JUST AS MANY U.S. CITIES are subject to gay men’s restorative ministra-
tions, so too are many much smaller settlements throughout the country. One such place is the unincorporated village of Cooksville, Wisconsin, a quiet rural crossroads community of fewer than one hundred people near Madison, the state capital. Since 1911, very early in the American preservation movement, Cooksville’s early buildings and other historical documents have been a focus of the gay passion to preserve.

Cooksville is one of many settlements that sprang up in Wisconsin in the 1840s and 1850s, when venturesome residents of New York State and New England moved west. Though its chances of becoming a larger city ended when the railroads bypassed it, Cooksville didn’t disappear. It just stagnated. Seventy years after its first settlement, most of the original houses in the village were still standing, and few others had been built. Eventually dubbed “the town that time forgot,” quiet little Cooksville possessed a mid-nineteenth-century frozen-in-time ambience that attracted gay men of several generations throughout the twentieth century.

It was a spinster who got things going. In 1910 Susan Porter bought one of the early brick houses facing Cooksville’s public square, as a summer home. A teacher in Racine, Wisconsin, Porter had grown up in the village. During her first summer there she hosted a party at her quaint house. Some of the guests came from Racine, nearly ninety miles away, and one of them was Ralph Warner. Born in 1875, Warner was in his mid-thirties and, like his friend Susan Porter, a never-married teacher. He was enchanted by the sleepy, verdant village and the idea of owning one of its old brick houses. Porter told Warner that the house next door to hers was for sale. He purchased it and named it the House Next Door.

The house Ralph Warner bought in 1911 was a small, square, two-story structure made of local vermilion brick. Blending elements of the Federal and Greek Revival styles, it was a modest showplace built about 1848, when Cooksville’s speculators still harbored dreams of growth and prosperity. By the time Warner bought the house, it had been sold five times and
Generations of Gentlemen Keep Cooksville, Wisconsin

had weathered many years as a marginally maintained rental property. He paid one hundred dollars down and committed himself to a five-year mortgage of four hundred dollars.

Warner hired tradesmen to level floors, rehang doors, repair plaster, put on a new roof, repair chimneys, and open the bricked-up and plastered-over fireplace. Many windowpanes and a few sashes had to be replaced. Some shutters were broken, and everything needed paint. Layers of wallpaper had to be scraped off. With help from a Cooksville neighbor woman and one of his manual arts students from Racine, Warner spent much of July preparing the house for his first guests. “We began with painting, papering, and cleaning upstairs,” he wrote in his diary. “Paul painted woodwork and floors. Mrs. Savage helped me with the papering at first, but I soon felt I could do it much better alone (or, that is, with Paul’s help), as her way was not mine. She was not particular whether things matched or not.”

By the end of July the properly papered rooms were ready to be furnished, and it was time for a housewarming party, attended by two dozen Cooksville women. During the next month Warner hosted about a dozen guests, a small beginning for the enterprise that became the creative focus of his middle-life: In his old-time house furnished with his long-accumulated antiques, Warner served luncheons, dinners, and teas by reservation only. The first few summer seasons at the House Next Door were short and the guests were few. But things took off in 1917, and for fifteen years, typically from late spring through mid-autumn, Warner’s old house and garden kept him very busy. Garden clubs and other (mostly) women’s groups were frequent customers, as were society types from nearby cities and towns looking for an exclusive and unique automobile outing.

Warner did no advertising, and there were no signs identifying the House Next Door. He wanted his guests to learn of it personally, through word of mouth, and to experience it not as a restaurant or museum but as his home, a gathering place for kindred spirits who found romance and beauty in the things and ways of the olden days. Sometimes he would dress in black broadcloth, fine faded waistcoat, and high top hat to greet his guests. Often he would play his old square rosewood piano with its thin, harplike sound. The guests might sing, and, if he was in the mood, Warner might join in. Old English ballads were a favorite. Occasionally Warner provided bed-and-breakfast accommodations.

