



Brian Helms toiled for more than five years restoring White Cliff Manor. Today, it reflects the aesthetics of the original home, inside and out.

# WHITE CLIFF MANOR

## A Missouri Relic's Foreign Past

*A restoration revives a European-inspired home in the Mississippi River Valley.* BY SHEREE K. NIELSEN

**HE'D DRIVEN** the familiar route from Festus to his farm in Bollinger hundreds of times before. Somehow, today was different; Brian Helms would view Highway 61, the scenic and historic river road, in a different light.

Driving along the bluffs, Brian noticed a "For Sale by Owner" sign. He steered his vehicle up the winding path, past dogwood and redbud trees, until the aging Schaaf Hill mansion came into view. The weathered structure was in dire need of TLC.

"She must have been one heck of a beauty when she was young," he says, recounting the story.

As he rounded the crest of the hill, Brian found real-estate flyers nailed to a tree and dialed the number on the ad. After a tour of the bare-bones interior and a three-hour conversation with the owner, Brian drove to Kaskaskia Island for another view of the bluff home. Unable to shake the striking image from his mind, Brian made an offer that evening. He entered the mansion as owner in November 2002.



Schaaf's Hill was built in 1879 by Louis Schaaf, founder of St. Mary's Mill Company, a major wheat flour producer.

During the five-year restoration, Brian worked as the general contractor and completed all the handiwork. He revived the spirit of the home's six-foot windows by meticulously removing, cleaning, sanding, and refinishing the frames and sills.

Upon completion, he realized what must have been the home's original opulence and brilliance. During the project, he learned about the family who lived there long ago and about the building's architecture from Schaaf

family descendants and local historians. He even considered selling but took the house off the market. Too emotionally attached to the home, he just couldn't let it go.

"Keeping alive the lineage of the Schaaf family and history of the Mississippi River Valley was my destiny," Brian says.

The manor was renamed White Cliff Manor Bed and Breakfast and Gardens for the estate's color, grounds, and commanding size and view. Brian hopes visitors walk away with a better

SHEREE K. NIELSEN



COURTESY OF WHITE CLIFF MANOR

White Cliff Manor Bed and Breakfast and Gardens treats visitors to its historically opulent rooms and panoramic views of Kaskaskia Island and the Mississippi River Valley.

SHOW-ME *Homes*

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understanding of the vanished Provence de la Nouvelle France, the Creole-Colonial District established by France in North America.

"I've tried to create an old-world charm with an aura of elegance, a sort of put-your-drink-down, put-your-feet-up ambience for the guests," Brian says.

Today, Brian treats visitors to a historical narrative of the home and a captivating look at the couple that settled Schaaf Hill—Louis Schaaf and Harriet Brown.

Louis Schaaf's parents, John Frederick and Caroline Bauer Schaaf, traveled from Prussia in 1837 and settled in Jerseyville, Illinois. In 1856, they moved to St. Mary's. Louis became a miller at sixteen and managed St. Mary's Mill, which his uncle August Schaaf owned.

One of the largest wheat-milling operations in the state, St. Mary's Mill produced eight hundred barrels of pure winter wheat flour daily. Steamboats from St. Mary's Landing shipped flour grown by German farmers in one of the most fertile valleys in the nation down the Mississippi River. St. Mary's finest flour reached consumers on Eastern and Southern seaports and two continents. The mill's products were-

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Before the French and Indian War ended, the Schaafs were among the Mississippi River Valley's elite. Louis Schaaf treated his wife, Harriet, to riches and luxury. Guests can get a glimpse of this style in the drawing room, the dining room, and other areas of the Manor.



critical to the survival of New Orleans' French community.

Louis supplied the market with winter wheat and was instrumental in helping the settlements of the mid-Mississippi River Valley bring commerce and industry to local farmers.

Louis's love interest would be the genesis of many things to come. Both sixteen years old, Louis and Harriet met at the Kaskaskia church picnic in 1856. Smitten with the young woman's natural good looks, petite frame, and long dark hair, Louis courted Harriet and later married her in Perryville on April 16, 1863.

Harriet was a part of the third generation of French colonists born in the Mississippi River Valley. In the 1730s, her ancestors traveled from Quebec by flatboat in search of new land. The eldest daughter of local builder Walter L. Brown, Harriet was educated in French history, tradition, and culture. Her family was among the oldest and most respected early settlers in the mid-Mississippi River Valley.

In 1872, Louis purchased acreage for a home site and gained an interest in St. Mary's Mill. Eventually he became the sole owner of the mill.

During the Mississippi Steamboat era, few homes of stature in St. Mary's were situated on large parcels of land, making Schaaf Hill a rarity in the area.

Located on the Mississippi River's romantic bluffs, Louis built Schaaf Hill—Harriet's dream home. Shaded by ancient oak, maple, ash, and walnut trees, the grandiose twenty-acre estate sat high on a hill, perfect for natural breezes. The porch and lawn commanded magnificent vistas of the river valley and historic Kaskaskia Island below.

A faded note from the family Bible written by Harriet states, "Moved to our new house, Tuesday, October 21, 1879."

COURTESY OF WHITE CLIFF MANOR



**Top:** Rooms on the property are named after its historic owners. Harriet's room has an updated version of the French-Creole style. **Right:** This room, named after Harriet's daughter, Caroline, has a French-Creole twist, even though the architecture is Italianate.

Harriet and Louis raised six children there. The mansion's lush grounds provided the backdrop for the weddings of their three daughters.

Louis provided Harriet with anything her heart desired and surrounded her with luxury. Her decorative style blended old-world charm with French-Creole accents evidenced by her furnishings and way of life.

The Schaaf Hill home reflected the influence of Anglo-Saxons in French-speaking villages and the way people were transitioning from French-Creole architecture to the style of the Renaissance Revival and Italianate architecture.

During the First Renaissance Revival (from about 1840 to 1885), the style was evident in public and commercial buildings and homes for the wealthy. The Schaaf home was no exception. Its original Revival characteristics included an L-shaped interior floor plan. The main part of the house consisted of three floors and a basement. The first two floors contained central hallways with staircases. Near the home's entrance, a library sat directly left of the hall. A drawing room and formal dining room, divided by nine-panel faux-mahogany parlor doors, sat to the hall's right. The staircase to the second floor allowed access to three bedrooms and servant quarters (leading back to the kitchen via private stairwell).

Homeowners in mid-nineteenth-century America commonly copied floor plans of old manor houses in Italy. The unique Schaaf Hill home is reminiscent of an Italianate manor home with porches resembling

those in the New Orleans Garden District. The Schaaf home also used oil-lamps as light sources and coal for energy.

Schaaf Hill's exterior bore a balanced, symmetrical façade with columns balanced on either side of the windows, a gabled roof, balconies, and balustrade porches. Wooden double doors on each level showcased carved curvilinear and circular panels with twin-paned transoms. At the time the house was built, men and women were social at the dinner table but afterward, withdrew into separate rooms. At the manor, they would venture into the split-parlor.

During the home tour, Brian directs visitors' attention to the interior's high ceilings, tall windows, parquet hardwood floors, and moldings. Custom highlights include original cast-iron fireplace mantelpieces, cast-bronze ornamental doorknobs, and keyholes fashioned in England.

Since White Cliff's reawakening in 2007, Schaaf descendants have visited and shared colorful stories key to the family's genealogy, donations of photos, an original dining room chair, and the couple's Bible.

Owning the bed and breakfast affords Brian a good lifestyle: horses, acreage, and his faithful dog, Lola. "And, I get to live in an old mansion on the bluffs—my manifest destiny."

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COURTESY OF WHITE CLIFF MANOR