

Reconstructing the Smith house

With its long family history, this distinctive blue-shuttered house on a quiet corner in Edgartown presented new owners with a restoration quandary.

BY SHELLEY CHRISTIANSEN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WAYNE SMITH

Extensive photo documentation and precise measurements went into designing the façade of the new house in the same spirit as the original, built in 1870.





Nelson Smith, the eldest of nine children and unofficial family historian, grew up in the 1870 house that once stood here, now rebuilt anew.

Long before the wrecking machine took its first bite, the house at 86 South Summer Street was a sad-looking thing – mildewed, peeling, and losing bone mass fast. It looked all the sadder for its prominent site on one of the finest residential corners in Edgartown. Never mind that the street corner sits just outside the Historic District, whose jagged borders are arguably gerrymandered in the first place.

Indoors, the house looked no jollier. Ceilings crumbled. Wallpaper drooped. Floors shifted on the unsteady legs of an old foundation. Wind and water swept through broken window panes. And there was emptiness throughout, save a few chairs, a dining table, a Bible from the 1800s, and a withering piano.

Nevertheless, the sprawling 1870 house had distinction aplenty, in its heritage of homesteaders and in the architectural deviations that enchanted decades of passersby. First and maybe foremost, in a staid neighborhood known for its ubiquitous shutters of near-black “Edgartown green,” the shutters at No. 86 were a lively go-to-hell blue. The High Street façade was so bold as to sport a bay window. It had front entries on two sides, one of which used to be outfitted with one of those Victorian follies – a porch. And whereas the house was likely known as the Captain Thomas Fordham House when it was built for a gent who sailed a nineteenth-century whaler, it came to be known in

recent times as the Bill Smith house, home to a twentieth-century guy who catered clambakes.

Captain Fordham is long departed. Bill Smith passed away in 2002 – at home at No. 86, in his sleep; four years later his house mate and younger brother Mark died. As of 2007, the old house itself was dead and gone – in a single autumn day, the sprawling edifice was toppled and hauled away.

In its place quickly rose a replica of its former self – at least as it appears from the street. The tidy new house was conceived by the property’s latest owners, Gabrielle (“Grey”) and Michael Hirschfeld of New York, aided by the vision of architect Patrick Ahearn and the handiwork of the builders at Colonial Reproductions, both in Edgartown. Fans of the Bill Smith house sing praises for the “restoration.” Hardly a passerby would guess that No. 86 is a brand-new build. Unless perhaps he’s a Smith.

No. 86 belonged to Mary West Simpson in 1934, when her four-year-old grandson Bill Smith moved in with his parents and siblings. Bill’s brother Nelson was the eldest of the brood, which eventually grew to nine. Today Nelson is the unofficial family historian. “I’m more family-oriented than the rest,” says the re-

Facing: Old-growth pine flooring, antique window glass, and historic furnishings help make the house feel like a restoration.





The Hirschfelds, from left, Natasha, Ned, Gabrielle ("Grey"), and Michael, relax in their backyard, which is next door to the Smith house they rent out.

tired mariner and long-time pilot of the On Time ferry to Chappaquiddick. He still calls Edgartown home. Nelson cherished the old house. Grey Hirschfeld cherished the old house too, long before she ever had a notion she would own it. Nelson and Grey each have their love stories, told here in their own words.

Nelson

Grandmother got a really good buy. She bought the whole block along High Street, from South Summer to School Street, for \$3,000 in 1903. There was an old lady living there – either the wife or the mother of the captain who built the house – and the deal was that my grandmother had to take care of her for as long as she lived. Grandmother was very good at that. I don't believe the lady lived more than a couple of years after grandmother bought the place.

My mother, Marguerite Gertrude Simpson Smith, was born in the house in 1904. She got a good education – went to the Bridgewater Normal School and then taught at the Oak Bluffs School. My father, Stanley Marcus Smith, came from the Vineyard Haven Smiths. Our ancestor John Smith arrived here in 1642, even before the Mayhews, with the original English land

Facing: Architect Patrick Ahearn reworked the inside layout, including moving the stairs to the middle of the house, for better traffic flow.

grant. He became magistrate of both Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket.

Dad ran the waterworks in Vineyard Haven. Later he was the Edgartown chief of police. Mother was three months pregnant with me before she even told my grandparents she was married. We lived all over Edgartown – in the house that's now the Point Way Inn on Main Street, then up in the Planting Field Way area. When I was eight or nine years old, we moved into grandmother's house on High Street. It was just three of us kids then – me, my sister Mary, and my brother Bill.

Grey

I've been coming to the Vineyard on vacation my whole life, since 1965. When I was a child, my mother and I would always walk past the Smith house. I loved the blue shutters, and I liked pecking through the bay window and seeing the room with the piano.

My husband and I started coming to the Island with our own family about twenty years ago. For a couple of summers, we rented a house across High Street from the Smith house. We always eyed this one special house at the corner of High and School streets. Then in 2004, we saw a real estate ad in the Vineyard Gazette with a photo of the house, and we said, "That's it!" We grabbed the opportunity to purchase it. It looked like an



The kitchen, with antique European accent tiles, is now on the east side of the house to take advantage of the morning sunshine.



The house reconstruction included creating a glass wall between the dining and living areas to allow more natural light into the interior.

old house, but it was actually built in 1978 in what used to be the Smiths' backyard.