Meals at the House Next Door were neither gourmet nor strictly 1840s fare, but Warner enjoyed cooking and brought his artistic eye to it. For two women visiting one day he served a simple meal of an omelet with currant jelly, a freshly picked salad of tomatoes and lettuce seasoned with herbs, an aged cheese flavored with mustard and garlic, and dessert of baked custard
and coffee. As his guests ate on old pewter, which gleamed against the shining mahogany table, Warner admired the look of the golden omelet on the dark blue platter. “The cream Wedgwood plates were never quite right until I got the ivory handled knives,” Warner remarked to the women. “They brought everything together, and the ivory pepper pot saved the situation.”

One of the earliest and most knowledgeable antique collectors in Wisconsin, Ralph Warner began gathering old-fashioned things as a child, starting with family pieces from his grandmothers and aunts and other old women he got to know. Through his twenties and early thirties he gathered, repaired, and stored many antiques in anticipation of finding just the right house for them and himself, and he acquired much more thereafter. “I begin to think I draw things to me like a magnet,” Warner exulted in his acquisitions notebook. Antiques were important to him not only for their beauty and value but for the people, places, and events associated with them. “They tell me things,” he said. True to his house’s age, Warner at first furnished his rooms with late-Empire and early-Victorian furniture. But his rooms were dynamic spaces, frequently rearranged, and through the 1920s he sold most of this more ornate and massive furniture and replaced it with simpler eighteenth-century pieces.

The House Next Door was a dream come true for Ralph Warner, but he was ambivalent about engaging with the world in such an intimate way. He was bright, sociable, and talkative, a creative homemaker and gardener, a gifted pianist. He was also quite effeminate in voice, mannerism, and essential nature, and his complexion was badly scarred as a result of childhood smallpox. “I wish those who come to do so because they have been told of my collections by mutual friends, and to arrange for their coming by a note addressed to me,” Warner told a reporter in 1926. “Other visitors I cannot hope to give time to, even when they come from long distances, as is often the case.”

Magazine and newspaper articles about Warner and his Cooksville home brought many strangers calling. “The most remarkable thing about The House Next Door is its owner,” declared a 1923 article in *House Beautiful*. The story of how the man dreamed the house for years, collected much of the furniture to go into it, and finally acquired it and with his own hands made it the charming place it is to-day has a legendary sound. It wouldn’t be so much of a story, or so interesting perhaps, if Ralph Warner were a woman; it certainly wouldn’t be if he were a wealthy collector and had the house as a hobby, or if he were a shrewd business man and used it as a money-making proposition. But Ralph Warner is the direct opposite of these things. It is not
easy to catalogue him at all, except to say that he is—in the broader meaning of the term—an artist. . . .

Paying guests who come for the first time to the house insist that there must be a wife or a housekeeper somewhere concealed. If they accept the flawless housekeeping as Mr. Warner's own, they challenge the delectable food. Confronted by proof, they are still skeptical about the dishwashing. Later, when they hear the man who has both prepared and served their meal play beautifully at an old piano, they are in a state of mind to believe anything. The enchanting old-fashioned garden, the linen-weaving, the hand-wrought copper bowls, the hooked rugs of original design—all these are further evidence that the most remarkable part of a remarkable house is its owner. 4

When a visitor asked, "Where is Mrs. Ralph?" Warner gave an evasive reply that was no doubt well rehearsed: "All the ladies nowadays belong in the tomorrows and next days. I've never found one that fitted into my land of long ago." 5 Reporters often hinted at Warner's queerness. They described him as an artist, a musician, "a very pleasant, romantic gentleman," a "delightfully temperamental antique collector." They likened him to Henry Thoreau at Walden Pond. "He was a bachelor and he was different," observed one writer toward the end of Warner's life. "He always puttered around the house—cooking, making hooked rugs, collecting antiques and the like. Strolling around the village in his white pants, he always had plenty of time to talk when the farmers were busy with their chores. . . . He would mop his brow with a silk handkerchief delicately and say, 'Death, it's so wahm!'" 6

