



lady of the lake

On the edge of a primordial Louisiana swamp
an abandoned house starts a new life

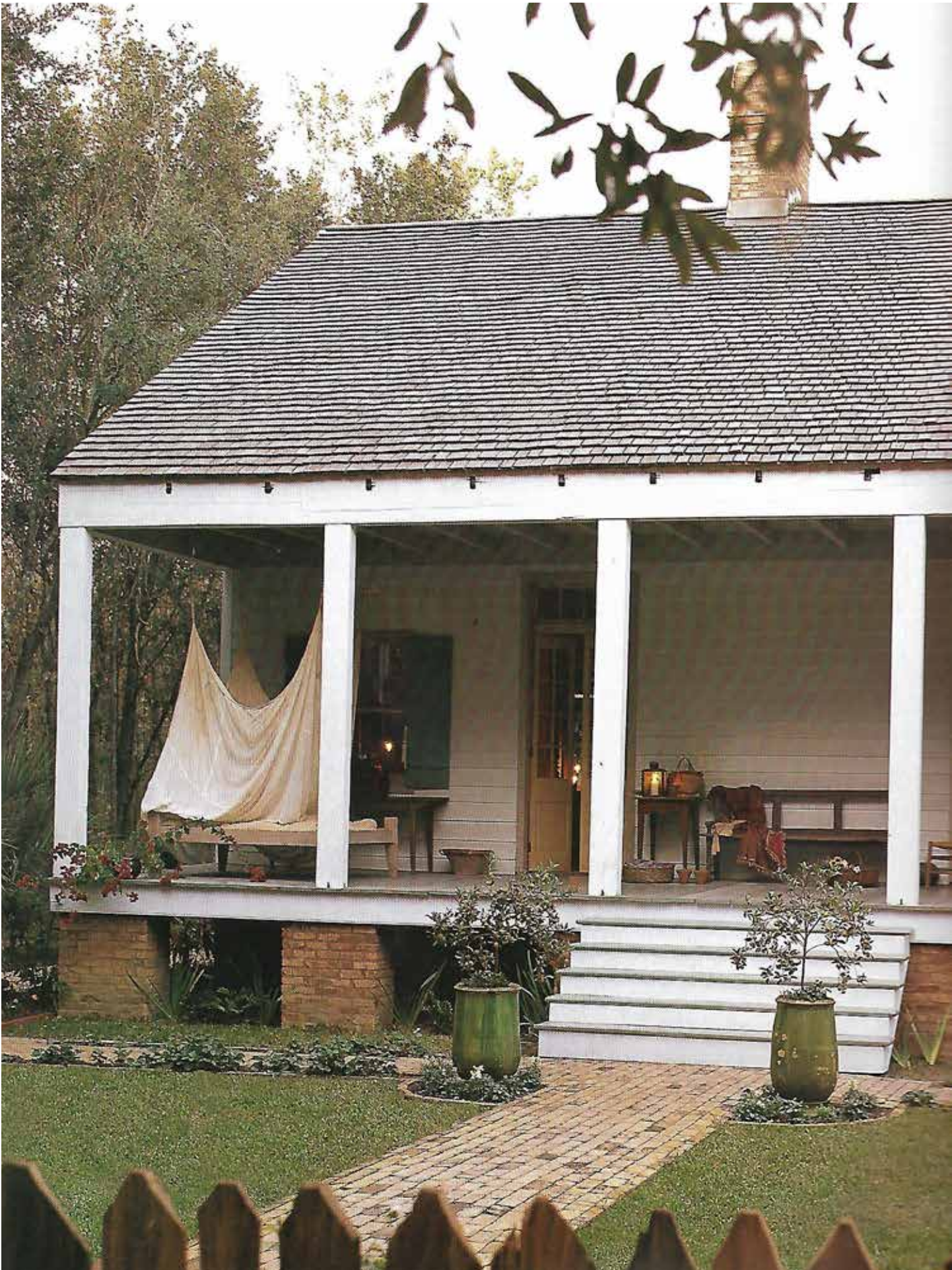
Who can write the secret life of old houses, catalog their wiles or understand their seductions? Neither they who fall under the power of such enchantments nor those impervious to them can fully explain this profound inanimate will to survive. People succeed eventually in owning ordinary houses, but a truly great house possesses its owner. Such places are not always grand. They need only to have acquired a soul while surviving their rambling histories.

