

A Primitive Paradise

CRISS AND BOB CEFUS HAVE CREATED A HAVEN OF ABUNDANT GARDENS, WEATHERED OUTBUILDINGS AND GRASSY PATHS SURROUNDING THEIR 19TH CENTURY OHIO HOUSE AND CABIN.

By Gregory LeFever Photographs by Jill Peterson





Previous page: As this scene shows, the Cefus property is a magical array of beds, paths, arbors, and other visual attractions. In the foreground is one of the first beds Criss created, now resplendent with Honeysuckle, Hydrangeas, Holly, Spirea, Coneflowers, Creeping Jenny and ground-covers. The 1876 house has its main door in the porch on the side of the structure. To the left of the bed is the home's original outhouse, restored and moved to this new location.

Top: One of the stone hitching posts located beside a path leading to the house.

Above: A shamrock design is carved into this decorative stone. Criss uses stone items, including discarded head-stones, throughout her gardens to add visual interest.

One day a woman who'd been visiting the Ohio home of Criss and Bob Cefus turned to Criss and said: "You can't even see this place from the road unless you come up the driveway. I can't believe there's even a place like this up here."

"And I told her, 'That's the idea,' Criss laughs. "I like it private, so that when you're here in the garden, it's like another world. I love it that way."

To her credit, Criss truly has achieved her other world – an incredibly alluring one of flower-beds lush with brightly colored Cosmos, Impatiens, Black-eyed Susan, Coneflowers, Hydrangeas, Day Lilies and much more. Overflowing vegetable beds of tomatoes, corn, squash, strawberries and peas. Grassy paths winding between clumps of flowers, trees and bushes. Hidden ponds with gentle water sounds. Birds, bees and butterflies flitting from blossom to blossom.

Scattered amidst Nature's abundant display throughout the Cefus yard are the manmade backdrops – a barn, shed, lean-to, corncrib, produce stand and even an old outhouse, all weathered to perfection with peeling red paint and vines scaling the walls. Twig-style arbors and wattle fencing support gourd and hop vines and massive mounds of Bittersweet. Stone artifacts from grindstones and discarded headstones to water troughs and birdbaths hide among the dense groundcovers.

And then there's the house from the 1870s, filled with primitive furnishings from even earlier eras, and an 1830 log cabin hauled up from North Carolina and rebuilt behind the Cefus home in Suffield, about a dozen miles east of Akron.





Previous Page: Weathered outbuildings add to the charm of the Cefus gardens, providing backdrops to the nearly two-dozen flower and vegetable beds. The smaller building here was a produce stand in the 1950s where fruits, vegetables, and flowers from the property were sold. Criss uses it now as a potting shed. The main barn at the right holds tools and vehicles while supporting various vines. The two larger sheep are made of resin and the lamb is concrete. The beds are bright with Coneflowers and Impatiens, while various potted plants adorn shelves on the buildings.

Top left: An area Criss calls "Old Soul's Cemetery" holds some discarded headstones Criss has saved from destruction. Some she acquired after newer headstones were put on the graves, and others were to be destroyed before she rescued them.

Top right: the bed in front of Criss's potting shed, which used to be a produce stand on the property. This view shows the cement lamb in the bed with groundcovers, Coneflowers, and a larger sheep made of resin.

In one breath, Criss will say, "I've fulfilled my dream of using every bit of space for gardens, and I've run out of room." But in the next breath, she'll add: "I'd be dangerous if I had more property because, if I did, I'd be adding more gardens."

Finding a Home

Criss was raised in this part of Ohio and traces her love of antiques and gardening back to her family, especially two aunts. "They lived on farms," she says. "My aunts have given me a lot through the years and told me stories about family, which always interested me. They had gardens and made a big impact on me." One of the farms in particular dates to the 1840s and has been in one branch of the family for 200 years. "There was a wonderful summer kitchen there that my aunt filled up with antiques to make it look like an old general store. Growing up around that was wonderful and always comforting to me."

Bob, who was raised in southern Ohio, grew up in more contemporary surroundings. "He didn't have antiques, but once we got together, he learned quickly," Criss says. During the 1980s he was a rubber chemist with the tire industry when the couple decided to marry.



“We began looking for a place and I saw a listing for this place,” she continues. “I thought it was interesting because my grandparents are buried right near here and I’d spent a lot of time in this part of the county as a kid.”