The writer of a 1933 Ladies' Home Journal piece titled "Wisconsin Witchery" made similar winking observations. She enthused about Warner's homemaking and gardening and deliciously frugal cooking but described him (without naming him or Cooksville) as a monkish recluse: He was living in one of the prim, half-ruined witch-houses of a little old forgotten settlement, with old women's bodices, petticoats, and dresses hanging on the door pegs as if discarded yesterday. She stated that Warner's hard-working farmer neighbors regarded him as a harmless curiosity, though they were not quite sure of his harmlessness: his tangled garden grew strange medicinal herbs that in earlier times would have assured his burning at the stake. "A young man of this sort may well find himself a little lonely sometimes," she observed, "lost in the middle of the Wisconsin wheat fields." 7

This article, with its fanciful illustration depicting Warner as a young blond hunk serving a meal to two ladies, brought an effusive letter from a lonely young man in rural Oregon. Harold March, a college student, confessed to being so charmed by what he read in the Ladies' Home Journal that
he had requested Warner’s address from the author. “I’m not the gushing type,” March declared, “and so it is difficult for me to really say to you what is in my heart. The things you have done in reality I have only accomplished in the secret places of my soul.” March mentioned that he had several pioneer things from his grandparents, who had crossed the plains and settled in southwest Oregon in 1852, and that he was starting an herb garden. He told Warner about his travels in California the previous year, during which he had his first experience of bohemian life, and a visit to San Francisco. “I have never encountered another such delightful place—the true home for the bohemian,” March wrote of San Francisco. “I got the finest meal of my life in a shabby little restaurant, a remodeled carriage house at the foot of Russian Hill.”

March implored Warner to accept his friendship and to write and reveal more about himself and the history of his Wisconsin village. Warner began his carefully composed reply by cautioning Harold March not to be misled by the magazine illustration. “Would I were a beautiful blond boy. Never was blond or beautiful and now not young and really almost bald. Sorry if this is spoiling an agreeable something for you. You would however like the little house and the tangled garden and possibly the owner if you forgot the story and the picture.”

“I am not married,” Warner continued, “so have not that responsibility, nor the care and expense of children.” But he wanted March to know that he was not a recluse: the joy of his summers was that his house was a meeting place, not only for his stream of scheduled guests but for the boys of the village, who would stop by to get Warner to join them in the swimming hole at the creek. Later in the summer the boys would lend a hand at his cider press, and he would give them pony rides. Likewise, Warner welcomed the attention of the young man from Oregon: “I’m sure I should enjoy your friendship and perhaps the time will come when you will travel my way,” he wrote. “I should enjoy seeing you and making you an omelette.” He closed his letter to March with greetings “from a he-witch of Wisconsin.”

Within several months of this correspondence, Warner suffered a stroke that left him greatly incapacitated for the rest of his life. He lingered as long as he could in Cooksville, then went to live with a friend in the Chicago area, and finally with his sister in Florida, where he died in 1941. As Warner’s life was ending, one of his friends remarked on the relationship between the man and his house: “No one could enter that front door without feeling that he was stepping into ‘yesterday,’ a yesterday complete and alive in spirit. Coupled with the material side of the house and its garden was something of a happy philosophy which Ralph Warner gave to all who knew him; and which still lingers, in essence, about the House Next Door. He firmly believed, as he had often expressed it, ‘My house will keep me.’”
Generations of Gentlemen Keep Cooksville, Wisconsin

A few years after Ralph Warner’s final departure from Cooksville, the House Next Door was sheltering gay men of a younger generation. Indiana native Chester Holway, born in 1908, had traveled widely throughout Wisconsin in the 1930s. Picturesque, historic towns had a special appeal for the young journalist. Holway had heard of Warner and the House Next Door, had visited Cooksville, and was captivated by the idea of owning an early house in the village, where he could live as a country gentleman. Following Warner’s death in 1941 Holway purchased the House Next Door and its dusty contents. It was the most renowned and desirable house in the village.

After serving as an officer in the U.S. Army Air Corps, Holway returned to Cooksville in 1945 with Texas native Marvin Raney, ten years his junior, the man who would be his life partner for thirty-five years. The couple were soon consumed by the work of rehabilitating their new place. The house needed relatively modest repairs and refurbishing; simply getting it opened up and lived in made a big difference. It was a staggering task, however, to restore the formless and impenetrable half-acre garden to something of its appearance in Warner’s time. But by the summer of 1947 at least parts of the garden were deemed a suitably groomed backdrop for snapshots during a visit by Holway’s mother and by Raney’s mother a year later.

