen cabinets; she found the demi-lune cabinet and painted the rest of the kitchen island to match it.

missing—gone. Steve and Janice were thrilled to get the architect's blueprints, a gift from the original owner's grandson, and used them to rebuild. Also named Herbert Funsten, the grandson had lived there as a bachelor until 1960, after inheriting the house from his grandparents Oliver Herbert Funsten and Bessie Carter Minor Funsten, whose father had been a lieutenant on the *Merrimac*.

Herbert passed away in November 2007. His widow, Edythe Funsten, a native of Richmond's Northside, knew the house somewhat, from having stayed there two nights between their wedding and honeymoon in 1960. The newlyweds sold the house for their move to Princeton, New Jersey, for Herbert's post-doctoral work. "It was a very handsome home with parquet floors," Edythe Funsten recalls. "Of course, you looked at the wall of the next house, but that was townhouse living. We in Ginter Park felt sorry for people who lived downtown, because we felt like they didn't have backyards."

Before the downstairs was converted into a doctor's office (with parking lot), there had been an elegant rose garden behind the house, which Herbert Funsten's grandparents had tended. Today, that space has been reclaimed and turned back into a whimsical city garden with low brick walls and geometric plantings. "We didn't want any grass, and we liked the idea of the formal garden," Janice Nuckolls says. A fireplace wired with an electric trompe l'oeil hearth closes in the east end of the yard, and a Victorian-style playhouse, bought on Jefferson Davis Highway, holds bicycles and garden tools.

At the back of the house, where the original kitchen had been, there's now a sunroom. It stretches the entire width of the house and has French doors that lead out to the garden. The sunroom is a lovely, warm space where quirky touches can be found, such as canine portraits hung low



Steve's collection of antique and current musical instruments hangs floor-to-ceiling on three walls of what was the library. Left: the couple with their beagle, Stuart.



A Victorian playhouse in the garden serves as a bicycle and tool shed. Left: the former library that now houses Steve's instrument collection.

to intrigue the couple's dog, Stuart, a beagle they found on Stuart Circle (appropriately, also part of the original Allen parcel).

The house's scale has allowed the pair to have a little liberty with the furnishings. "It was part of the fun and part of the challenge," Janice says. "There's no such thing as too big for this house." The furniture is fun verging on fantastic: A French or maybe Italian vitrine "looks like it's ready to dance out of the room," she says. Huge torcheres in the foyer look as if they'd be right at home in the Vatican, ceramic birds flock an Italianate curio, and 10-inch-long fringe adorns a sofa. The aforementioned dining room chandelier is also outstanding: "I coveted one from another Monument Avenue house," says Janice. "When I found out they were moving to the Prestwold, my first question was, 'Can buy the chandelier?'" The owners politely said no, and took it with them to their new home. (That chandelier appeared in the

October 2003 issue of *Virginia Living*.)

No matter: Janice found a reproduction at the High Point market, in North Carolina. The ship sails over the dining room table in the original front parlor, which did double duty as an administrator's office and a copy room in the doctor's office days. Steve and Janice chose to make that space the dining room, pushing the kitchen to the center of the house, because they like to entertain. And entertain they do, in the kitchen set at the center of the house on the street so central to Richmonders.