

Stories from an Old House

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As an architect for 30 years, it's not surprising that I have renovated three homes of my own. Professionally, I have restored historic buildings from log cabins, farmhouses, colonial mansions, and grist mills, to barns and meeting houses.

My current home on Oakbourne Road in Westtown is a 2½ story stone-masonry, stuccoed former farmhouse, purchased in 2004. It was built about midway between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, and is a fairly typical early 19th century Chester County farmhouse.

While the house had undergone various renovations and additions, it retained many charming original features such as a walk-in fireplace, beautiful white oak floors, thick stone walls that kept the house cool in the summer, and a more than 100-year-old silver maple tree in the yard. It also had some original windows with six lights of glass in each of the upper and lower sashes, known as "six over six." The oldest windows are "single-hung" design where the upper sash is fixed in place and the lower sash slides up without a counter-balance, so the windows propped open with a notched stick to allow progressive degrees of ventilation.

Renovating an old house comes with the challenge of creating a floor plan for modern living, while fitting into existing space and retaining the integrity of the house's style. Oftentimes materials are difficult to modify, such as 20" thick exterior stone walls, and age-hardened oak walls and floor framing. In my house, several interior walls were added during the 20th century, mostly for closets. I removed these walls and fortunately did not damage the original walls, mantels and moldings.

Renovations always bring surprises, and this house was no different. We learned that a wall built to divide the large parlor (living room) was located under a principal second floor beam, and the 8" x 8" oak timber was cut through to allow ductwork to reach the second floor. Restoring the parlor to its original size necessitated replacing the oak timber by installing an 8' x 6' steel beam concealed in the second floor. Removal of the old beam required shoring the

attic, second and first floors all the way to the basement to temporarily remove the load during beam replacement. Once that arduous work was done, the actual beam was installed in less than an hour. Other support work was necessary in the basement, like replacing an 8" diameter locust post set on a single stone about the size of a car steering wheel with a steel post and reinforced concrete footing, while sagging floors were jacked-up to a level plane.

I knew I needed to renovate the generous attic space under the pitched roof to accommodate my family. The attic floor was covered with wood boards and concrete (a fire-proofing measure of the 19th century). A room alongside the main chimney was for smoking meats; a stone could be removed to fill the room with smoke. With modifications, the attic could accommodate two bedrooms, a study room, and a cedar closet, alongside the existing stair. The floor joists were sistered with 2x6s for final leveling; the 4" x 4" roof rafters with 2x10s for straightening and insulation value. A dormer with legal-sized escape windows, required by building code, was installed in each new bedroom. A separate heating/cooling system, concealed under the roof eave between the dormers, was installed to service the third floor. All wiring and heating/cooling lines to new and renovated spaces had to run through the only wood framed first floor wall, since the exterior walls are solid stone. I recycled an antique cabinet front on the first floor to provide a concealed shaft for these utilities. Ductwork, added during the 1940s to the 1st and 2nd floors, was modified and extended.

The added space on the 3rd floor allowed for 2nd floor changes; a bedroom was renovated into a hall bathroom. The former hall bath became the master bath and the smallest bedroom became the master closet, creating a unified suite across the rear of the second floor. The kitchen, in a lean-to, stone-and-frame, first floor wing had been the pump-room; a hand-dug well is hidden under the floor by a steel cover and wood floorboards.

Researching the history of the house from old area maps going back to 1860, I discovered this house has had few owners. The original builder seems to have been Isaac Bailey, when Oakbourne Road did not exist. The south façade was the original front of this house; the Oakbourne Road side was the rear, again before the road existed. This farm was 97 acres, until after ownership by the final farmer, Roman Hunt. He worked the orchards and raised cows and chickens from 1920 to the late 1960s. When we bought the house we learned that of their five children, two Hunt daughters still lived across the street from us.

A great way to learn the history of a house is from former inhabitants. We invited the Hunt sisters for dinner and they charmed us with many stories of growing up in the house. According to the Hunt's, there was an outhouse in the backyard until they were in high school. The women remembered a large cast iron stove in what is now my dining room, placed in front of the walk-in fireplace. Prior to indoor plumbing, they had their weekly bath in a metal tub attached to the stove where the bath water was heated. Their father sent them to St. Agnes School in West Chester. However, each day before they went they had to

milk the cows and place the filled milk cans in the spring-house (which still exists on an adjacent property). Then they walked down Oakbourne Road to the Oakbourne station, took a train to Market Street in West Chester (where the excursion railroad is now), and then walked the half mile across the borough to St. Agnes School.

A bank barn stood on the property until it burned down in the late 20th century (some neighbors still remember that event) and was replaced by a 2 1/2 car garage. When I planted trees on the former driveway I encountered a lot of oyster shells which were given to the chickens to peck to add calcium to their diet, thus strengthening their eggshells.

Fortunately, I was able to renovate this house with minimal intrusion to the original architectural fabric and modest but functional modifications to the floor plans. A big challenge to renovating an old house is installing new utilities and systems in concealed ways to achieve a modern, livable home, while keeping the charm and history of the past visible.