Raney and Holway got to know the woman next door, a cousin of Warner’s friend Susan Porter. Cora Atwood had inherited Porter’s summer house and carried on the Cooksville Old Settlers traditions, including the annual reunion. A founder of the county historical society, Atwood compiled many notebooks from the scrapbooks of news clippings and other ephemera kept by local women. When she died, Raney inherited her collection of local history materials and continued to add to and organize them.

When he wasn’t gardening, Raney was likely to be researching the history of Cooksville, compiling biographies of the village’s early families, buildings, and businesses. He spent many hours in the county courthouse, tracing back the deeds to every piece of property and using census records to determine who was living in what house when. He enjoyed poring over the country correspondent columns in old newspapers; their gossipy reports helped to bring vanished Cooksville residents to life. The director of the Wisconsin Historical Society expressed an interest in seeing Raney’s history when it was completed. “Between you and Mr. Holway,” he wrote, “Cooksville seems to boast an unusually high percentage of articulate historians.”

Raney safeguarded village census records, business ledgers, and school rosters. He compiled the genealogies of scores of families in Cooksville and the surrounding region. Raney was interested in more than just the raw data of names, places, and dates. He was charmed by the atmosphere, neighbor-
liness, and old ways of the village—the persistent custom of husbands doing the household shopping at the Cooksville store, for example. He wanted to create an intimate portrait of daily life in early Cooksville and continued to gather and study the rather scarce materials that would help him do it.

Elton Breckenridge first visited Cooksville in 1938 and fell in love with it. In 1952 he bought a five-acre lot across the road from the House Next Door, perhaps inspired by the example of his friends Raney and Holway. On the property stood a small, century-old oak frame structure, which had been first a one-room house, then a farm shed. In the 1920s the woman who owned it had it moved there from a block east, saving it for sentimental reasons.

An instructor of interior design at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Breckenridge had lived in an old mansion on Oak Street in Chicago from the mid-1920s. With his arrival in Cooksville he became the village’s most overtly eccentric resident, one of several Chicago transplants who gave the phrase “Chicago people” a distinctly artsy/queer connotation among the locals. He wore a decidedly bad wig, loved decorating Easter eggs and delivering them in baskets to various households around the village, and despite his Chicago commute never learned to drive.

Over the years Breckenridge helped Raney and Holway with their domestic projects, and they returned the favors. Digging the basement and building a foundation for Breckenridge’s small house and a new wing was their first major collaboration. The man who was hired to move the old structure onto the new foundation was appalled that anyone would spend money on such a shack. “There are very few of these houses left anymore because nobody sees,” Breckenridge remarked in later years. “My home points up what can be done with a thing that people regard as worthless.” He refinished the original pegged oak floor, some of the planks nearly two feet wide. He built a fireplace using brick from the blacksmith shop that had stood on the property. He was so pleased by the zebra-stripe look of the exposed riven lathing on interior walls that he decided to leave it exposed.

Breckenridge’s style of decorating and furnishing was attuned to aesthetic harmony and personal whim rather than period consistency. A seventeenth-century Italian trestle table, a French crystal chandelier, American pine cupboards, louvered cherry closet doors from Chicago mansions, Venetian glass mugs, a platter by Picasso, a patio teacart by Matisse’s grandson, pieces from the Art Institute’s castaway section—Breckenridge wove them all into the dynamic fabric of Breckhurst, his telephone-free Cooksville retreat.

When Breckenridge sold his creation in 1976, the original house was just one of seven rooms, as Breckenridge had continued to design and build additions. He created the landscape so that every window looked out onto a
striking scene—a white stone Victorian bust set within a half-circle hedge of trimmed Chinese elm, for example. Near the house he developed an elaborate and intimate garden in the style of old Italian-English gardens. There were flowering crabapple trees, many varieties of clematis, meticulously clipped hedges of arborvitae and hemlocks, Italian sculptures, a fountain and a lily pool, and many intimate places to sit. At night he illuminated the garden with candles, Viennese lanterns, and iron lanterns of his own design, made by the Cooksville blacksmith. He had many bird feeders and left a large portion of his acreage undeveloped as a haven for wildlife.

