

SAVING  
SOUTHWEST  
FLORIDA'S

# Past



A landscape architect  
by day, W. Christian  
Busk has also become  
known for rescuing  
area historic homes

BY JANINA BIRTOLO PHOTOS BY RHONDA MANDEL

**W. Christian** Busk could be considered something of a superhero, whose mission isn't to protect a bustling metropolis but rather to preserve the history of Southwest Florida. Although he's not mild mannered like Clark Kent, Busk is affable and engaging. And like Kent, he holds a "regular" job by day, that of landscape architect. It's a career that's allowed him to indulge the love of plants he developed growing up in Central Florida. It is also one that has proved quite successful for him; he now has his own landscaping firm and has created beautiful surroundings for a number of upscale homes.

In his off hours, however, Busk's alter ego comes to light, as he works to preserve and restore historic homes in Bonita Springs and, most recently, Naples. "It's my hobby," Busk says with a grin. "I get to play architect and do preservation. I bet 30 percent of my time is now spent on this. My parents were born and raised in Central Florida, and I kind of consider myself a Cracker. These are pieces of my history. I used to skip school to go look at old architecture and gardens. These houses are my own little pieces of history that won't disappear."

Busk started down this historical path about fifteen years ago, when he jumped at the chance to move and save a 1940s beach cottage. He enjoyed the process so much that he bought several lots in Bonita Springs, near the intersections of Tennessee, Michigan, and Pennsylvania avenues, and began looking for more houses to rescue. So far, he's restored half a dozen homes, and he's become the go-to guy when historic residences are in danger of being demolished.

That's exactly what happened when Naples's Haldeman House and property was sold to developer Gerald Goldberg in late 2005. Goldberg didn't want to renovate the landmark house. His plan was to subdivide the beachfront lot and build five new homes to sell.

Built in 1886 by Confederate General John S. Williams, the house was Naples's oldest. Williams eventually gave the house to his friend Walter Haldeman, publisher of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and the man who first put Naples on the map, and it was used by the Haldeman family for many years. Local preservationists were upset at the thought of losing the house, but, although Goldberg offered \$100,000 to any local historical society or museum to move the structure, no groups came forward. That's when Busk got a call from the City of Naples.

"I said, 'Yeah, I'll take the house! Of course!'" Busk recalls. "It [the call] came out of nowhere. This is a piece of history. It's older



than the Edison home."

Busk contracted with Flint & Doyle to move the historic home to his properties in Bonita Springs, and in April 2006 the house made the slow journey of roughly fifteen miles. To make the move, the house had to be cut into sections. The 1915 addition was separated and placed on one of Busk's lots. The original 1886 portion was divided into three pieces and brought to another lot, on a seven-foot knoll overlooking Oak Creek.

"The roof collapsed when we separated it," Busk reports. "We tried to save it, but it was impossible. And the first rain we had [after the move], we ended up with an inch of water in the

**Above: The fireplace in the E.P. Nutting House was still usable, but all of the windows needed to be replaced. Opposite: W. Christian Busk checks on the progress of the Nutting House at the start of its renovation.**

## Of House & Home

living room. There was grass sisal carpet throughout the house. We had to tear all that out and throw it away.”

Such are the trials of moving old houses. You never know what’s going to give or what you’ll find as you start restoring. When Busk started work on the E.P. Nutting House, a circa-1913 fishing cottage in Bonita Springs, he discovered it was laden with termites. Fortunately, the termites hadn’t gotten into the floors. Electrical wiring is also always a problem. Typically, it needs to be completely replaced. Air-conditioning usually needs to be added, but in such a way so as not to detract from the look of the house.

And, of course, there is the danger of something happening during the move. An SUV, for instance, nearly plowed into the back of the Haldeman House during its journey. “I never watch them move the houses,” Busk admits. “It takes too long and it’s nerve-racking.”

In addition to the logistical and technical problems, the houses also present puzzles in terms of how best to restore them. “I do historical interpretation rather than strict restoration,” Busk explains. “These houses are like a mystery project. You have to ask, What’s right for the home? What’s right for the time? What’s right for today?”

“You make mental notes,” he continues. “How does it make sense? How is somebody going to live in there today? How should I orient the house? And then, when you start putting things back together, you find that things have rotted or shifted. You always have to address each area by itself.”

The Haldeman House exemplifies the need to make changes. When the 1886 structure was built, kitchens were situated in separate buildings, so cooking wouldn’t heat up the rest of the home. But obviously no one today wants a house that doesn’t have a kitchen. So Busk needs to find a place to put one. He doesn’t face that problem with the 1915 addition,



**New lighting fixtures are a must in Busk’s renovated homes, as most have electrical systems that are worn out and substandard.**

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which included a kitchen when it was built. But, as in the older home, he does need to update the bathrooms and wiring, add air-conditioning, and decide whether to enlarge any of the rooms.

“I’m there almost on a daily basis,” Busk says. “It’s part of my job now. Figuring out how to conceal the new mechanicals is always a challenge.”

