The refurbished Houmas House will have a new color scheme, reminiscent of its original colors.

Carpenter William Fassbender, his image reflected in an antique mirror, prepares a bedroom ceiling in Houmas House on Friday for installation of a chandelier. The original house at Burnside was illuminated by candle chandeliers and gas-jet gaseliers throughout, but they were removed by the last owner. The antique lighting systems are being reinstalied.

Houmas House gets face-lift, new life

By STEVEN WARD
River parishes bureau

URNSIDE — Houmas House Plantation owner Kevin Kelly expects to reopen the Ascension Parish antebellum house and grounds on River Road to tourists and the public in September.

Kelly, 48, is a New Orleans-based industrial real estate developer who bought the home and its adjoining 24 acres May 29 from heirs of the plantation's former owner, George Crozet.

Kelly spent just under $2.9 million to purchase the estate.

Right now, Kelly is spending about $2 million on new construction and renovations.

Crozet, a New Orleans orthodontist who bought the home in 1940, kept it as a showcase for his antique Louisiana furniture, including a noted collection of rare armories.

But Kelly said his vision for Houmas House is
Palace

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much different.

"I call this a sugar palace," Kelly said Friday afternoon while standing in the home's foyer.

Kelly said he is turning Houmas House back into what it originally was: A landmark representing the wealth and taste bought and paid for by the spoils of the sugar industry.

Kelly said the plantation was purchased by colonial settlers from the Houmas Indians in the late 1700s.

In 1812, Gen. Wade Hampton of South Carolina bought the property and gave it to his daughter, Caroline, and her husband, John Smith Preston. The couple cultivated sugar cane in fields surrounding the home, and built Houmas House, the three-story Greek Revival-style home with Doric columns, in 1840.

John Burnside purchased the property in 1858 and almost doubled the size of the plantation's landholdings—from 12,000 acres to 20,000 acres.

Houmas House was the largest sugar cane plantation in the nation, at times producing as many as 20 million pounds of sugar annually, the Crozet family said.

Kelly said he had been trying to buy a plantation home for nine years.

"It's hard when you are dealing with families and heirs," Kelly said.

But Kelly's dream came true May 29 after the heirs to the Crozet-owned property decided to sell Houmas House.

Collectors and museum curators swarmed the plantation in the middle of May when an auction was held to sell furniture and artwork.

Kelly bought some of the Houmas House artifacts and antiques, including a 1907 Steinway piano and one of only three 5-foot by 5-foot Louisiana census maps from 1847 known to exist today.

"I want to keep the home in the period of 1812 to 1850," Kelly said as construction workers kept busy on high ladders beside him.

Kelly said he wants Houmas House to go way beyond the typical plantation experience.

"Usually, you are rushed through a home by a tour guide in less than an hour and that's all. I want people to spend hours at Houmas House. I want it to be an experience and a destination," Kelly said.

The plantation home, which was painted stark white for years, is being painted sandstone yellow.

Kelly's renovations to the home will include men's and women's parlors, a game room with pool tables from 1885, a photo gallery on the second floor and a Bette Davis tribute room.

The home is the setting for the 1964 motion picture, "Hush ... Hush, Sweet Charlotte," starring Davis, Olivia de Havilland and Joseph Cotten.

Kelly bought the bed in which Davis slept during the filming of the movie. In that room, Kelly is going to have a muralist paint a life-size portrait of Davis and display other Davis memorabilia, such as a copy of the film's script and other mementos of the actress' career.

The interior walls of Houmas House will be decorated with murals depicting scenes from its past, among them an elaborate sugar cane field setting in the foyer and a panoramic and chronological history of Houmas House and the surrounding area in the center, main room in the middle of the house.

Near the side of the house, there's a large garçonnière, French for "boy's house" where Kelly hopes to hold weddings.

"We already have 50 requests for weddings," Kelly said.

Kelly said he envisions people eating and drinking on the grounds as well as playing croquet on the broad lawns of the 24-acre estate.

"We are shooting for an opening on Sept. 1, but I'm telling people now, 'sometime in September,'" Kelly said.

For information and updates about the opening, visit http://www.houmashouse.com on the Internet.