“Elton was in the tradition of the sensitive, artistic resident who is concerned about the beauty of Cooksville, its tranquility and quaintness,” says village historian Larry Reed. A gay antiquarian and his wife wandering around Cooksville’s streets one summer weekend found themselves drawn into Breckenridge’s garden, though they had never met him. After they had been strolling around awhile, a shutter door opened, and Breckenridge stepped out of the house. “How nice of you to enjoy my garden,” he said. “When you’re finished, please come inside.”

On a June weekend in 1953, Marvin Raney and Chester Holway joined with four neighboring households in opening their house and garden as part of a fundraising tour sponsored by the Mothers’ Club of the Cooksville school. The two were closely involved in planning the event, which represented Raney’s big debut as village historian. The five tour houses were chosen because they were about one hundred years old, they were either in their original state or had been restored, and most of their furnishings were the same age as the houses. Raney prepared a mimeographed tour booklet including a brief account of Cooksville’s development and biographies of the five houses. Only a few hundred tourists were expected that weekend, but thirteen hundred showed up. This success was reprised a few years later, and Raney and Holway continued to open their house to small groups as Ralph Warner had done—though without meals, period costume, or musical entertainment—allowing many women’s clubs to tour the premises as part of their outings.

By the time of the 1953 house tour Raney had opened his first business enterprise in their old barn. Cooksville House was “a fey shop, if there ever was one,” observed a local reporter, who described Raney as “an engaging young man with no visible means of support, who shudders slightly when the word ‘work’ profanes his presence. (Unless, of course, it be caring for the plants and flowers of the formal gardens behind the house in which he lives.) He does not have a telephone in the house because they bother him.” Raney’s shop was dedicated to selling things handcrafted in Cooksville, “with some of the craftsman’s heart in it, and a little bit of the beauty of the old village.”
A local weaver and ceramist produced much of the shop’s merchandise. Raney wove rag rugs and began venturing into the antiques trade.

While Raney immersed himself in Old Cooksville, Holway was working in Chicago much of the time and living with his mother near the city. Raney was kept busy as a historical consultant and antiques expert, speaking and writing on porcelain and pottery. A longtime member of the county historical society, he worked with it on many projects. He established the society’s archives and was a key consultant during its restoration of historic buildings. If people had questions about Cooksville history, they turned to Raney. If people had something related to the village, they gave it to Raney. He had become the keeper of the community’s history and seemed to relish that role. It was Raney’s research that formed the basis for Cooksville’s listing as a historic district in the National Register of Historic Places.

By the late 1950s Raney and Holway’s Cooksville presence was attracting younger gay men with similar leanings. With Raney’s encouragement Chicago native Bill Wartmann bought the long-vacant and disintegrating Sayre-Osborn House several miles east of the village in 1959. Wartmann moved there from Madison with his lover, Michael Saternus, and they began a meticulous restoration of the place. “There were at least three or four gay people living in tiny Cooksville at that time,” Wartmann recalls. “I said to Marvin, ‘I knew we were organized, but I didn’t think we had a whole town!’”

Around the time that Wartmann and Saternus moved into the Cooksville orbit, Eric Lieber (pseudonym) discovered the village. He was driving a drinking buddy home from Madison late one night, and that friend happened to be Raney’s nephew who was living with his uncle. “Two or three o’clock in the morning we came to this wonderful old house at the corner of a village square,” Lieber says. “That was my introduction to Marvin Raney and Chester Holway and this small town that had maintained its integrity over the years without too much modernization. I became fascinated by the place, by what was going on and the people involved. I wanted what these men had, not only the old houses and the antique stuff but also the type of life they were leading and the intellectual things they were doing. My own experience growing up in New York City had never exposed me to that country-gentleman sort of thing. My friendship with Marvin began when I told him that I was gay and that I presumed he was. I would come out to Cooksville on weekends and help in Marvin and Chester’s garden. That was the beginning of a long and dear friendship with those two men. I became sort of their protege. This kind of mentoring was especially critical in the old days, when things were more closeted. Marvin and Chester were my mentors intellectually and provided emotional stability through the rough times.”
Lieber bought property in Cooksville in 1963, when he was in his early thirties, and moved there in 1967. The child of German-born parents, he had grown up in a tenement house in the South Bronx. “We had no roots in this country, nothing to tie yourself to. We had no history; I felt more European than American in attachment and language. I was looking for roots: owning a piece of land, which seemed impossible to me growing up in New York City, and buying a gravesite in the Cooksville cemetery. How critical that was to my well-being and still is.”

