



THE ELEGANT HOMES of  
*North Washington* STREET

*A few of these historical beauties have been lovingly restored by their owner/occupants.*

by NANCY HILLER  photography by STEVE RAYMER



**THREE BLOCKS NORTHEAST**

of the courthouse Square, one of Bloomington's oldest neighborhoods has changed surprisingly little in outward appearance over the past hundred years.

Shortly after its platting in 1889, the two blocks of North Washington Street between East 8th and East 10th streets were developed to house some of Bloomington's most prosperous citizens. Members of the Showers family, who made their money in furniture manufacturing, bought half the lots—some for their own homes, others for speculative development. Soon doctors, merchants, owners of limestone mills, and the publishers of Bloomington's two daily newspapers purchased the remaining lots, several of them hiring notable architect John Nichols to design their elegant new residences.

Up popped fashionable Victorian Queen Anne "cottages" exuberantly decked out in diamond and fish-scale shingles, their gables resplendent with spindles, fretwork, and decorative brackets reminiscent of delicate German butter cookies and Battenberg lace. By 1905 the street could also boast two of Bloomington's most magnificent homes: the brooding limestone house at 321 N. Washington St. (now called the Stone Mansion), designed by Nichols for Maude Showers and her husband, Dr. Burton Myers, an early dean of the medical school; and the monumental mansion at number 430 (now the Showers Inn), with its two-story Corinthian columns—also a Nichols design—built for Maude's cousin Edward.

Fast-forward to 2011. A few houses are sided in aluminum or vinyl. The street is paved with asphalt, not cobbled brick, and flanked by concrete sidewalks. Overhead wires carry

telephone lines and electrical power. Yet the basic streetscape is very much as it would have appeared in the 1920s, when the last of the houses was erected.

Its architectural stability notwithstanding, the neighborhood has undergone considerable demographic change, primarily because of its proximity to Indiana University. As family sizes dwindled in the mid-20th century and the original owners died out, the handsome, large houses, an easy walk to campus, became attractive investments for landlords, who divided them into apartments, confident that students would keep them fully occupied. By the 1980s the culture of North Washington Street had taken a decided shift from refined to rowdy, with loud, late-night parties and front yards and porches often littered with trash.

But the '80s also saw burgeoning interest in historic preservation. Fortunately for North Washington Street, the period style du jour was Victorian. One by one, several of the houses were purchased by a new class of owner/occupant, the old-house aficionado—a somewhat grittier, perhaps more adventurous type than the neighborhood's high-society founders. As elaborate wooden shingles and paint schemes began to be restored, the new owners gained confidence that neighborliness, too, could be revived. The district's 1991 listing on the National Register of Historic Places served to increase its appeal and property values.

Today, residents on North Washington Street work hard to foster respectful coexistence with the lively, ever-shifting population of student renters. Here are three of their stories.

The conservatory at the rear of Jamee and Scott Wissinks' 1895 house features a fountain, aviary, and built-in planters. The banana trees, like the other plants, are real; one even produced bananas this past summer.





Jamee and Scott Wissinks' house was built for Jennie Showers, who married Joseph Smith. Jennie was a granddaughter of Charles Showers, founder of the furniture company; Smith was an employee. Later, the house was owned by the widow of Fred Matthews of the Matthews Brothers Stone Company (now Bybee Stone Company).

## The Right People for the Right House

JAMEE AND SCOTT WISSINK  
514 N. Washington St.

"The first time we saw the house," recalls Scott Wissink, "we walked around, then went outside, and Jamee wanted to buy it so much. But because of its condition, all she could do was cry."

The two-story Queen Anne at 514 N. Washington St., one of a matching pair built by William Showers in 1895 for his daughters, Jennie and Nellie, had looked stunning from the exterior. Partially restored by Patricia and Marvin Carlson, its owners since 1982, the place had caught the Wissinks' notice long before their first actual visit in 1987, when the house went on the market.