They visited the property in the fall of 1985. The two-story house was built in 1876 on 60 acres, including a large apple orchard. By now, the orchard was mostly gone and the land reduced to just under three acres. “We walked around the property first and I picked up an apple and bit into it,” she says, “and it was delicious – an heirloom apple.” There were several out-buildings, all in various states of disrepair.

“When we went up to the house, there was a big piece of plywood on the porch floor. We discovered it was covering a big hole in the porch floor that nobody had bothered to repair,” Criss says. “That should’ve deterred us immediately, but it didn’t.”



Top: An heirloom Hearts and Honey Vine climbs up a make-do sign at the intersection of garden paths.

Above: One of the herbal beds in the East Yard. In the background is one of the arbors Criss and Bob have built of locust branches from the many locust trees around the property, this one supporting gourd plants.

Right: A stone trough collects water in one of the beds.

Next page: Arbors and wattle fencing maintain the rustic feel of the Cefus gardens, including this one at the site of a vegetable garden a previous owner cultivated. Today the garden produces abundant tomatoes, corn and squash, among other vegetables. The bed of strawberry plants is a recent planting, but already prolific. Clumps of volunteer Cosmos brighten the whole bed.



Reflecting Earlier Times

Criss and Bob purchased the property, spent the month of December, 1985, taking up tile and sanding floors and doing deep cleaning. “We didn’t want to move in until we’d taken care of some basic things, and it took us a month,” she says. They moved in on New Year’s Eve and were married in the house two months later, in February of 1986.

Criss believes the house is unusual in that, while built in 1876, it feels earlier. “The man who built it seemed to mimic earlier time periods,” she explains. “We learned that his parents and grandparents lived here with him and he must have taken what they liked about their own homes and put those things in here. He did things you wouldn’t normally do to a Victorian house.”

The upstairs ceilings, for example, are seven and one-half feet high, at least a foot lower than was common for a house of the period. “Of course for me, who loves low ceilings anyway, I thought all of this was great,” Criss says. She discovered original mustard graining on two kitchen doors. The builder used square nails throughout, and the walls are all horsehair plaster. “It seems he did everything he could the old-fashioned way.”

Far less enticing were the color choices of the home’s recent owners. “Everything was painted white and everything was trimmed in powder blue, and I mean everything,” Criss says. “It



Top: A raised bed in the East Yard features this teepee trellis draped with Sweet Peas and purple Morning Glories that reseed year after year. The bed in the background is rich with Coneflowers, Cosmos and Black-eyed Susan surrounding a large arbor overgrown with Bittersweet.



Above: One of the many grassy paths separating beds overflowing with flowers and vines, including this selection of Coneflower, Nasturtium, and Black-eyed Susan. This is just a section of the longest, winding bed on the property.

Right: This arbor near the vegetable garden supports hop vines Bob grows for making his home brew. Beneath the arbor is a two-seat glider for relaxing. "You can look out over the veggie garden and whole East Yard from here," Criss says.





Top: This scene gives you an idea of the abundance and variety of flowers that brighten the property. This bed, winding past the greenhouse all the way around the barn to the corncrib, has Coneflower, Black-eyed Susan, Nasturtiums, Lambs Ear and much more. The greenhouse and portions of the barn are enveloped in branches of Butterfly Bush and tendrils of Clematis and Bittersweet. "I cram a lot of things into the gardens," Criss laughs.

Left: Criss uses this shed today mostly for drying her crops of gourds and for storing garden tools. They created the window on the side, using an antique window with wavy glass they'd found, "and it fit perfectly," she says.



Top: A peaceful path winds between the large barn, a corncrib and the storage shed. Because the area has gravelly soil and is heavily shaded, Criss relies on various groundcovers, vines and hostas in her plantings alongside this part of the path. One of the many grinding stones is propped against the barn, with a large stone water trough nearby. While the corncrib is picturesque, maintaining it has been a lot of work because the large maple pushes against the structure.

Above: The little lean-to shed was in earlier times a milk house and a chicken house, when there was a plank for the chickens to walk from the ground up through the window, which now has a wooden cover fastened with two turnbuckles.

was that way throughout the house and even the barn was painted that way. I looked at it and said, ‘No barn should ever have powder blue trim.’”

Sometime during the 1940s, an owner had enclosed the front porch on the house to make the kitchen larger, eliminating the front door in the process. An enclosed side porch was added, which serves as the main entrance into the house. Typical of many houses of its era, the upstairs – where all three bedrooms are located – has no heat and almost no electricity. A ceiling vent now allows heat from the kitchen to rise to the master bedroom.