By 1971 Raney was in business once again, selling antiques at the Only Yesterday Shop in an old granary building near the village. Chester Holway was retiring from his Chicago business and planning to become a full-time Cooksville resident. And the village’s gay population was continuing to grow. Another Madison couple had bought an early house facing the village square. Though Raney and Holway fretted that these new arrivals would blow their cover, they were pleased that the house was being properly restored. While Bill Wartmann continued to work on his old house east of the village, his former lover Michael Saternus staked a claim in Cooksville by purchasing the landmark Congregational church building. Saternus began restoring the exterior of the 1879 building with the help of his new lover, Larry Reed. Within a few years Saternus and Reed purchased the Van Buren House across the street from the church and began its rehabilitation. The small Greek Revival frame house had been vacant and deteriorating for twenty years.

With a new generation of gay men earnestly engaged in Cooksville’s preservation, Marvin Raney died in 1980, shortly after Chester Holway suffered a stroke. That year Saternus and Reed moved into the House Next Door to help care for Holway and his home. They lived there for six years while working on their Van Buren House, which they moved into in 1986, the year Holway died.

Michael Saternus was another of Cooksville’s “Chicago people.” Born in 1936, he grew up on the city’s near-west side. Very visual and artistic, he studied architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology, then moved to Madison, Wisconsin, in the late 1950s, where he studied art. Shortly before AIDS ended Saternus’s life in 1990, he thanked Bill Wartmann for awakening in him a passion for restoring historic buildings. What Wartmann had done about thirty years earlier, toward the beginning of his ten-year relationship with Saternus, was to saddle them both with a barely inhabitable wreck of an old house out in the country near Cooksville. It was in those circumstances that Saternus discovered his own desire not only to make the structure sound, waterproof, and warm but to do it in a way that respected the house’s period integrity.
Working on the Sayre-Osborn house with Wartmann through the 1960s was Saternus’s restoration apprenticeship, with Marvin Raney as chief mentor. But the house belonged to Wartmann, and when their relationship ended, Saternus looked elsewhere for his own redemptive focus. He found it several miles west, in Cooksville, when township officials decided in 1971 to sell the building that was originally the Cooksville Congregational Church. Built in 1879, the church was largely idle and in disrepair after a scant thirty years of ecumenical use. In 1939 the building was shorn of its spires and belfry to serve the township as a meeting hall for twenty-five years. Then it sat vacant for several years before township officials decided to sell it.

The old church building was Cooksville’s most prominent architectural landmark. Saternus wanted to save the pale, stripped-down structure and put it back the way it was meant to be. His sealed bid of $2,250 won him the property. For twenty-five years Marvin Raney and Chester Holway had been witnessing the relentless disintegration of many of Cooksville’s early buildings and had been unable to do much more than create documents of their diminishing lives. With Saternus putting down roots in the village and planning to restore the landmark church, historic Cooksville’s chances of survival must have suddenly appeared much greater than Raney and Holway had ever allowed themselves to imagine.

Saternus envisioned creating a local history museum in the former church sanctuary. But museum making would have to wait until the outside of the building was restored. Raney supplied photographs and documents relating to the building’s early appearance. Knowing exactly how the original belfry and four spires looked, Saternus constructed reproductions of them in his church-basement workshop. At a nearby antique shop he found a bronze bell close in size to the original. On a fall day in 1974, with his partner Larry Reed and many neighbors and friends gathered, Saternus saw the ninety-five-year-old building regain its nineteenth-century silhouette as a crane operator hoisted the five new structures into place. A few strategically placed smears of Vaseline helped to slip the balky belfry snugly onto its base.