Madeleine Conac always imagined she would build a French-inspired house on a magnificent property once owned by her family. Destiny, however, has a way of swatting down our plans like August insects. Conac, whose ancestral roots run deep in Southeast Louisiana, understands enough about Acadian magic to heed the voices that whisper through the cypress. That's why one afternoon it did not seem particularly odd to her, while standing at the edge of a country road looking through a ruined sugarcane field, that an old house beckoned her. Like most Southerners who rank trespassing as a sin only slightly less grave than forgetting a dinner party, she hesitated. Then, oblivious to caution, she

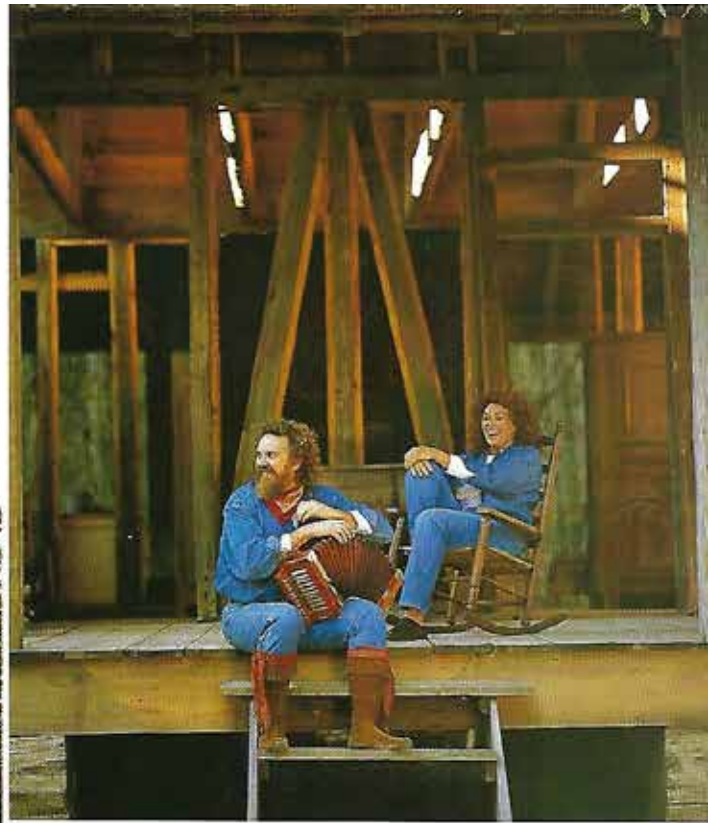
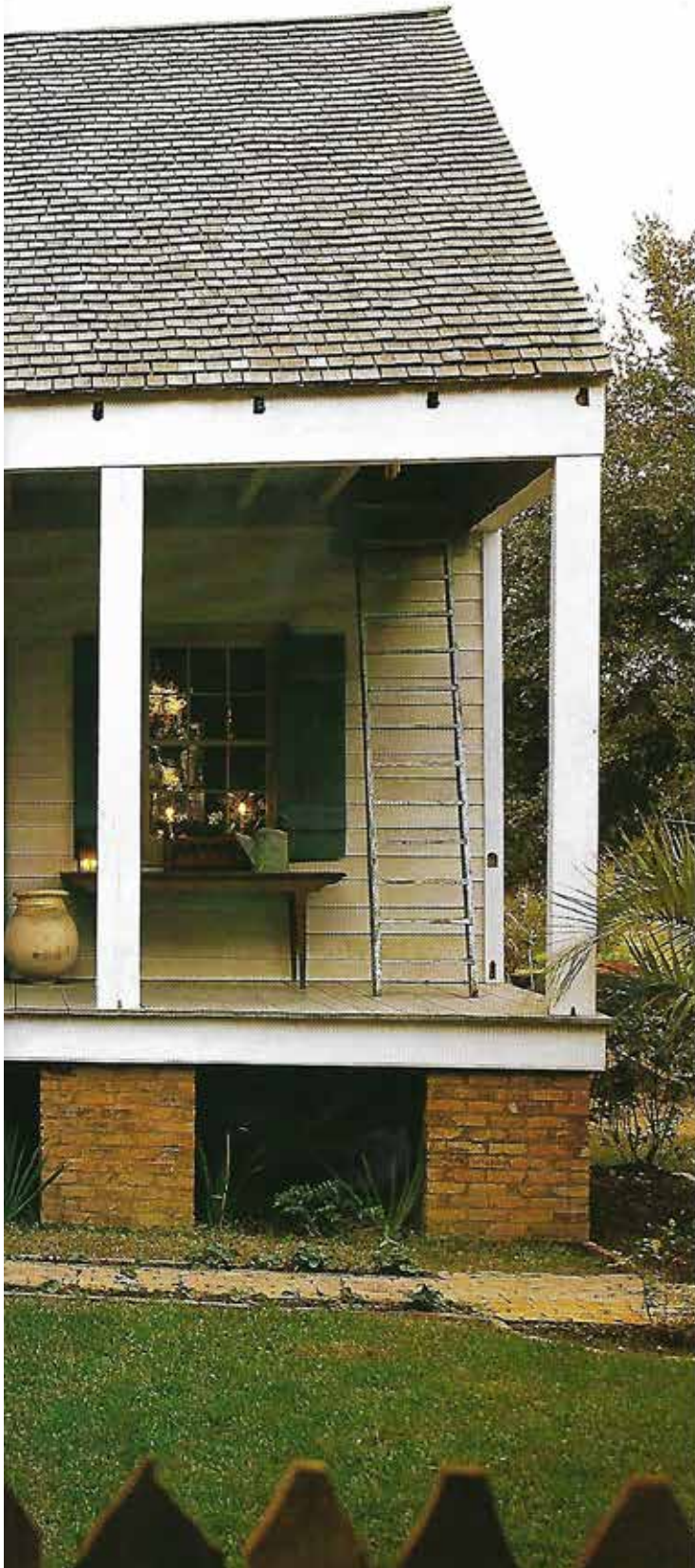


