Add a Second Story

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Adding a Second Story
121 Smith Street

Sandra Ely

Our 1,000 square foot upstairs addition was the result of our desire for another bathroom. Our house is a small bungalow built about 1929, with plaster and lath walls. At some point, someone had added a shower head in the only bathroom by just running a pipe up the side of the wall over the tub. I’m sure this worked quite well for a time, but by the time we were bathing there, pieces of the plaster were likely to fall in the tub with you. So, after much discussion, we decided the best solution was to return the tub to its original use as only a tub. However, we really enjoyed the convenience of a shower and wanted one in our home. Where to put it? The answer to that problem is why we now have a second story.

The only access to our attic was through a small hole (trap door) in the kitchen ceiling. You had to climb up a ladder (not a pull-down), push over the cover to the hole, and climb through. There was just space enough to stand up at the roof ridge. Since there was not sufficient head room to stand upright in the attic, our decision was to add an entire second story.
The next big decision was where to put a staircase. We looked through numerous books on bungalows and Craftsman cottages to try to determine the most appropriate way to handle this problem. We finally decided the most convenient place for us, though maybe not completely appropriate, was the kitchen. Any other location would have meant the loss of a bedroom, and we had planned on gaining space in the kitchen by moving the water heater, washing machine, and dryer, which we didn’t want in there anyway. By putting the staircase in the kitchen, we were also able to put a small door under it, giving us indoor access to the existing small basement right under the kitchen.

The staircase, taken from the EastBrook Springs Resort, during installation in the kitchen.
We had been helping some of our neighbors in dismantling the EastBrook Springs Resort on the Elk River (see The Historic Huntsville Quarterly, Fall 1994), so we knew we had access to building materials we could use. Also, friends and family had given us various things. My sister gave me an old pedestal sink for Christmas one year; one of our thoughtful neighbors left a newel post on our front porch, knowing we could probably use it; another friend found us an old footed tub (without feet) in a junk yard; etc. My sister Gail had, with the help of one of my brothers-in-law, taken out the oak flooring of a building being torn down in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. She had been planning on using it herself but offered it to us. Some of the boards are stamped “Victory” on the back side. (Oak Ridge was built during World War II as part of the Manhattan project. When we moved there, you had to have a badge to get in the city gates.) We used this flooring upstairs.

Looking out through the new window openings that are covered with plastic. The wood is some of the flooring my sister, Gail, salvaged from a building in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.
The ridge board of our new space was to be raised and turned at a 90° angle to the existing roof. By changing the bracing of the rafters and flooring the original attic, we gained about 300 square feet of much-needed storage space along with the 670 square feet of new living space.

The estimated time of completion of the work we wanted done was six months, and we opted to stay in our home during the restoration/construction. We thought we might house-sit for people going out of town to give us some relief from the construction, and we did have at least one opportunity to do so, which we turned down. I’ve read that this is not uncommon for other people in the same circumstances—you just can’t leave what’s going on. So, we lived in one room for the nine months it took for the work to be completed. Incidentally, that room might still be locked and unused, with its crumbling walls and falling ceiling, if my sister Gail (everyone should have a sister like Gail) hadn’t come down from Tennessee three consecutive weekends and completely repaired the plaster. That room is now known as Gail’s room.

The room we lived in for nine months during renovation and construction.
After the roof was punched through for the second story, the exterior framing and tar-papering were completed in one day. Evening rain had been predicted, and this was one of the times the prediction was correct. The work crew looked like ants or worker bees swarming all over the place. My husband, Dave, was up there helping, trying to get plastic cover over us before nightfall; and just as the rain started, they had it done! The Palladian window we had custom made for the upstairs didn’t come for a couple of months, so the hole for it was covered with plastic. When the plastic flapped in the breeze, the sound was slightly reminiscent of tall ships—it was pretty neat.

We experienced many unexpected problems, as most people do. Right before we were ready to start construction, our oven went out, and since we were converting to gas, we didn’t bother getting it fixed. As a result, I’d come home, hunt for the stove (it was moved all over the house from day to day), and cook whatever I could on the top burners. A window in our kitchen had been covered over on the inside, and we wanted to open it back up. When the new custom-built cabinets were installed, the window was off center. I took one look and said someone was going to have to move that window—it was moved. Water was left standing for so long in the new upstairs tub, to ensure it would hold, we had mosquitoes breeding there.
These are just a few experiences that kept everything so interesting. Now we have nice additional space for family and friends. It has been well worth it, but I’m not sure I would ever care to do it again.
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