“We could tell the house just needed some help, that’s all,” she says. “Basically, it has great bones.”

“I Just Kept Going”

For someone with Criss’s love of gardening, she knew her property was a potential paradise. The rear property line still had beautiful locust, hemlock, pine and birch trees, and cattle still grazed in the adjacent field. “It’s wonderful how the cows will come up to the fence and hang around,” she says. “It’s really peaceful back here.”

Right: The fenced-in section next to the house is actually a secret patch of serenity, unseen unless you're right on top of it. The fence is made of old fencing material Criss's parents obtained years ago from one of their neighbors and knew Criss would have use for it.

Below: The enclosed area is an herb garden, part of which Criss and Bob decided to turn into a pond. The old bricks came from Criss's brother who was a railroad foreman and retrieved them from an excavation. Barely visible beneath the Dappled Maple leaves is the two-seated settee Criss and Bob enjoy while listening to the sound of the pond's water. "This is my secret garden because nobody can see you sitting there, and nobody knows the pond is there," Criss says.



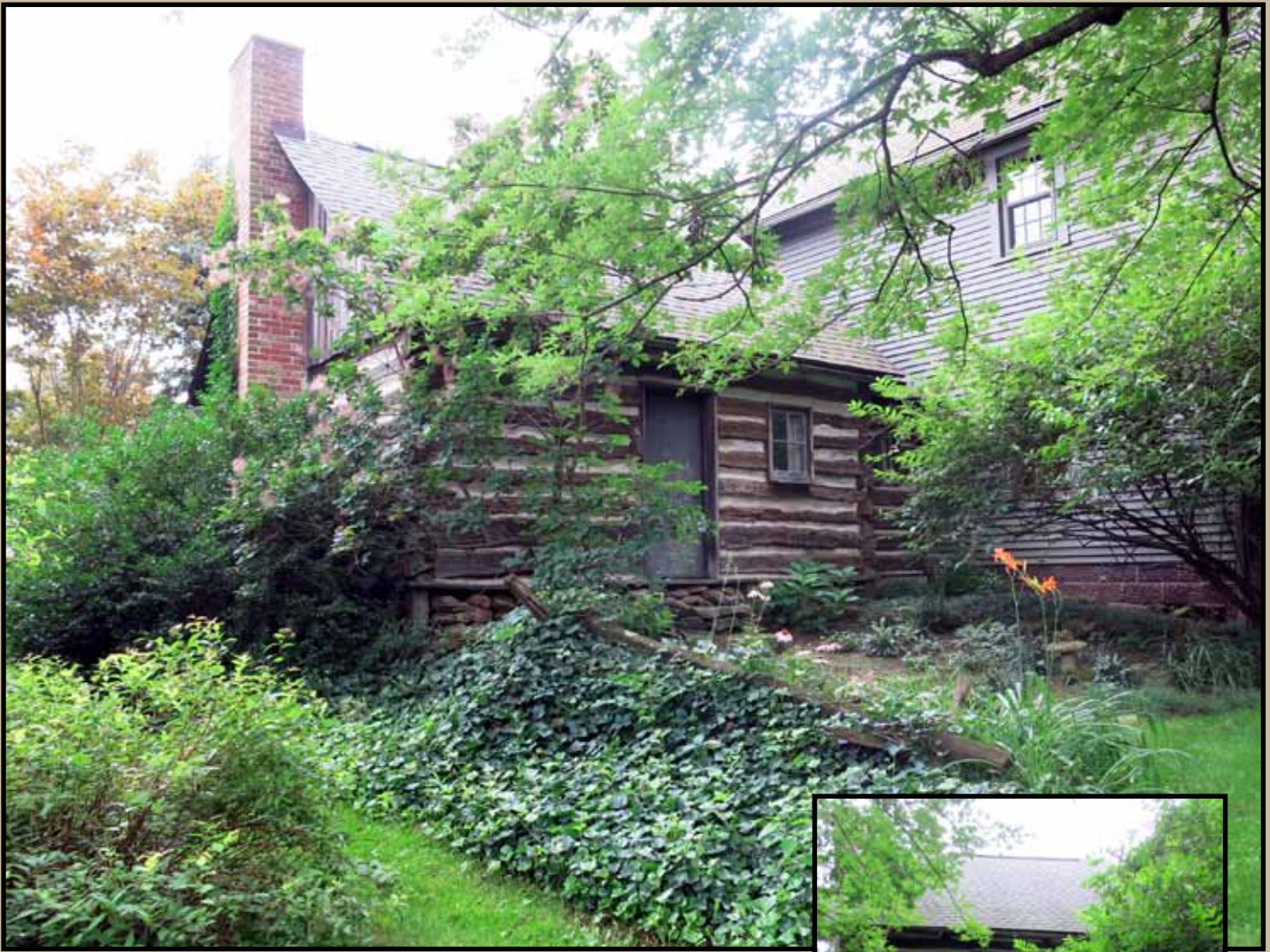


Above: Grassy paths intersect in the West Yard, enchanting with its array of weathered outbuildings, lush beds, garden ornaments, and the tall trees bordering the rear of the property. Criss enjoys unusual items for visual interest, such as the mock vulture sitting atop one of her twig arbors, while behind it is one of her stone miniature moai statues like their huge counterparts found on Easter Island. Grindstones in varying sizes lean against buildings or are used as stepping-stones in other places.

Left: An ornamental grouping of Sweet Woodruff winds around a headstone to create an unusual design in one of the beds.

Among the previous owners was a woman who also was blessed with a green thumb. “There are things she planted that are still here,” Criss explains. “She had one huge bed put in – I call it the island bed – with lilacs and all kinds of stuff. I’ve added to it through the years, but she planted heirloom things that I can’t even find any more.”