Madeleine Cenac, whose roots run deep in Southeast Louisiana, moved an abandoned 19th-century house 50 miles to the shores of Lake Martin. Although the work continues, furniture has been placed in the drawing room, creating a kind of eerie glamour amid the anarchy of rebuilding.

BY PATRICK J. DUNNE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
THIBAUT JEANSON



The gracious proportions, steeply pitched roof, and center chimney suggest early Creole architecture. It is unknown whether it was once a manor house or an overseer's cottage. The exterior gallery serves as an outdoor living space. RIGHT: With the help of her boyfriend, Mark de Basile, Cenac renovated the structure, which now represents the enduring elegance of country life.

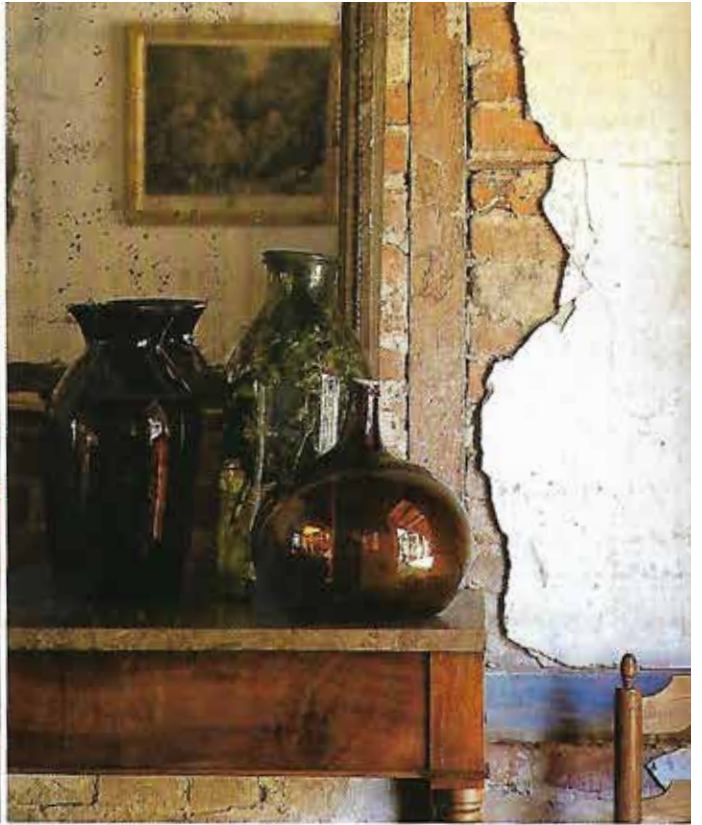
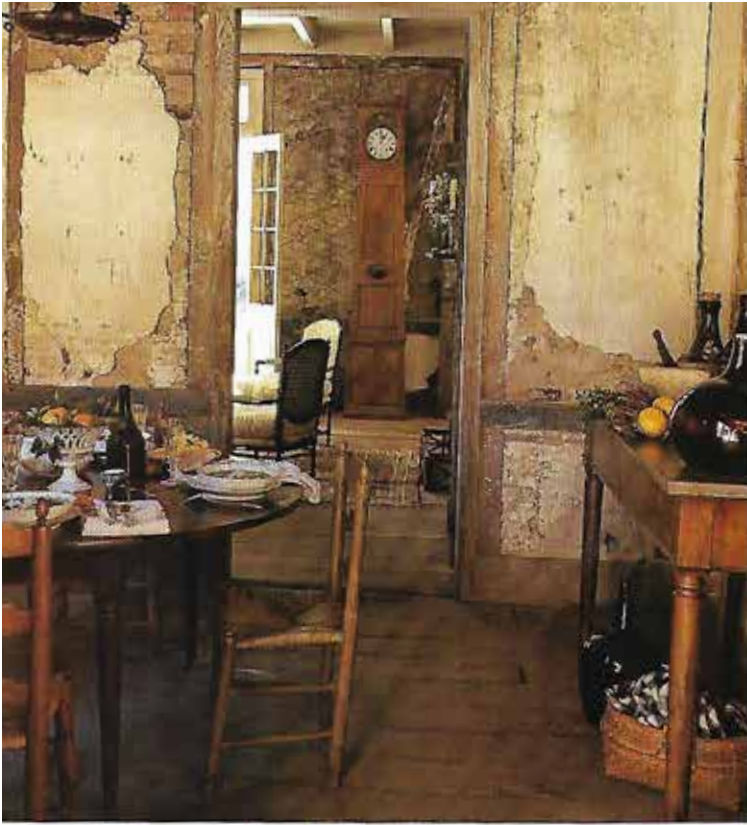


waded through the cane to take a closer look. The house had only fragments of porches, no window glass, and a beautiful sweep of roof. After an hour it became so hard to leave, she knew something serious had happened.

Only a short time before, she had discovered a little-known lake formed some 5,000 years ago by a meander of the Mississippi River. Land there was hard to come by and rarely changed hands. Then, miraculously, a parcel became available, and she acquired it without any clear purpose. The apparition in the cane field provided the answer. Within a few months the house that had been abandoned for nearly 70 years was mounted on a flatbed and moved 50 miles to Lake Martin.

