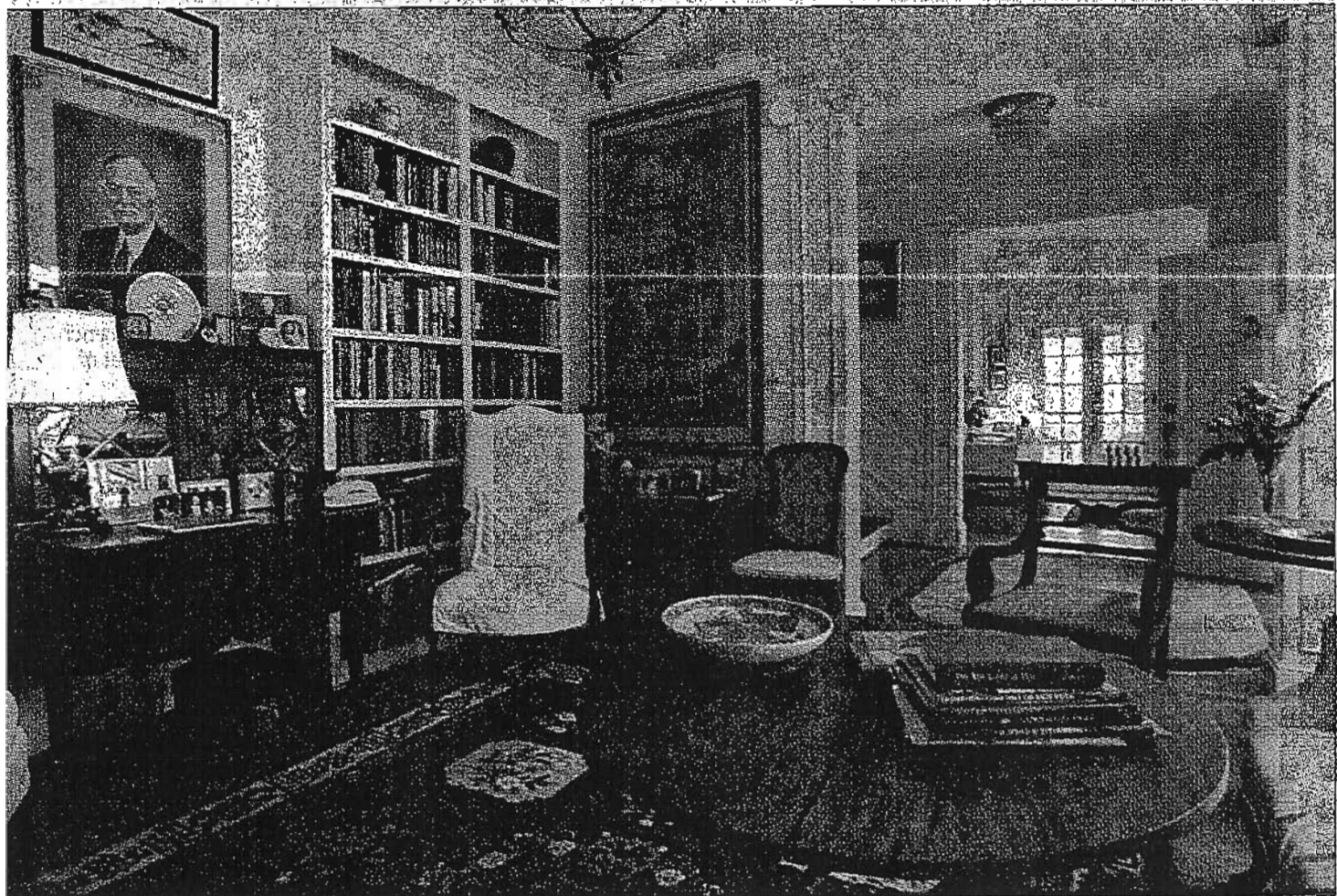


Full house



Illy and Bill Creech changed their house's floor plan to suit their lifestyle. The former dining room is now a cozy study with a desk that once belonged to President Woodrow Wilson in a place of honor.

Imagine a place where you can lose yourself
and find yourself at the same time.

BY ELEANOR LEE YATES
CORRESPONDENT
RALEIGH

Call it the 10-year itch. Sally and Bill Creech routinely buy and then renovate older houses.