In a large section called the East Yard, Criss noticed that nearly everything she’d plant would thrive, while planting in the West Yard was more challenging. “The reason things grow so well in the East Yard is because it’s the original veggie garden,” she says. “And another thing: everything grows like a weed there because it was also the chicken yard, which means the soil has years of chicken fertilizer in it, and everything just takes off.”



The first several years on the property kept both Criss and Bob busy with work on the house and the several outbuildings. “I was able to do a few things in the gardens during the 1980s – a little bit here, a little bit there – mostly in the veggie garden,” she recalls. “I did a few new beds, but not so much right away because I was still figuring out what I wanted to do. Things really didn’t evolve until the mid 1990s.”

She still talks about one day in 2000 when she was on her riding lawn mower. “There was still a lot of underbrush – berries and things – in part of the yard, and I just decided, ‘That’s it – I want to have a garden back here too,’ so I just turned the mower into that whole area.” After working hard to clear and prepare the soil, the couple put in a greenhouse and Criss planted a massive bed of flowers, herbs and bushes that winds throughout much of the yard. “That was in 2001 and I just kept going, putting in beds wherever there was grass,” she says.

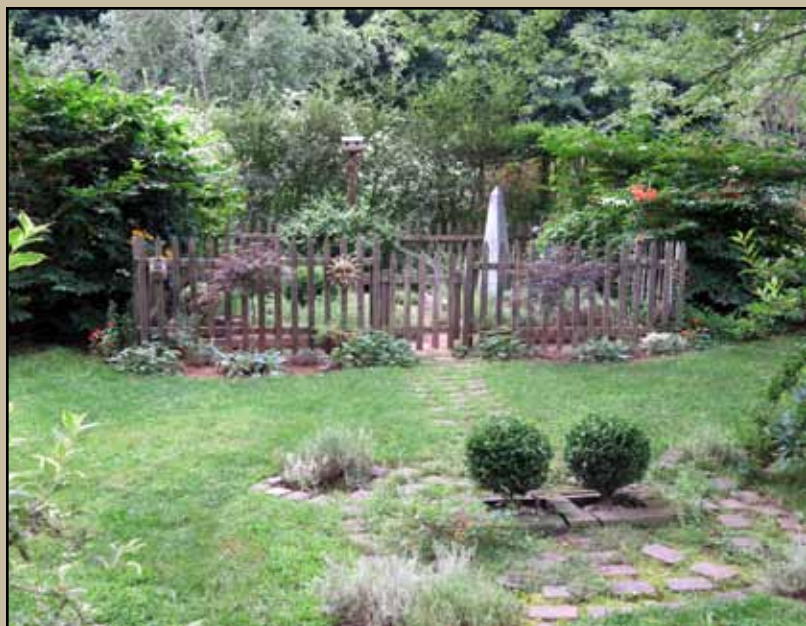
By 2005, she had around 20 different beds of different sizes and content, but she felt the layout was lacking



Top and above: The 1830s log cabin is from North Carolina and was brought to the Cefus property in Ohio in 1995. Criss and Bob finished reassembling it a year later. They used some of the original logs to also build the buttery, which connects the house to the cabin. The cabin is roughly 18-by-18-foot and has a functioning fireplace. It’s surrounded by holly and Spirea, Hydrangea, Cone-flowers, Day Lilies and Sweet Woodruff, among other plants. The inset photo above shows Lakota, the Cefus’s friendly dog.



