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A Touch of New England in Old Town
DaleRhoades

The story of our house is not one of historic preservation as is usually written about in *The Quarterly*. Perhaps it is a suitable subject though because, in building, we chose to use traditional architectural and interior designs that have stood the test of time. In a sense, we are preserving historic designs.
The outside of our house is a replica of the Witch House that was built in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1642. It is considered to be the oldest existing house in Salem. The style is called New England Medieval. The interior is an eclectic collection of things I’ve seen in museums, historic buildings, books, and magazines—things that spoke to me. When something grabs me in such a way that I’m consumed by its very presence, that’s a religious experience for me. That’s the way the Witch House and the interior designs we chose to use affected me.

The Witch House is not haunted and a witch never lived there. It got its name because one of the judges who tried the Salem witchcraft trials in 1692, Jonathan Corwin, lived in the house at that time and some of the hearings were held in an upstairs chamber.

I first saw the Witch House 20 years ago in the summer of 1976. I was completely captivated by the “intuitively appealing” exterior. Before I ever went inside for the tour I thought, “I could live in that house.” I never recovered from that feeling. While on the tour I bought a post card that showed the exterior of the house. I went home and in my mind’s eye laid out a floor plan. Several weeks later I sketched that floor plan on a piece of notebook paper. My dream was born. For the next 17 years I refined my floor plan and interior designs. I cut templates of our furniture; placed them on the floor plan; then, drew the walls.

All the while I was building this house mentally, I really had no serious intention of ever moving from our house on Monte Sano. It was a charming house and I loved it. It was built as a summer cottage about the turn of the century when the mountain was a resort. Our furniture looked good in that house and I really planned to spend the rest of my life there. Dick and I lived there for 26 years. Three daughters grew up there.

Somehow the desire to build the Witch House grew and the “If I could build a house this is what I’d build,” became “When we build....” The lot in Old Town that I’d looked at longingly for years became available. I appeared before the Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission with a picture of the Witch House saying, “If we get the lot this is the house I want to build. Will you approve the plans?” The answer was yes. If the plans had not been approved I would not have wanted that particular lot. I wanted to build that house on that lot. We bought the lot.
We chose Joe Butcher as our draftsman. We took the picture of the Witch House, my floor plan, Dick’s site plan, and my 17 year collection of pictures and ideas to Mr. Butcher. From that mass of paper came our house plans. When I saw the drawing of the elevation I was awe struck by the project we were about to undertake. I recut templates of our furniture for the floor plan just to make sure everything would fit where it would be placed. Everything fit. My dream was taking shape.

The two biggest obstacles we had to deal with were choosing a builder and locating the wide pine boards I wanted for the flooring and the raised-panel wall in the great room. Both were finally accomplished but neither came easy.

The search for the right builder started with our asking friends if they knew or could recommend builders. We compiled a list of builders to talk to and a list to avoid. I was amazed at the horror stories that some people shared.

The comments I heard most often from the builders with whom I talked were: “You can’t do that; that won’t work; that’s not the way we do it; that’s not the way it’s done now; the pitch of the roof can’t be done.” Naysayers! But the most upsetting thing we were told was, “It’ll cost you $75,000 more than you want to spend.” I was encouraged. If enough builders would come down $25,000 each, then we’d be able to do it. Some builders just returned our plans without ever giving a bid.

One day I ran into HHF member, Norma Oberlies. She asked how the house was coming and I told her of our problems in finding a builder. She told me of the house recently constructed next door to her new house. She said her husband had watched it go up and when it was finished, he hadn’t seen anything the builder did wrong. When I mentioned this to Dick he said, “Call him.” I made my first call to David Collins Construction. Soon after my first meeting with David I knew I had found a builder with whom I could work. He was young, energetic, and open to suggestion. And, he wasn’t negative. Months passed before we actually signed a contract and broke ground.

During these months, while Dick and David were working out the details that didn’t interest me, I turned my energy to locating wide pine boards. Of the many ads I answered, the same two problems kept
recurring. The pine boards I located in the Southeast were only up to 12 inches wide, which was not wide enough. The really wide pine boards I located in New England were not affordable. The fact that we needed 2,200 square feet added to this problem. One of the phone calls I made was to Craftsman Lumber Company in Groton, Massachusetts. It was really encouraging, but their prices were so good we wondered about the quality of the wood. Coincidentally, Dick had a business trip to Boston and made time to visit the lumberyard. The quality was good and he placed our order. I had made a special request for “one magnificent board” to be the focal point in the raised panel wall. When the boards were delivered the following spring, I had one of my religious experiences when I saw them. The widest floor boards were 22 inches wide and my magnificent board was 28 inches wide by 6 feet long. It was perfect.