"After about 10 years things began to look bad again. So we just move on," Mrs. Creech quips. The couple — she's a real estate agent, he's a lawyer — relish the challenge of renovation projects. They're up to four now.

But they love their current home on Saint Mary's Street so much, this could be a keeper. Seven years ago, the Creeches, Raleigh residents for 30 years, bought the handsome brick Georgian home. It was built in 1927 for Nell Battle Lewis, a well-known Raleigh journalist, educator and early feminist.

The 2,200-square-foot house met the Creeches' criteria: It was in the section of Raleigh in which they'd always lived, and, more important, it needed some work.

Their new home had loads of character, but the Creeches wanted to punch up the interior and add more space.

Antiques, family treasures and art from around the world fill this gracious Georgian.



The screened porch is a favorite retreat for Sally Creech.

The couple worked with architect Meg McLaurin and contractor Seab Howard to modernize and customize the house.

One priority was actually outside.

"We wanted a townhouse

sort of yard with low maintenance," she says. A veritable forest of pine trees, grown up over the years, had almost obscured the front of the house. The Creeches cut down more than 40 of the trees, then installed a circu-

lar drive.

The tiny front porch was replaced with a larger one, along with steps and curved iron railing.

In the original house plan the living and dining rooms flanked the hall. Behind the dining room was the kitchen. The bedrooms were upstairs.

The Creeches turned the dining room into a cozy study and converted the kitchen into a bedroom. The doorways of the living room and study were knocked out for a more spacious look.

These changes helped make the old house more livable.

But the most important change was a two-story, 1,500-square-foot addition to the back of the house. It includes a spacious dining room, a kitchen and breakfast area, an additional bedroom and an upstairs den that doubles as an office.

One reason the Creeches needed the addition was to squeeze in all their furniture. Mrs. Creech is an only child who inherited many family beds, desks, tables and chairs. Mr. Creech's mother operated an antiques store in

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Smithfield for a time, and she kept much of what she bought. He also worked for many years in the Foreign Service and acquired furniture and art from around the world. The Creeches can't remember setting foot in a furniture store since they were married.

"We stopped collecting anything big 30 years ago," she says.

Because of the multitude of antiques and paintings, the Creeches wanted to keep the background simple. All of the downstairs, except the kitchen, is painted the same shade of sunny yellow. Almost all the rooms have hardwood floors.

The foyer contains several family portraits; the grandest is of Mr. Creech's grandfather from South Carolina. The formal, 4-foot oil portrait was painted in 1876 in New Orleans, when he went to the horse races. Also of interest are two landscapes by North Carolina mural artist Ben Long.

On the wall along the staircase, the Creeches display their collection of Louis Orr etchings. Orr, who came from France to do the etchings of North Carolina architecture in the early 1900s, turned out 51 of them, including the state Capitol, area churches and the old mint in Charlotte. Mr. Creech's mother bought a subscription to the series.

The couple display their possessions creatively. A silver punch bowl Mrs. Creech inherited from a friend is now home to a large potted lily. A massive copper tray is used as a fireplace ornament.

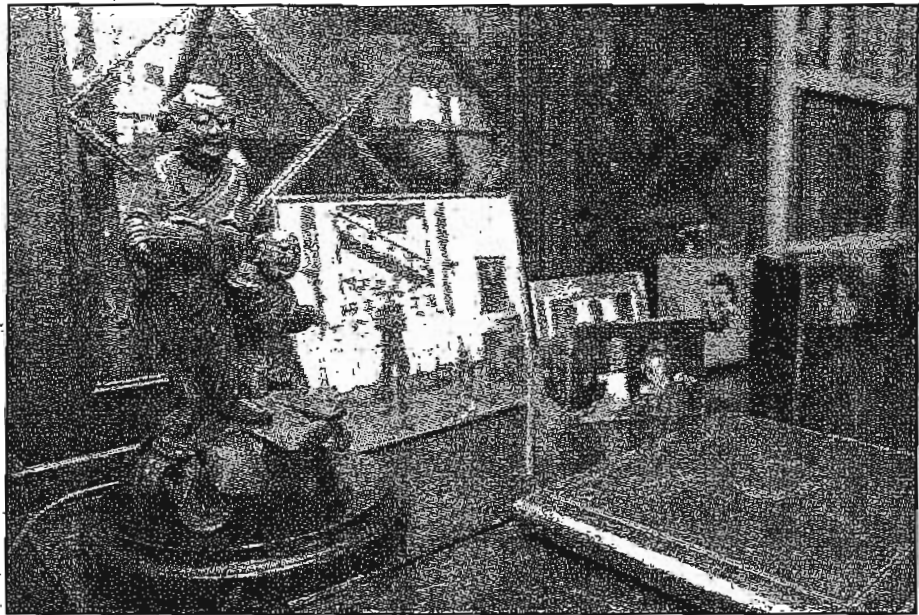
The Creeches intended to install curtains in the living room. Then they got used to a cleaner look and decided to forgo window treatments.

