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# Boston

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The McCool family sits in the kitchen of their fully restored 19th-century house in Newburyport.

# Remaking History

A young family painstakingly restores a Federalist home in Newburyport, keeping its heritage in mind—and intact. By Rachel Levitt

**T**HE MCCOOLS COULD have lived anywhere. As an MIT-bred software guru in his thirties, Dave McCool was already in a position to retire to a leisurely life with his wife, Catie, and their two young daughters. Many of their equally successful friends had moved to the “W towns” west of Boston, into newly built 8,000-square-foot manses with sunken living rooms and enormous master suites. But the McCools, both midwesterners, loved the older, more modest houses on the Massachusetts coast. “And besides,” says Catie, an avid equestrian and amateur artist, “I hate wasted space.”

Living historic had been a 14-year ambition for the couple. After they married, they tried buying in old Newburyport, but, priced out, they settled in Haverhill. A few years later, they were able to afford a small place in Newburyport, then a larger one built circa 1800. Much of the old moldings, baseboards, and flooring in the latter property had been replaced or rehabbed, and it also featured a 20-something-by-20-something great room and obligatory supersize master bedroom with giant bath. “It had been done to sell, and it wasn’t in keeping with the original house at all,” Catie says.

Then, in 1999, the house across the street became available. Built in about 1800 as a single-family, over the years it had been turned into four apartments through a series of haphazard additions, creating multiple staircases and kitchens, and dead-end hallways. The 5,000-square-foot mishmash of period details showed how tastes and means had changed over time in the town. From the front of the house to the back, the floorboards got steadily narrower—from 10 inches to 3 inches wide—and the moldings, baseboards, and doors varied in style and size. The oldest room (now the McCools’ dining



**This page:** Top, a picturesque potting shed gracing the McCools' generous backyard; above, the entrance to the 200-year-old residence, now accented with a portico; below, the living room. **Opposite:** The new sunroom, featuring French granite floors and plenty of multipaned windows.



room) had a huge hearth, with dimensions like those found in colonial Salem. Even the "original" floorboards had older nail holes in them, indicating that they'd been taken from a building predating this one. Outside, there was a large yard—rare in Newburyport—that would be an ideal place to host little girls' tea parties or train recalcitrant puppies. The McCools were sold.

Of course, the house would need a lot of work in order to return to its single-family layout. Fascinated most by its historic details, the couple resolved to keep as much of the existing structure as possible and to salvage or recycle what they could. "Not to be sentimental, but you only own a house for a short time," says Catie. "Dave and I agreed that it was important to leave some [of the history] for the next generation." In Cambridge architect Frank Shirley, the McCools found a passionate and patient designer. The principal of Frank Shirley Architects, he serves on the Cambridge Historical Commission and lives in a big Victorian with his young family; when he started the McCools' project in 2000, he was just formulating ideas for a book about adding to period homes. In the end, the renovation would cost more than \$2 million and take a little over two years.

Shirley, who's worked on 100-plus historic renovations in his 16 years in the business, marvels at the level of skill that went into building the original house. He gushes over such details as the elaborate scrolling on the thumb latches, blacksmithed with great care, and the fine, flat plaster walls. "How they got those walls so smooth with a trowel is a mystery!" he says.

But renovating a 200-year-old house takes a strong stomach—and it's the stuff you can't see lurking behind the walls that can cause the most trouble. "When we walked through the second floor in the back before the renovation, the floor felt a little bouncy," says Shirley. "I figured during a previous renovation someone had inadvertently cut a structural beam and all we'd have to do is replace it." As workers began peeling off the sheathing, though, they were shocked to discover the inner walls were completely charred. "Turned out, the back wing of the house had been in a major fire in 1920s, during an ice storm when the hydrants were frozen," he says. "Instead of rebuilding, they'd just covered up the damaged structure. It's amazing that that part of the house was still standing." With help from Danvers-based contractor Roger Charron, the rear wing was taken down and meticulously reassembled, costing an estimated \$90,000.

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## Fall Home Design 2007

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The second big surprise would set the McCools back some \$50,000. Much of the two chimneys, mortared by clay from banks of the Merrimack River, had turned to dust ("You could pull the bricks out with your hands," says Catie), and six fireplaces would have to be rebuilt to make them operational. Some of the original hearth bricks remained, so as Beverly-based mason Brian McMahon and his team dismantled each stack, they numbered the bricks so they could be put back in the same order. "When our friends saw what we were doing, they said, 'Are you crazy? Gut

**"We didn't want to live in a museum," Catie says of settling into the renovated 200-year-old home. "We wanted it to be comfortable."**

it?" says Catie. "But we knew where we wanted to go. We just didn't know how intense it would be."

Where many architects or contractors would replace the old windows in the name of environmental efficiency, Shirley fought to keep them. "New windows do nothing for you when the cold air leaks through the walls—that's where you lose heat," he says. "There are four new thermal-pane windows on the first floor, all of which failed in the first five years!" Instead, the McCools kept 26 sashes, which, in Shirley's words, "aren't exactly perfect." They lack a parting bead—the piece that separates the upper and lower sashes—which makes them difficult to move. And in place of a counterweight system, they're held open with the aid of a pin stuck into the frame. The windows also feature Indian shutters, popular in the 18th and 19th centuries, which slide into wall pockets—a neat way of hiding them when they're not needed.

In a few instances, however, parts of the house simply had to go. The central staircase, designed for the original four-room structure, was mean, narrow, and twisty—too tight for the stitched-together 21st-century home. "You have to understand that before the renovation, the house was all chopped up," says Shirley. "We had to make some sacrifices to turn these random parts into

an elegant home with good traffic flow and lots of light." Designing a new staircase took research and care. Because Federal-era architects typically created everything on a very fine scale, Shirley's challenge was to match it using modern methods. The balusters, for example, are only 5/8 by 1 1/8 inches. To make them strong and straight, Shirley had them constructed out of maple specially fitted to the structure of the stair. The banister is dollhouse size, at 2 inches wide, built out of mahogany by Beverly furnituremaker Philip C. Lowe. The paneling along the deconstructed stair was reused as wainscoting in the pantry, mudroom, and family bathroom.

Because of the McCools' emphasis on recycling, at least 80 percent of their cost was labor. Had they built new, their money would have gone into buying materials, rather than paying craftspeople. "I estimate that we saved 300 square feet of flooring, 26 windows, and 14 doors. That's sparing a lot of trees and a lot of energy that would have been spent cutting, refining, and shipping the wood," says Shirley. And the energy saving continues: The structure is now so tightly insulated (Shirley foamed the exterior walls—his trade secret) that the McCools need to open a window or door to create enough airflow to get a fire going in the winter.

Since its completion in 2002, the house has been home to the couple and their two daughters, Maggie, 11, and Clara, 9. The girls' toys, drawings, and horse-show ribbons are everywhere, and the family's two friendly cats follow guests from room to room. Ernie, their one-year-old terrier mix, whines from the garden (thanks to his activities, most of the Oriental rugs are in storage). Their furniture is "a random assortment of stuff," Catie says. "We didn't want to live in a museum. We wanted it to be comfortable, with room for our books and the children's artwork." Many of the pieces came from antiques stores in Essex or along Route 1 in Maine; others were bought at auction in Portsmouth, like the anonymous 19th-century portrait over the library fireplace. "We get something special from living in a historic house, and there's plenty of room to have our own space," says Catie. "I especially love the small, sheltered, cozy spots that are everywhere. You just don't find nooks like these in new houses." ■



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