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VERMONT HOMES AND GARDENS

# Idyllic Island Home

*As it was restored, this grand old home revealed both its past and its potential for another family to live happily inside its walls.*



There are two staircases that lead to the upstairs, and the Stewarts have kept details like the hinges at the bottom of one staircase, even though keeping a door there didn't make sense. The upstairs is filled with other such original details and fixtures, like the claw-foot tub in the guest bathroom and cutouts on the doors to fit the slant of the roof. With four bedrooms and four bathrooms, there is plenty of space for family members to spread out and enjoy themselves.

I HAVE ENCOUNTERED a house that seems to have a soul, and it is a kind one, an old one. It seems to wrap its unseen arms around you when you visit; it whispers its secrets to you, silently hoping that you will stay a while. When you visit it, this realization begins well before you arrive, when you cross a bay on Lake Champlain on the Route 2 causeway and notice that your pace is slowing. The islands you are nearing seem to be generating a sense of calm and relaxation...that's when you know

you are on "island time." As I crossed the drawbridge, drove through North Hero, and finally rounded the corner at the gate of the Stewart residence, I couldn't be sure that my car was still moving forward. One glimpse of the lake and the Stewarts' old lake house, and I knew this story would be different from every house story I had written before.

As I entered, owner Anne Stewart offered me coffee, and I noticed the writing on the side of the mug: "Our own



The kitchen sink dates from 1922 and is just one of many original features of the house that is still in great condition. Beyond the kitchen and leading into the dining room is hidden storage space that makes this house unusual for one of its era. It doesn't have a basement, but the house more than makes up for that with a multitude of closets, built-in shelves, and pantry nooks, including the recent addition of a root cellar outside. The kitchen window affords a fine lake view. Anne comments that she "made sure the kitchen sink was under this window so I wouldn't mind doing dishes so much."



The downstairs areas all seem to flow together thanks to the addition of new wainscoting in the living room to match the original wall treatment in the dining room. As they did their various renovations, the Stewarts tried to retain the old feel of the house. They built an addition on one side of the house and, although it is new, its lines blend harmoniously with those of the original construction. The addition houses the master bedroom upstairs and the family room downstairs. Anne says, "We keep the television in the family room in the new part of the house because it's cozy in here, but also because it felt wrong to have a TV in the historic part of the house."

private island." Anne chuckled and said, "Well, it's not technically a private island, but it feels that way out here." We started chatting about the big old house, and Anne stopped the conversation to say, "I wouldn't be doing it justice if I didn't tell you the story of the owners before us." I was intrigued, and when she finished the story, the feeling I had gotten when I drove up to the house just grew stronger.

Built in 1922, the house was one of a pair of camps built by two brothers. Its early history was filled with the joy of Vermont summers, but when the brother who owned it eventually passed away and his daughter inherited it, the house became entangled in family arguments concerning its use. She banned her own brother from the vacant property when he visited to keep it in repair. There was no reconciliation, and so the house fell into disarray and sat, empty and abandoned, for 35 years as trees grew to cover its roof, juveniles paid illicit visits to the property, and raccoons took up residence inside.

In the early 1990s, a couple from Seattle—undeterred by tales (and a ghost story or two) the locals told them about the house—bought the property and restored it as a part-time camp. Here, Anne paused and said, "This is where our history with the house starts." Anne and her husband Don, who were friends of the Seattle couple, had been living in Essex, raising their children and growing their business, Stewart Construction. While they had enjoyed the convenience of living in town, "I wanted a farm on water," Anne recalled. They had been searching for a house that met that criteria for two years when they heard their friends were looking to sell their house up in the islands. "It wasn't quite a farm, but living on the lake interested us enough that we went to look. As we drove up the long driveway and rounded the corner at the gate, I saw the wrap-around porch and a glimpse of the lake. I said to Don, 'We are going to buy this house, aren't we?' And we did."

Thus, the Stewarts took possession and started working on the house in the fall of 2001. Although updated in the 1990s, it was only functional as a seasonal camp. The Stewarts immediately set out to winterize the house and warm it up, both functionally and aesthetically. "The house felt like a camp, which was great in the summer, but a little too chilly in the winter. We insulated, paint-



The beautifully restored house has four spacious bedrooms with scads of storage space, and none of the building's old charm has been lost; the lakeside property outbuildings still include the original ice house.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ANNE STEWART

ed, and made it our own,” says Anne.

Don and Anne knew they could do anything with the structure, but they didn't change the setting. “It's about the land,” Anne said, “and this land is old. The property feels ancient.” The bones of the house, so to speak, were strong and its size was perfect for the growing Stewart family. “We have five children with four spouses and six grandchildren now. We really fill up the space!” Anne laughed. Their love of old homes and weekend projects got them through the building process, which ended up pitting them against nature the first few years. “Living on the lake is all about battling nature,” Anne explained, adding for good measure that, for example, “We

had to line a faulty chimney, because all it was good for during the first year was letting wasps in the house.”

When the Stewarts moved in, their friends who had rescued the house gave them a photo album documenting its history. On the front page of the album is the notation: “This house revealed its past and with it its potential for another family to live happily inside its walls. We know it will love the Stewart family.” Spending an afternoon there, I could see that it really does love its second chance, for it sparkles and shines, much as the nearby lake does on a sunny day. As I was getting ready to leave and head back to the rapid pace of my life in Burlington, Anne shared one more

story. “When we hosted our first few events here, it seemed like they always fell on hazy days. I was disappointed, because you couldn't look across the lake and see the mountains. Don said to me, ‘Maybe it's good, to keep the envy at bay.’ I laughed, because he had a good point.” She continued, “It's been an idyllic place to live. It's peaceful and comfortable, and sitting on that bluff on a clear day, you don't want to be anywhere else in the world.”

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