Traditional touches

The study is a traditional hideaway, with built-in bookcases, Oriental rugs and white-slipcovered mahogany furniture. The Sheraton desk belonged to resident Woodrow Wilson and was in the White House, says Mr. Creech, who bought it from an antiques dealer when he lived in Washington.

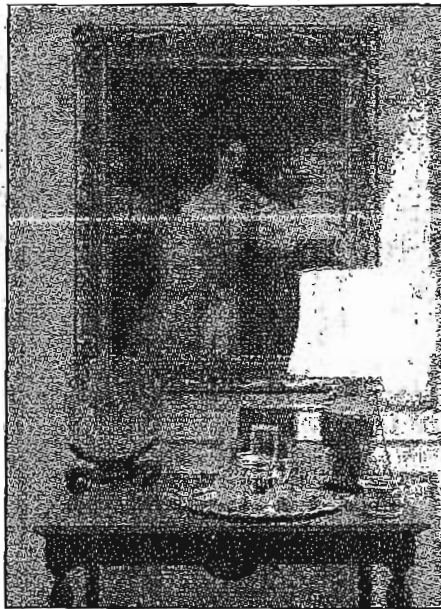
The dining room adjoins the living room, with Corinthian columns marking the entranceway. Over the dining table hangs a striking Victorian crystal chandelier.

"It came from another house we stored," Mrs. Creech says. "The owner was trying to sell it but ended up letting it go with the house. We've moved it around with us." She says she



An unusual lamp adorns Bill Creech's desk, above. In the dining room, below, a massive painting of Emma, Lady Hamilton, dominates the back wall.

STAFF PHOTOS BY JOHN ROTTEI



The downstairs bedroom, originally the kitchen, contains an antique canopy bed, an 8-foot mirror, a yellow wingback chair and two primitive paintings done by Mrs. Creech's cousin. But all these furnishings are dwarfed by a life-size oil painting of a young tennis player, racquet in hand, grass courts behind him. When the couple inherited the painting, dating to 1883, it was in terrible shape and they were told it wasn't worth repairing. But "tennis boy" grew on them, and they had it restored.

The large upstairs family room, part of the addition, is a retreat for reading, working or watching TV. Mr. Creech acquired the ornate 200-year-old sea chest, made in India, during his Foreign Service years. He found the leather-top rococo desk with gilt trim at a Salvation Army benefit auction in Washington. Books and paintings, including an 1800s seascape with clipper ships, fill the room.

Home history

Before working on their Saint Mary's Street house, the Creeches tackled the Broughton house, owned by Gov. Melville Broughton, and the Busby house, home of the founder of Jügtown pottery.

"Somehow we've ended up living in other people's houses: the Broughton house, the Busby house and now the Nell Battle Lewis house," says Mrs. Creech, who says she doesn't care if there's not a Creech house.

"That would mean it was a new house, a house without history. And that wouldn't be half as much fun."

understands now why the previous owner didn't want to move it.

Because the dining room is so large, the Creeches have room for their grand piano.

Antiques everywhere

The all-white, spartan kitchen is a stark contrast to all the colors and textures throughout the rest of the house. A sign in the kitchen says "Sanitation Grade C." The room rarely gets too dirty, though, because the Creeches don't cook much.

Family antiques have crept into the kitchen and breakfast room. An 18th-century armoire holds china. Old baskets that belonged to Mrs. Creech's mother sit atop the armoire.