So is figuring out what design changes to make. With the Nutting House, Busk opted to remove the existing roof and put on a gable roof instead. He would have liked to save the original tin roof, but previous owners had sprayed it with insulating foam, making it unusable. To balance the design, he added a gable to the

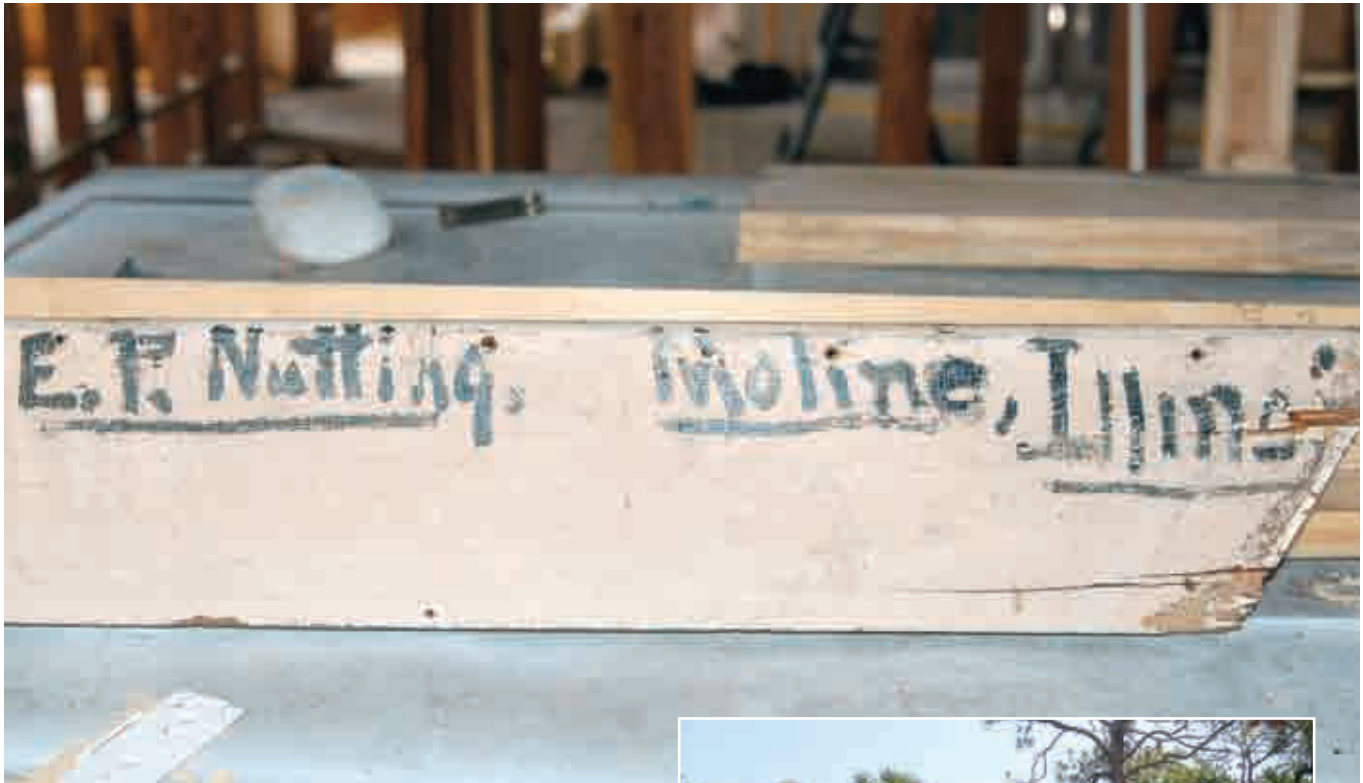
back side of the house as well, along with a porch. The extra space allowed him to incorporate a new bathroom for the master bedroom as well as a spacious den.

The restoration process has turned Busk into something of a scavenger. He collects doors and windows the way others might collect art. He figures eventually he’ll find the right home for all of them.

“I’m always scavenging things,” he says. “But you find a need for them. The Nutting House had been all boarded up; it was pretty forgotten. We sneaked in to take a look. People had taken up the floor. They took windows, doors. There was nothing left.”

It took Busk and his crew about six months to transform the Nutting House from a neglected shack to a comfortable three-bedroom home. As with his other homes, he’ll now rent it out. After putting so much work into these projects, he just can’t bear to sell them. “I want to hold on to them as long as I can,” he explains.

The original portion of the Haldeman House should be finished before the end of the year, Busk estimates. It’s the easier portion because he’s keeping the layout much as it was,



Clockwise from above: Uncovered wood shows the Nutting House's origins; a section of the Haldeman House awaits renovation after its move from Naples to Bonita Springs; adding a porch to the rear of the Nutting House allowed Busk to include a master bathroom and den.



# Of House & Home





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adding only a kitchen and a porch. “The best part of this project,” Busk says, “is giving new life and new space to this historical house. People will be able to see it—maybe even more so than before.” Once that project is done, Busk plans to start turning his attention to the 1915 section.

Maybe. That house may have to wait, because a brand-new project may end up taking precedence. This past summer, work began on the construction of Imperial Parkway, to connect it with Three Oaks Parkway and Livingston Road. One house sits in the way of that construction project: the Bowers Briggs House at the northeast corner of Dean and Imperial streets in Bonita Springs. The house is rumored to have served as a hideout for Al Capone. It’s also rumored to be haunted. Guess who wants to move and save it?

Busk hopes to work with the Lee County Department of Transportation to secure the house. He’ll then move it to a lot he owns on Dean Street, just west of its original location, where he already has an historic cottage and a garage. The move will necessitate cutting off the roof and chimney in order to ease the house under the power lines. But Busk isn’t worried. Nor is he ready to turn down any other historic home that may come his way.

“There are other structures that will become available due to the expansion of [Bonita Springs],” he points out. “You can plan ahead, but you don’t know for sure when they will become available. I have four more lots in the historic area.

“I’m going to be busy for a little while yet,” he adds with a smile. “But I have a passion for this historical stuff.” Others who share his passion for local history are just glad that superhero Busk is on the job. 🦸

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**The Nutting House has been transformed through Busk’s preservation efforts and was set on concrete pilings to protect it from flooding; opposite: Busk’s team applies plaster to the den in the Nutting House and adds insulation and air-conditioning to the former fishing cottage.**