Top: A number of stone artifacts adorn this fenced-in garden. At left, the stone obelisk came from a friend who was a former mayor of Kent, Ohio. The garden also has its own pond, with a nearby grindstone dated 1853. At right is a stone that resembles a headstone and serves as a centerpiece for a grouping of herbs.



Right & Below: The fenced-in garden is a focal point for a large section of yard. Planted in 2006, it is the most recent garden Criss has designed and planted. She determined its location and size by drawing an outline in the winter's snow and checking it out from a second-story window in the house. The two small topiaries are planted in antique chimney caps "for something a little different," she explains. The fenced-in garden, shows several beds growing a variety of herbs and plants.





Original chair rails, wainscoting and floorboards add to the early atmosphere of the large kitchen. Criss further aged the original plaster walls, uncovered the original graining on the doors and added a faux fireplace to enhance the effect. Furnishings include the early 1800s shoe-foot table with its gray and original red paint, with two slat-back chairs from the late 1700s next to it. The ladder-back chair against the wall is an early piece, dating to around 1680. The early New England hooded cupboard holds some of Criss's pewter collection and some of her favorite glassware.

something closer to the house that would function as an enticement, something to lure people into the gardens. “So what I did in the winter of 2005 was go out in the snow with a stick and draw the outline of a new four-square garden, figuring out how big it would be,” she explains. “Then I went up to my bedroom in the upstairs of the house and looked down and I thought, ‘That’s it!’” Today that garden is fenced in and provides the focal point for the whole west section of gardens.

“It’s taken me all these years to get the gardens full up,” she says. “But that’s because I like to cram a lot of things into the gardens and I’ve never quit.”

Cultivating a Weathered Look

Whether you’re in the gardens or in the house, the entire Cefus property has a distinct feel to it. There’s a lot of primitive, a lot of make-do, and a lot of fun. “You can have formal gardens or you can have informal gardens, and I think more people like the informal gardens,” Criss says. “I know I do. I let things go a little wild where I shouldn’t, but I like it like that.”



Above: These kitchen shelves display a variety of treen, including chargers, plates, pitchers and tankards, bowls, salts, and a rare butter-keeper from New England. The lower shelf is one of Criss's antique purchases, which was the same color as the woodwork and coincidentally fit perfectly.

Right: Criss aged the kitchen's plaster walls with a diluted mixture of burnt umber paint that she sponged on and wiped off. The two doors were painted powder blue like all of the other woodwork in the house, and Criss discovered original mustard graining on them when she stripped off the blue paint.



Among the best examples of Criss's style are the several outbuildings. After painting them barn red about 20 years ago to cover the white and powder blue, they've been allowed to weather through the Ohio seasons with only a bit of touch-up painting here and there. The result provides an established backdrop for the twig-style arbors and fences and her vivid vegetation.

"There's a beauty when paint wears off, and I've always loved it," she says. "I love the weathered look because it just looks older. It means the buildings have withstood the test of time. I have a hard time painting over things like that. I don't have the heart to do it."

Just the fact that Criss and Bob have expended considerable effort to save the outbuildings says a lot. Trees have encroached on the foundations and threatened to topple a couple of the sheds, but they just keep adjusting and leveling the foundations rather than tearing down the structures. Among them are a former produce stand now serving as a potting shed, another shed now used for drying gourds and storage, and the property's original corncrib and outhouse, which now serve as picturesque artifacts.

A less common garden feature is a collection of actual old headstones Criss has placed around the property, with several grouped into what she calls Old Soul's Cemetery. "I acquired some and I bought some because I wanted to preserve them," she explains. "They

The sitting room features a rare shoe-foot chair table in old red. It was originally among the furnishings of Virginia's 1755 landmark Gunston Hall mansion, and Criss has the paperwork documenting the table's de-accessioning. The bannister-back chairs are late 1700s, and the chest in the corner is a Connecticut piece from the late 1600s in old red paint. The Bible box sitting on the chest is dated 1723. The tall cupboard is a butler's secretary, also in old red, from the early 1800s. The large 1700s settle bench next to the faux fireplace still has its original mustard paint.