The clapboard siding and original doors, long painted white, were returned to their original light brown with dark brown trim. The wooden entrance porch, which had been replaced with a concrete one, was restored. A document from Raney’s archives indicated that the windows, now clear, had originally been stained glass. This was confirmed when the chancel window, which had been sided and plastered over, was uncovered and the original stained-glass window was still in place. An antiques-dealing Cooksville couple gave Saternus remnants of some of the other original windows and one of the original pews. Though badly deteriorated from many years in their garden, the pew would be invaluable as a basis for the eventual crafting of reproductions.
“When I moved to Cooksville,” says Eric Lieber, “the Congregational Church was just an old square building with no steeple, an eyesore that needed to be either torn down or fixed up. When I saw Michael’s designs for it, I thought it would be a nice addition to the village. The good old Norwegian farmers around here wondered why anybody would invest money in something frivolous like restoring the church. But they seemed rather pleased that it worked out—maybe didn’t say as much, but they seemed to be proud of what the community was doing. Michael used the village as a showplace for his work.”

By 1975, with the church’s exterior restored, Saternus and Reed were looking for a home of their own rather than continuing to rent. They considered making their residence in the church basement but decided to try to get a proper house. In a carefully composed letter to the absentee owner of the long-vacant 1848 Van Buren House near the church, Saternus expressed his concern about the condition of the small house and his desire to buy it and restore it as his residence. Within a year Saternus and Reed owned the place.

In addition to Saternus’s full-time employment as an architect, the massive and compelling job of restoring the Van Buren House meant there was no time to work on the church’s shabby interior. Still, the tall and stately profile of the brown building at the village’s main intersection continued to attract praise and publicity. While Saternus worked on the church, Cooksville residents stopped by to watch. As some of them were inspired to restore their own buildings, Saternus found himself in business. In addition to his own church and house, he got involved with many architectural restoration projects around the village and throughout the state. From his stashes of old doors, windows, shutters, and other items, he was able to supply his neighbors with replacements that helped them maintain the original look. He charged only for architectural drawings, not for advice, and loved to teach on the subject. With Reed working as preservation coordinator for the Wisconsin Historical Society, the couple developed an old-house workshop. Saternus’s detailed written and photographic documentation of his restoration work made it easy for students to see the process happen, step by step. His “before and after” slides were inspiring.

“I think Michael Saternus was, like me, a big-city escapee looking for roots, someplace he could attach to,” says Eric Lieber. “At first, when he was living down the road with Bill Wartmann, Michael was sort of in the background, very quiet and subdued. He may have had all the artistic talent in the world, but you didn’t know it. Then all of a sudden he bloomed from a very shy, reticent person to somebody who had opinions, who seemed to have found himself and his voice: he would get up in front of people and
Generations of Gentlemen Keep Cooksville, Wisconsin

speak about historic preservation. One or two successful projects turned him around. When he was working on something, Michael was the most focused person I ever knew.”

As Michael Saternus blossomed at midlife, the rehabilitation and restoration of Cooksville’s historic buildings began in earnest. “Cooksville’s been lucky,” Saternus said. “It’s had a history of sensitive people, intelligent, artistic people who cared about its past and the aesthetics of the place.” Through the 1970s and 1980s, Saternus secured his place in that impassioned and quirky lineage.

The three individual narratives that follow present the accounts of contemporary gay men with Cooksville connections. William Wartmann gives an impassioned portrait of the rich blend of impulses—artistic, romantic, connective, redemptive—that led him and Michael Saternus into the Cooksville orbit in 1959. Reflecting on his adopted Cooksville, Al Garland remarks on the tremendous creative and physical energy that he has seen many gay men pour into the rehabilitation of things of beauty. Just as Saternus was introduced to Cooksville by his lover Wartmann, Saternus introduced his new lover, Larry Reed, to the village in 1971. Even as Reed celebrates more than ninety years of gay-propelled preservation in Cooksville, he is working to ensure that his own curatorial vision for the village persists well beyond his own lifetime.