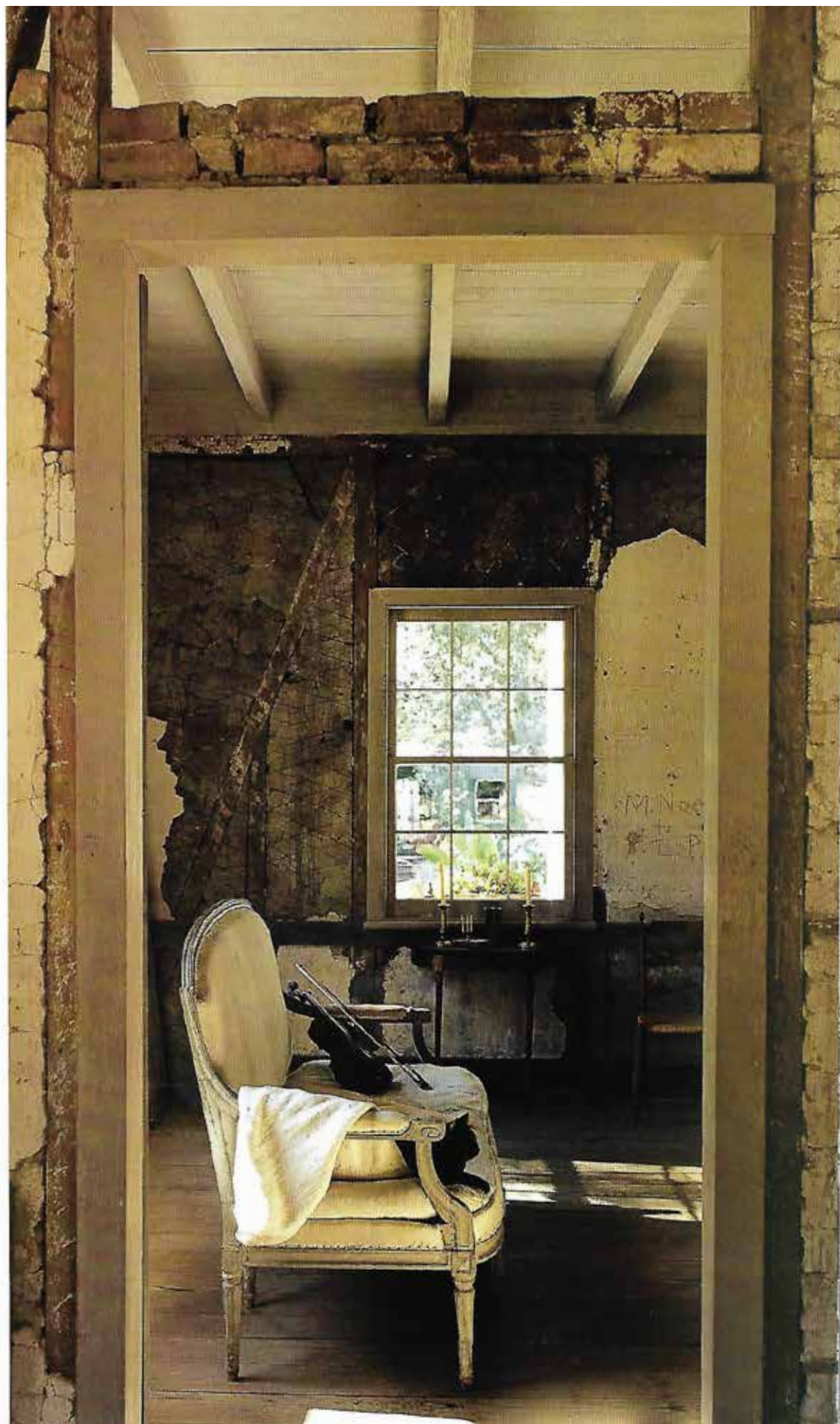
Today, when someone asks Cenac why she embarked on such a foolhardy project, she smiles and shrugs. Then the softest of shadows crosses her face as she murmurs, "I was blind, just blind. Most love blinds us, and it was love." The house remains something of an enigma.