One of the reasons we were so pleased with David as our builder is because he was one of the few with whom we talked who was willing to help us economize, and was also agreeable when we told him we wanted to do some of the work ourselves. To get what we wanted and to keep it affordable, my job was to sand, stain, and oil all the pine boards for the pine flooring. Together we would do all the interior painting.

We broke ground on December 13, 1994. I started a diary, but it didn’t last long. I was so busy building a house, I didn’t have time to write about it. When the house was framed, I was almost embarrassed by how big it was. I just didn’t realize it was this big. I could actually see it while driving I-565. I looked over one day and thought, “It looks like Stone Mountain!” I didn’t want a big house, I only wanted the Witch House.

My need to have a walk-in fireplace might have brought on the building of this house. For years I had collected wrought iron and cast iron cookware and fireplace utensils. I had never had a proper fireplace in which to display my iron in our house on the mountain. It just sat on the hearth collecting dust and falling over. I had very definite ideas about what I needed in my fireplace. We had spent hours talking, planning, and looking at pictures. When work commenced I sat on a stack of bricks in
the corner of the keeping room and watched almost every brick be laid. Changes were made and many decisions were made as they worked. When it was time to mount the cranes, I made a quick trip to Lewter’s to get the right size eye bolt to use as a bracket. The contractor, Ed Bracken, and the master mason, Tony Leonard, are very good at what they do. I’m still impressed by the care Tony took in planning and lining up each row of bricks. My fireplace is beautiful and exactly what I wanted. And the chimney draws, too!

My only disappointment was in the placement of the beam. We were given two wonderful old beams that came from the buildings of the Monte Sano Female Seminary erected on the mountain in the 1820’s. Mildred Rowe Sanders, a lovely lady who lives in Cullman, is the great granddaughter of the Rev. and Mrs. Rowe who founded the school. She offered us the beams. I chose one for the lentil in the fireplace and the other to go in the kitchen above an open counter. City fire codes
prevented one being used as the lentil, so it became the mantel instead. The change works very well. It’s a very attractive, as well as useful, open shelf.

The pine boards were delivered in mid-March. I set up shop with my saw horses and sander and began the seemingly endless job of sanding, staining, and oiling. This could have been a very tedious job, but it turned out to be the most fun I had while working on our house. Our finish carpenter, Danny Gibson, came to work. Before he started David told him, “I don’t know what she wants, but she knows what she wants. Just go down there and do what she wants.” Danny came to work with the feeling he’d last at least one day, maybe two, with this opinionated woman and her Ph.D. husband. He’d had unfortunate experiences with Ph.D. engineers wanting him to do his job their way and he was not looking forward to us. Something happened to change his mind. We clicked. The three of us worked very well together probably because each of us was so busy doing our own jobs we didn’t have time to interfere with each other. Maybe, too, it’s because Dick and I worked just as hard and quite often longer than many of the contractors and their crews. Danny takes a great deal of pride in his work, and I think he really enjoyed doing the different things we wanted done. Most of his jobs began with “How do you want this done?” and he always rose to the occasion when something called upon to deviate from the way its done today.

A good example of this was the front door. The foyer was panelled with the wide pine boards but the front door was mahogany. I stained the inside of the door with pine stain and it turned bright orange. Awful! I had some of the boards planed. We took the door down and clad the inside with pine boards. The door actually looks very similar to the door of the original Witch House. The boards on the outside are vertical and the boards on the inside are horizontal and are held in place with hand cut Tremont nails. It’s beautiful.
I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge Kenny Parker at Gobble-Fite Lumber in Decatur for his help. The fluted trim and rosettes I wanted for door and window trim were not always easy to get. The fluted arc over the front door was a particular problem, but the third time truly was the charm. My little foyer is completely pine and lovely.

The trim on the door frame between the foyer and the great room was inspired by the trim on a door frame at Oak Place. When I saw George Steele had a pocket door in a thick wall and wide door frame like ours, I thought that might be an idea we could use. I made arrangements with Lee Kilbourn for David and me to go to Oak Place for David to see the door trim. From David’s description of the trim, Danny was able to trim our door the same way.