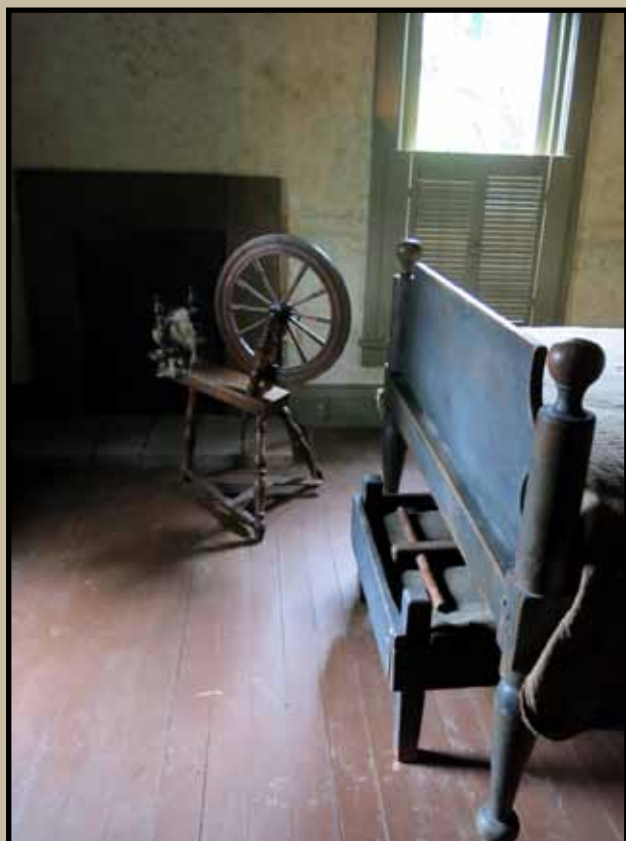
Above: The living room has several early furniture pieces, including the large cant-back cupboard from the late 1700s, with its original H hinges. The small tavern table in front of the couch is from New England, late 1700s, with pad feet, original red paint on the base and a one-board top. Against the rear wall is a 1700s ladder-back chair and an early tavern table with a Bible box from the 1600s. The door leads into the buttery.



Right: Criss has acquired an impressive collection of leather-bound books, including a number of miniature books. Many of the books are Bibles, with the oldest dated 1703.



Left: This living room shelf has some of Criss's prized boxes. A small calling-card tray from one of Criss's great-aunts rests against the red dome-lid box, with the tray's painting by Wallace Nutting. Another item of special interest is the small box on the right side of the top shelf. It was painted in black when Criss bought it, but she detected a painting beneath it, showing a house and topiary. She stripped it carefully and was able to ascertain that the little box was painted by Jacob Weber, a Mennonite farmer in the mid 1800s who became one of Pennsylvania's foremost folk painters of the period.



Left: This spinning wheel in an upstairs bedroom once belonged to Criss's great-great-great grandparents in Pennsylvania. Next to it is an early Ohio rope bed in brown-gray paint. Beneath the bed is a trundle bed that Criss bought separately, though the paint matches and the size goes with the larger bed. The tool on the trundle bed is called a bed key, used for tightening the ropes on rope beds.

Bottom left: This bedroom has a small rope bed, the child-size settle, and a candle stand in old red paint. As with all three bedrooms, it is on the second floor and is unheated.

Below: The early New England child-size settle still has its old red paint. The one-drawer chest is another New England piece in old red, this one dating to the late 1600s.



were going to be destroyed, but I'm a great preservationist and I wanted to save them. I've researched every one of them. To some people it seems really creepy, but once I explain it to them, it doesn't seem so creepy. Hey, I'm an old soul and old cemeteries comfort me."