This story-and-a-half cottage with graceful chimneys and walls of *boussillage*, which is Spanish moss mixed with mud and filled in between timbers, is typical of Creole construction of the early 1800s. But the evidence of circular saw marks indicates it was actually



OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP ROW: The dining room lies between the drawing room and the kitchen wing. The Louis XVI walnut drop-leaf dining table is set with 18th- and 19th-century porcelain, glass, and silver. The side table displays a collection of glass jars. OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW: The house's floor plan is unusual because it allows for an exceptionally spacious drawing room. The Prussian blue color on the door was reconstructed from traces of paint found in the old house. The French oak cabriole table is 18th century, as are the rush-bottom armchairs.

RIGHT: The unfinished walls reveal an old-fashioned construction of *bousillage*, a combination of moss mixed with mud that was filled in between timbers. It was an excellent insulator, collecting the cool air of the evening and aspirating it during the day. The miniature candelabra on the demilune table was discovered tucked away in the floorboards. It has been a talisman for the life of the house.



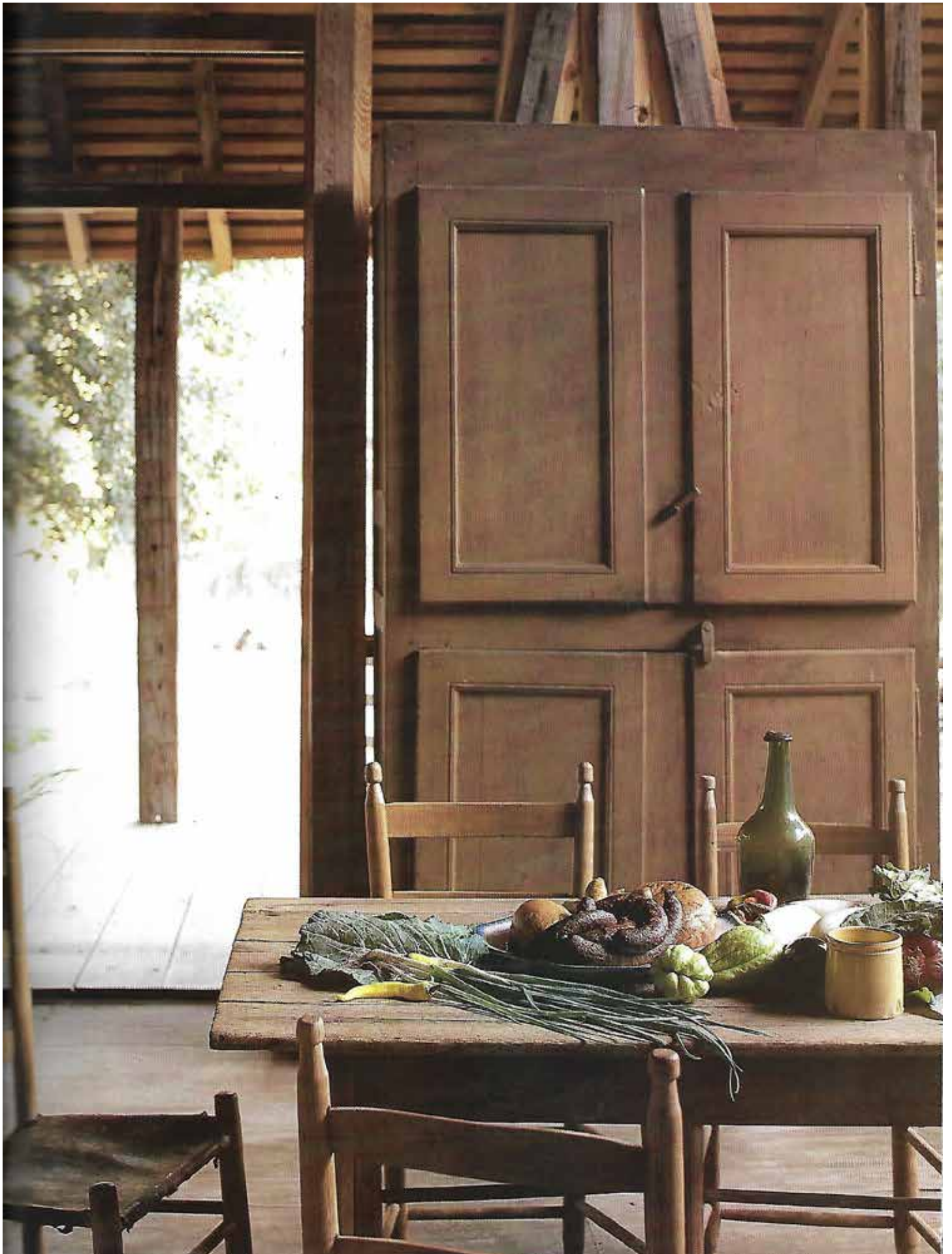


In a sympathetic addition using old materials, a commodious kitchen has been created and is bounded on both sides by porches. The French armoire is early 19th century. LEFT: The feature of the house emanates enchantment, it is the cooking hearth. Friends and family instinctively gravitate to its warmth.

built after 1840. So was it a small manor house or an overseer's house? No answer seems definite, but Cenac characteristically favors the more modest interpretation. "It came partially furnished, you know," she says. "There were plows, fencing, crayfish traps, and most intriguing, a child's dollhouse candelabra—not just a candelabra, but a doré one." That toy has become a sort of talisman, reassuring her through the difficult moments of the project and, in a sense, lighting the way.