The door is typical of the problems that arose throughout our construction. But I decided early on there is a solution to every problem. And there is. I was not about to let any problem outweigh my excitement. More often than not, the best solution was the simplest. I approached each challenge by asking how it might have been done 350 years ago.

The beam in the kitchen is another example. Some of the men in my life at that time thought the beam would be very heavy and need to be supported from the ceiling with iron bands. After listening to this, Danny asked how I really wanted to mount the beam. I said, pointing to the cabinets, “A hole in this end and and hole in that end with no visible means of support.” That’s what we did and it works beautifully.
Another example of the men trying to make a problem where none existed arose when we were ready to hang a board door Danny had made in the wide board wall. I wanted to use my antique strap hinges and latch. "Won't work. Door's too heavy." I asked that the door be hung with my antique hinges, and if they didn't work, then we could hide modern hinges inside the door frame. Danny hung the door. My antique hinges work perfectly. My antique latch works and looks good.

There are some simple things I did to preserve the integrity of my interior design. There are no light switches in the great room. All light switches are just outside the doors in the hall. My microwave is in the pantry. The steps going into the basement are in the garage rather than underneath the inside stairs. This gave us a small closet beneath the stairs. But more importantly, Dick doesn't haul his lumber, tools, paint—all those workshop things—through my kitchen and down the hall.

An exciting time in our construction came when it was time to put up the paneled wall. The inspiration for our wall came from the raised panel chimney wall in the Chowan house that was built in North Carolina in 1755. The room in which this wall stood was moved to and reconstructed in the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in Old Salem in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. After I saw the picture in a book, *Southern Antiques and Folk Art*, and again in *Colonial Homes Magazine*, I told Dick we had to go to Old Salem to see that wall. Our daughters were at the right ages to appreciate Old Salem, so we took a long weekend and went to see the wall. Another religious experience!
Our cabinet maker, Davis Cabinets, made and installed the panels. But, before they could go up, they too had to be sanded, stained, and oiled. The challenge here came in making sure I matched this finish with the shell-domed corner cabinets that I had ordered from Rachel Heeschen at Greenlawn Interiors. (The story of finding shell-domed corner cabinets is another one of numerous futile contacts until I got in touch with Rachel and she not only rescued me but her own mother as well. I’ll spare you the details.) My corner cabinets were made in South Carolina of southern pine, and my wall was made of Canadian and New England eastern yellow pine. There are subtle differences in the colors of the woods and staining would be tricky. Since they were all on the same wall, they had to match. They did. And they, too, are beautiful. By varying the numbers of coats of stain I was able to achieve a match. And my magnificent board in the chimney wall truly is a focal point between the shell-domed corner cabinets.

As we neared completion it was time to install the light fixtures. The one above the
dining room table is one that I made 23 years ago with the help of Maples Sheet Metal and a sheetmetal worker named Mike. It is a light-weight sheet metal cone in which I punched two pineapple designs. It has six arms that hold candles. Our workers called that my “witch hat.” After I was unable to find a pineapple chandelier I decided I might have to make that one, too. I found two wooden pineapple post tops at Lowe’s. I cut the pineapple leaves from tuna fish cans, painted everything the right color and took these pieces and a sketch I’d made to Maples Sheet Metal. They cut and shaped the arms. My next stop was Richards Lighting where I collected everything we needed for us to assemble the fixture and for Dick to wire it. The candle cups at the end of each arm are actually patty shell pans from Harrison Brothers. The chandelier for the keeping room was also made of post tops from Lowe’s, curtain rings, and a wooden curtain rod finial. This one was easy because it isn’t wired. The arms that hold the candles were cut from a pair of sconces I’d had for a number of years.

The very last things to be installed were the leaded glass windows that Wayne Lumpkin made for us. The leaded glass
panes are made of diamond shaped reproduction antique glass and were installed on the inside of the casement windows. They, too, are beautiful. The thank you note I wrote Mr. Lumpkin said they are the finishing touch for our house. They are exactly what this house needed. They are perfect. Another religious experience.

I’ve never worked so hard or so long in such hot weather as I did that summer of 1995. Neither have I ever felt such a sense of satisfaction in hard work. I came out of this construction project loving my builder, loving my framers, loving my masons, loving my finish carpenter, and loving my house (and, of course, my husband who let me do it my way). Would I do it again? Yes, but only if it were the same house on the same lot with the same builder.

We’ve lived here for nine months. I still walk through almost every day and say “I can’t believe I got what I wanted.” Dreams really do come true.