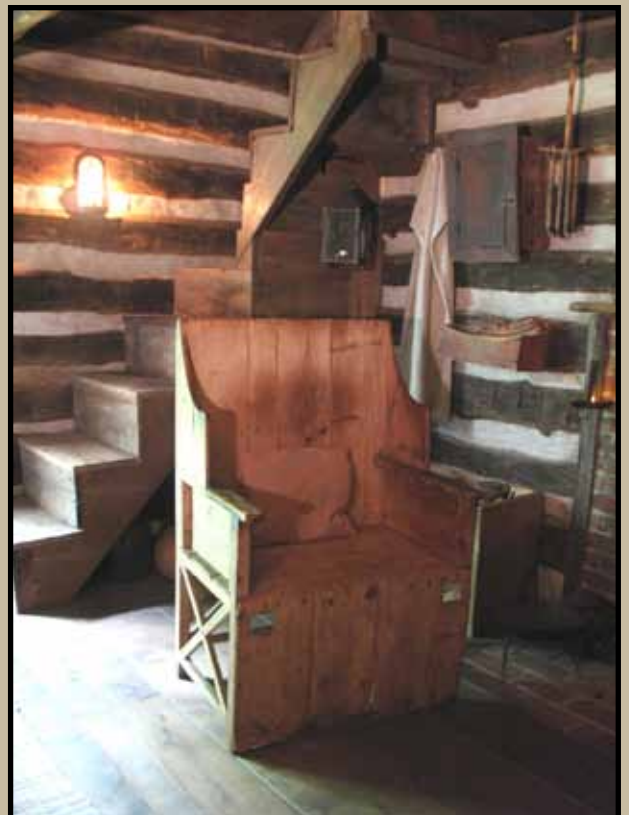
A Fun Space

Without a doubt the largest of Criss and Bob's preservation projects is the log cabin standing at the rear of their house. Criss had long wanted a cabin, and in 1995 when they learned of a woman in North Carolina who was selling disassembled ones and then a pear tree blew down right behind the house, conveniently clearing a space, Criss and Bob swung into action.



Top: The interior of the log cabin is cozy with its fireplace and array of early furnishings. The table is an early lift-top hutch table from New England, here displaying a large burl bowl. The large settle is also an early New England piece, unusual because of its curved back. Criss removed a coat of lime green paint to find the original mustard and dark paint.

Right: The square sedan chair in the cabin is very noteworthy because it's believed to have belonged to Major Gen. Benjamin Lincoln (1733-1810), a Revolutionary War hero and Washington's second in command for part of the war. The pine chair has square holes near the bottom, front and back, to accommodate long poles so men could carry the portly general in parades and other events. The chair is New England pine, and Gen. Lincoln was from Massachusetts. Bob built the stairs to the cabin's loft from cherry planks that had been stored in the barn for many years.