Despite her distress at the staggering scale of work remaining to be done, Jamee found the home inspector's report perversely heartening. "This house will never fall down around your ears!" he told her, even as he noted that all the systems—heating, plumbing, and wiring, plus the roof—would have to be replaced before interior decoration could begin.

Before the Carlsons bought the property it had been used as a boarding house and had several kitchens and bathrooms. The Carlsons had reconfigured the interior into three units, living in one and renting out the others to help finance the building's restoration.

The first job the Wissinks undertook was replacing the roof. Next, with their own hands, they reworked the heating, plumbing, and wiring systems and restored the original single-family interior layout. Scott, a professor of nuclear physics and director of IU's Center for

Exploration of Energy and Matter, is no stranger to mechanical systems. Jamee, a former naval aircraft electrician, has been his equal partner at every step. Once they finished this preliminary work, they stripped paint, refinished woodwork, repaired plaster, and hung wallpaper.

With seemingly boundless enthusiasm, they have also added on to the house at the rear and finished part of the attic. When a contractor recommended reinforcing the structure of the kitchen area, which had been added around 1910, they decided to build on an octagonal breakfast room and conservatory. In 2005 they redid the kitchen and butler's pantry in period style, and their most recent project has been the creation of a semiformal sunken garden.

The house is an ongoing labor of love. The future billiards room, off the kitchen, is currently stripped to bare studs and furnished with a table saw and other tools. "Done' is not in our vocabulary!" chuckles Jamee.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Scott and Jamee Wissink in their back garden.

The Wissinks added this octagonal breakfast room at the rear of their house, extending a circa-1910 addition. They handled all the finish carpentry, painting, curtain making, and decorative stenciling.



A 1904 "computing scale" purchased at an antiques show fits perfectly with the period-style kitchen. Scott repaired the scale, and Jamee painted it teal with a rusted light green. The framed fruit-crate labels are original, collected in California.

After extensive repairs to plaster and woodwork, the Wissinks decorated their dining room in over-the-top

Victorian style. Jamee sewed the curtains herself. The reproduction light fixtures were a Christmas gift from her mother. The tiled buffet came from the Bloomington Antique Mall, and the dramatic cabinet at the right came from an antiques store in Greenfield, Indiana. The tall breakfront cabinet is a reproduction.







As part of an extensive remodeling project in 1998, Tyler and David Ferguson had a handsome addition built at the rear of their house. The imposing antique bookcase with glass doors was a gift from Tyler's mother, who found it for just \$25 at a neighbor's garage sale in 1968. The long couch visible in the background came from the Furniture Exchange; Tyler says she bought it "when it was brown corduroy with cigarette stains," then had it reupholstered by the local furnishings store Grant Street, which is no longer in business.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

When the Fergusons added on at the back of their house, they retained the original exterior brick wall, turning it into a feature. The neon sign was a gift from one of David's friends, who had it fabricated by his sister, a professional sign maker.

The 1920s brick house is shaded by mature trees, some of them probably planted around the time of the house's construction.

Thanks to a four-fifths-height wall, this bathroom is illuminated by natural light streaming through windows in the adjacent mudroom. Atop the wall is a vintage plaster head.

The guest bedroom is furnished with an antique mahogany bed covered with a quilt made by Tyler's godmother.



## From Bachelor Pad to Newlyweds' Home

**TYLER AND DAVID FERGUSON**  
615 N. Washington St.

Compared to the other properties he'd toured, all of them former rentals, the brick foursquare David Ferguson bought in 1987 was in move-in condition. Like most houses built in the mid-1920s, the one at 615 N. Washington St. had been updated with drop ceilings, '50s wallpaper, and brown shag carpet. But it, unlike the others, was well kept.

Before long, Ferguson, a partner in the law firm of Ferguson & Ferguson, realized he didn't need a four-bedroom house to himself and invited a few friends to move in with him. The bachelors were often joined by friends from

out of town, who slept on couches—or, in one case, a hammock in the basement. The roommates moved out in 1998 when David married Tyler Caldwell, an IU graduate best known as a formidable soccer player and more recently for having catalyzed Bloomington's roller derby scene.

