

From: Jeremiah McGiff jmcgiff@optonline.net
Subject: Historic home offers windows to the past - Long Island Advance
Date: November 6, 2017 at 4:55 PM
To: jmcgiff@optonline.net

Historic home offers windows to the past



As Jeremiah McGiff got to work at 46 Bellport Lane, he noticed a clue that would prove essential to the entire project. Clapboard siding was discovered beneath dilapidating shingles, in good condition to boot. Some panels were restored and McGiff filled in missing pieces by having exact replicas milled. “You really can’t tell what’s old and what isn’t,” he said, admiring the home whose earliest deed is dated 1836.

Those seemingly innocuous discoveries make McGiff’s career as a restorer of period homes and antiques so gratifying. As horizontal clapboard panels were taken off for restoration, another stunning find: vertical, beveled siding painted slate-gray, believed to be the original siding.

Near the front entrance, a note circa 1878 scribbled in cursive appears to describe the weather on a mid-September afternoon — 82 degrees.

Standing beneath the front portico, it’s understood that the commanding views of Bellport Bay to the south and Bellport Lane to the north have not changed much since that note was etched. For that, McGiff credits the Bellport Historic Preservation Commission and creation of now six historic districts in the village. Today, 46 Bellport Lane can never be torn down, but any alterations to the structure must be brought before the commission for approval. “After reviewing their plans, we were especially pleased to hear that they wanted to restore the house to a more original look,” said Tom Binnington, vice chair of the Historic Preservation

Commission. In the early 1990s, Binnington was instrumental in getting preservation efforts off the ground in the village. “They try and retain the architectural flavor of the village,” McGiff said. “There’s a reason people come to Bellport.”

Owner Stuart Venner admitted that undertaking this project has been more extensive than originally realized. “But I always wanted to do a project on a house of this vintage,” he said, noting that he purchased the home in 2015. “That makes it totally worth it. You can try to build a new house that looks like an old house and it never works. It just doesn’t have the soul,” he said. “When taking on a project like this, it’s easy to get in over your head. I had to slow [McGiff] down at times,” he said laughing.

With guidance from McGiff and architect Gary Candella, Venner sought to restore the home to its period glory while keeping in mind today’s date. “The old houses tend to meander with lots of little rooms, and that doesn’t work in the 21st century. People want it open,” McGiff said.

Inside, the pieces began to come together. Wide, original floorboards remain intact after ceilings were raised, walls torn down and bedrooms expanded. In an upstairs bathroom, an elegant claw-foot tub and vanity remain as well. “I don’t know what period [the vanity] is from,” McGiff observed. “It looks almost art deco. But that’s the beauty of these houses. They evolve.”

Old touches, like painted vintage radiators, meet modern-day comforts; the home will be steam-heated, but have backup heating and cooling systems.

Some old touches require a closer look. At a quick glance, the windows look somewhat ordinary. Upon closer inspection — and best viewed from inside the home — you can see waves characteristic of old glass. It’s a strange imperfection caused by the method in which window glass was produced in the 1800s: set in water to cool, forming “bubbles” or waves. “I’m sure someone will come in and complain about that,” Venner said, tongue in cheek. But it’s those minute details that give this home the soul he mused about earlier. The project, McGiff said, is expected to take, at most, five more weeks.

On a recent walk of the property, historian Zachary Studenroth pointed out the frame of the original house. “It didn’t have dormers. Those would have been put in later,” McGiff said. “After the Civil War, there was a period of great wealth. And when there was wealth, people upgraded. That’s how you can mark when architectural changes came. These houses are records.”

Tangible records, thanks to the efforts of the Historic Preservation Commission and smart planning. As a result, McGiff had plenty of inspiration when it came to designing a new portico for the home’s entrance. “I was able to walk the lane and see what would be appropriate,” he said, noting that he chose to replicate a similar feature found on another Bellport Lane home he felt was the “prettiest.”

Binnington noted that the changes inside and behind the home did not need approval. “We’re primarily concerned with the streetscape,” he said.

The home’s entrance also serves as an homage to the Presbyterian Church. “If you want to understand where the architectural motif for these homes comes from, you look at that church,” McGiff said. “What [the Historic Preservation Commission] has done allows me, as a restorer, to be able to look at these different specimens in town and then decide what’s the best way to go about a project.”

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