Cenac supervised the renovation with the help of her boyfriend, Mark de Basile, an accomplished musician and carpenter. Having no intention of being away from the project, she surprised friends by moving a trailer onto the land. And as she had done in the past, she enlisted the advice of her friend Robert Smith, antiques dealer, international taste setter, and authority on local architecture. He managed to create the illusion of a Louis Seize pavilion, fitting in many of her favorite antiques, including a period painted bed and other good 18th-century furniture. With the help of gardener Judith Bott Gonzalez, Cenac laid out a formal parterre in the front and a kitchen garden on the side, requiring burly construction workers to be as sensitive as ballet dancers.







Opening onto the front gallery, the bedroom is dominated by a Caribbean-Creole bed made of ironwood. The Directoire-style mantel gives the house a much earlier feeling than 1840, which is when it was probably constructed. **RIGHT:** The floor plan includes three rooms across the back, one of which is used as a bathroom and dressing room. The 19th-century tub is painted tole.



proceeded in a meticulous fashion, Cenac can be the impatient sort when it comes to decoration. Even before the windows had been replaced, she installed an antique French canoppy, a cabriole supper table, a gilded mirror, and a dozen candlesticks in the salon. Then, to the despair of the carpenters, she was having candlelit suppers for a few friends. Later a large Caribbean-Creole ironwood bed was moved in so she could experience the house as it had been without any modern amenities. "You learn something about yourself and your house when you experience it in its elemental and original state," she says.

She is also raising her teenage son, Armand, along with a passel of dogs and cats that have found their way to her domain. Lake neighbors often stop by, sometimes bringing freshly caught fish. They gather in the newly added kitchen wing. De Basile breaks from his labors to play the accordion and sing Cajun songs, while a thousand different birds swirl overhead before returning to their own nests at the swampy edge of the lake. The solitary ways of an old house that issued the irresistible siren song three years ago are vague memories, and now the house can hardly contain all the life asking for shelter in its reincarnation. ♦
For design details, see Sourcebook.