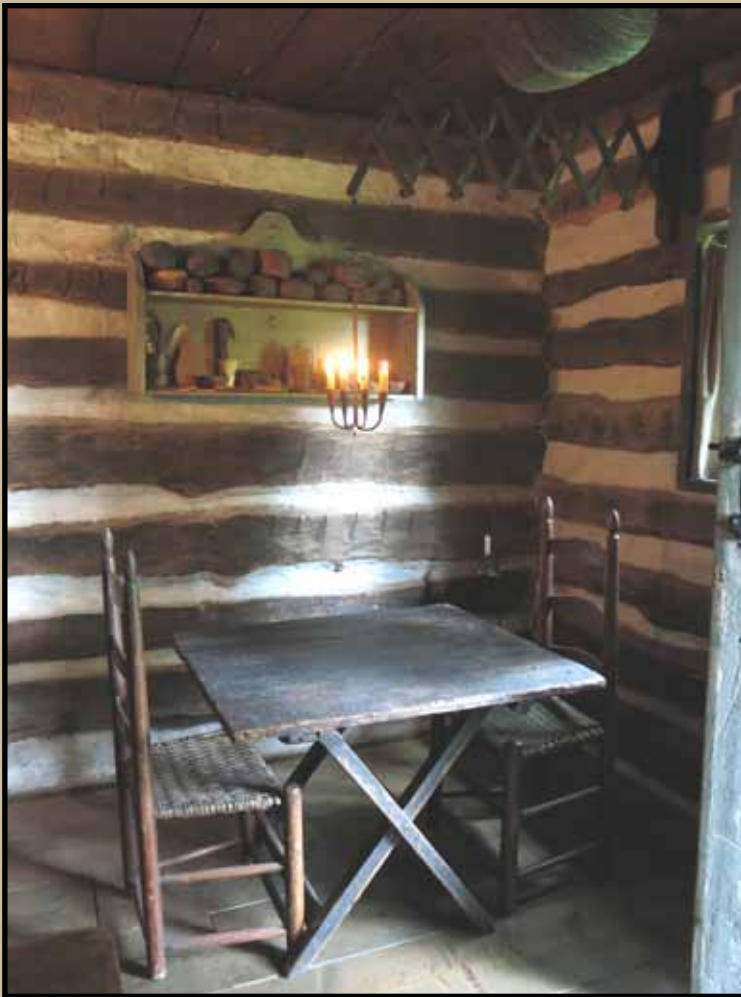


This corner of the cabin is home to the early New England rope day-bed in its original green paint. The mid 1800s shoe-foot stepback cupboard is an Ohio piece, with gray paint over its original red. It holds several Native American stone mortars and pestles, which are part of Criss's extensive collection of stone implements.

They purchased the oak logs from an 1830s cabin, had them hauled to Suffield and stored them in large barn on the property – bringing to an end Criss's antiques shop she'd operated in the barn since 1988. (She's sold antiques at shows since then.) Rebuilding the cabin took some thought and plenty of hard work.

The original cabin was about 15 logs high, but that would've collided with the house roofline, so Criss and Bob decided to build a buttery that would connect the house to the cabin. Eventually the cabin ended up about nine logs high, with a number of the other logs being used for the buttery. It took the better part of a year for the couple to haul logs from the barn, raise them into place, build the roof and fireplace and do all of the chinking. "It's a tough job, it really is," Criss says.

"Now we like to put a fire in the cabin's fireplace and just sit there and enjoy it," she goes on. "Sometimes we have people over for dinner, but mostly it's just my fun space – my little play house – and I love it."



Above: The hanging shelf in old gray displays Criss's collection of early leather spice jars and several Native American artifacts, including the unusual duck decoy sticking out of a cup.

Left: Two rare items are in this corner of the cabin. The sawbuck table is a 1700s piece where its top lifts off completely and the stretcher-base legs fold up so the entire table could be easily transported from place to place. Above the table is an 1800s scissor crane, constructed in accordion fashion so that it can extend several feet from a wall for holding lighting fixtures, such as the early candleholder chandelier Criss has attached to the crane.

Energy from the Gardens

As with the profusion of plants in her gardens, Criss has filled her home with several collections of early domestic items – many of them gleaned from her years as a dealer and many of them rare. Early cupboards display rows of woodenware, stoneware, pewter, leather-bound books, vintage folk art and several Native American artifacts.

Much of her furniture is early New England pieces, much of it with its original paint. There are chairs from the late 1600s, and more chairs, cupboards, tables and chests from the 1700s. As she describes her furniture and collections, it's clear that she has strong emotional attachments to much of these things. Telling about the items she's collected through the years, Criss says over and over: "This one means a lot to me," and she's clearly telling the truth.

Yet, while she surrounds herself with early furniture and a variety of "smalls" that she loves, Criss always seems drawn to the outdoors, to her gardens. "Every winter I can't wait until it's over so I can get back out to the gardens because it makes me feel like I'm 20 years old when I'm out there," she laughs.

"One of things I love about it is the positive energy out there. People say, 'Where do you get your energy?' and I say that I get it from the gardens because I love working in them," she says. "Years ago, my mother used to say, 'You eat, sleep, and breathe your gardening, Crissy,' and I'd say, 'Yeah, I do.'"



Left: The buttery holds an assortment of primitive household items. Criss had the early dry sink and had a friend carve the limestone sink to fit. It holds a burl dipper, while a number of stone pestles rest on the dry sink's lower shelf. The hanging shelves above the sink display early baskets, a painted pantry box and several small containers. Other shelves hold a hollowed-out

wooden sink that still has its stopper, while below it are a pair of early redware plates and a trencher and its device for measuring the depth of a liquid it would hold. Both the hollow sink and trencher could be either Native American or pioneer artifacts.



Above: The cupboard against the buttery wall is unusual because it's actually a hanging cupboard that belonged to a dentist in Kutztown, Pennsylvania, in the 1800s. It's not made to stand on the floor, so Criss has it hanging at floor level for displaying pantry boxes, bowls, mortars, and baskets. The cupboard has its original red paint with chamfered doors. In the corner are several 1700s barrels, a hornbeam, and an unusual Native American piece made from a partially hollowed maple tree.

Below left: An enormous mortar-and-pestle stands next to shelving in the buttery.

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Criss sells bittersweet and gourds, with the bittersweet usually ready for picking the second week of September.