On a Friday night shortly after their wedding, Tyler had an urge to start decorating. Taking a hammer to the ugly suspended ceiling in the kitchen, she discovered that it had been supporting the crumbling plaster above. As the plaster, along with decades' worth of coal dust, rained down on her and the contents of their kitchen, she realized that "decorating" might exceed her personal abilities and ambition.

To remodel the house properly—rather than "putting lipstick on a pig," as Tyler says—was a serious undertaking. They even briefly considered moving, until they realized that the other neighborhoods they had in

mind were more expensive, in addition to being farther away from some of their favorite haunts—Bloomingsfoods, the Farmers' Market, and Yogi's Grill & Bar, not to mention David's office at the corner of East 6th and North Grant streets. They decided to stay put and hire Kirkwood Design Studio as architect and Steve Percy as general contractor.

They're glad they stayed, not only because they love the location but because stewarding their house keeps alive a small part of Bloomington history. While conducting research for a Bloomington Restorations tour of North Washington Street, they learned that the house had been the childhood home of Doris Seward, a descendent of Austin Seward, whose business in the 1820s made the weathervane fish that swims atop the courthouse dome.

"We think it's amazing that there aren't more owner/occupants who want to live in this neighborhood," Tyler exclaims.





## A Student Returns



**KURT BRETTHAUER**  
526 N. Washington St.

As a graduate student in the IU School of Business during the 1980s, Kurt Bretthauer fell in love with Bloomington—the musical performances, the lakes and forests, the passionate engagement of citizens in their community. After nine years as a professor at Texas A&M University, he returned to Bloomington in 1999 as a visiting professor in the operations and decision technologies department of the IU Kelley School of Business. When he was invited to stay on permanently, he was delighted to accept.

Bretthauer was familiar with North Washington Street; he walked there often during his time in grad school, admiring its old houses and mature trees. Convinced he wanted to live there, he rented an apartment at Washington Terrace, the elegant 1929 limestone building at number 316—the former home of the Rudi Ashram in the 1970s—and waited for the right house to come up for sale. Finally, after six years, it did.

The colorful, single-story Queen Anne at 526 N. Washington St., built in the 1890s, had been rented for many years before it was purchased in 1993 by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Yusef Komunyakaa, at the time a faculty member in IU's Department of English. When Komunyakaa sold the house in 1998, Travis and Katie Paulin bought the property and restored its exterior to its present polychrome glory.

Bretthauer, a first-time homeowner in 2005 who “had a hammer and a screwdriver” when he moved in, claims he “knew nothing about taking care of an old house.” He has had plaster repair, wood refinishing, and interior painting performed by Golden Hands Construction and exterior painting done by Foursquare.

As for living in a part of town so densely populated with undergraduates, Bretthauer laughs, “They keep you young!” Every so often he has had one of his own students as a neighbor. Some, he says, are “terrified” by such proximity to their professor, while others “think it’s cool.” Occasionally, he gets students knocking at the door, hoping to rent the house when August rolls around. Though his home is not for rent, he’s glad to know that some young people appreciate the special character old houses have to offer. \*



Kurt Bretthauer's Queen Anne cottage is a striking polychrome contrast to golden daylilies in June.

**INSET:** A vintage-style mailbox adds attractive detail on the porch.



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:**

Bretthauer has decorated his home's interior in neutral shades to highlight his collection of artwork, which includes works by local artists such as Spiro Athanas and Carol Clendening, modern masters such as Pierre Marie Brisson, Jean Claude Gaugy, and LeRoy Neiman, and, says Bretthauer, “artists...on the weird, dark, and unusual side” such as Michael Hussar and Derek Hess.

The horse painting, *Khemosabi*, is by LeRoy Neiman.

Bretthauer sits next to a painting by French artist Pierre Marie Brisson, titled *La Pause, I*. He was delighted to learn that the director of the gallery in San Francisco, where he purchased the piece, had earned her fine arts degree at IU, where one of her favorite professors was Bonnie Sklarski, now Bretthauer's neighbor.