We ended up rebuilding the house after we learned it had some structural issues. It was a "spec" house that wasn't well built in the first place. It's about three-and-a-half feet taller than it used to be, and we added clapboards and a porch. Otherwise, it's basically the same house on the original foundation. We call it the Secret Garden House, because it's sort of hidden.

Mark Smith was a nice next-door neighbor. He was the last one living in the Smith house after his mother passed and then his brother Bill. He allowed us to put up a fence between our house and his. Unfortunately, Mark died suddenly just a couple of years after we bought our house.

The following year, we learned that the Smith house was on the market. Apparently, the family had tried to hold onto it but couldn't. That was the house I always really loved. Someone already had a bid on it – a hedge-fund guy from Greenwich, Connecticut, I heard. Since the house was in such poor condition, and since it sat outside the Historic District, we wondered: What if the new owner tears it down and builds something totally inappropriate? So we quickly outbid the other buyer and bought the Smith house ourselves. It was kind of a scary move, since we had just put a lot of money into the other house, but we had every intention of saving the Smith house and restoring it.

Nelson

My grandparents, parents, and all nine of us kids lived in the house together. Five boys and four girls. My grandfather was the night watchman in Edgartown for about thirty years. My brother George died when he was just five or six. He got hold of some pills and swallowed them, thinking they were candy. I don't think my father ever got over it.

We had a huge living room and dining room. The girls all had separate bedrooms, but the boys all shared – except me. I had my own room most of the time, because I was the oldest and I worked. It was tough on my father, feeding our whole gang. So when I was about eleven, I got a farm job, milking cows and delivering eggs and so on. I made two bucks a week. Later I worked at First National Stores in Vineyard Haven. If my job started at six a.m., my mother would make sure I was on my feet by five. She would serve me hot cereal and milk.

She was a wonderful piano and organ player. Used to play by ear. After the house was emptied, the piano was left inside. Nobody in the family wanted it.

Grandma used to rent out rooms when she first bought the house. It had an old-fashioned outhouse back then. Probably got electricity sometime in the early 1900s. We used to have a beautiful porch out front, and I remember Grandma sitting out there in her rocking chair and watching the cars go by. She lived to be eighty-four.



Donaroma's in Edgartown landscapes both the Smith house and the Hirschfelds' next door.

Our backyard had a two-car garage and a tool shed. I remember the shed was loaded with old whaling equipment. There was also a walrus tusk and a chessboard in there. They probably once belonged to Captain Fordham, who sold the property to my grandmother. I told my grandparents, "You're never going to use it," and I donated it all to the Historical Society [now the Martha's Vineyard Museum] for them. They sent me a nice letter.

Mom sold the lot on the School Street end of the block in the seventies, after one of my brothers hit her up for a big loan. She sold it to a lawyer for about \$25,000. She probably could have gotten more like \$200,000.

About twenty-five years ago, a leak sprung in the galvanized roof over the porch. My brother Bill tore the whole porch down. Mom was angry as hell; the house was her family inheritance. Mike, my youngest brother, was upset too. He had put a lot of money into the house, getting the roof and the chimneys re-done. He had grown up in the house from the time he was born.

Grey

We had two conservation specialists come in who said, "Well, you could save the house." They said it with a wince. We would have had to lift the house and build a foundation, but they didn't think the house was strong enough to withstand the lifting. They also said the plumbing was shot, the electricity



A pitched ceiling and an abundance of windows, including a stained-glass antique Grey found in Maine, give an airy feeling to this upstairs bedroom.



The architectural detailing of the built-in cupboards and bookcase surrounding an upstairs fireplace contribute to the room's period atmosphere.



The Greek revival house, shown here from High Street, rises just a story and a half, which was more typical of a midshipman's house than a captain's.

was shot, the heating system was shot.

So once again, we decided to knock down a house. I had mixed feelings about it. There was so much personal history there. Michael Smith told us his mother used to crawl out of a certain window to read when she was a child. He gave us a photo of the house from the 1940s. He told us about an identical "twin" house on Fuller Street and even a possible triplet somewhere else in town.

Pat Ahearn was our architect for both houses. For the second rebuild, I drew my "wish" house, and then Pat would figure out how to make it happen. We had a wonderful partnership; I wore him down redoing the first house. Bucko [supervisor Walter DeLarusso] from Colonial Reproductions had a real eye for things too, like the replication of the original molding and the addition of wainscoting in the main hallway.

We aimed to duplicate the look of the old house from the street while bumping out the rear of the house for more square footage. We added a bay at the rear to balance the bay I love in the front. We also added a full, finished basement. With the other house, I couldn't swing the addition of an eat-in kitchen, screened-in porch, or swimming pool, but I could have those things here.

And I wanted glass. It's a very sunny property, but the old

house was dark inside. We glassed-in the wall and transom between the living room and dining room to bring in more light. We put the kitchen to the eastern end of the property: the lightest morning spot in Edgartown. Pat contributed a lot of changes to the layout – to make the house more functional – like relocating the staircase to the center of the house. My son is 6'7", and he practically had to crawl up the straight, old staircase on his knees.

The old house was uninsulated, and there was a big oil heating unit in each room. Now we have a propane furnace and regular electricity as well as solar panels for supplemental heat and power. With an antique-looking house, you have to balance your energy choices between looks and the right way to live on this planet.

I wanted to incorporate as many antiques as possible, to preserve the historic feel. We salvaged and incorporated some of the beams from the old house and the mercury doorknobs. And I found a lot of things on eBay: The newel post on the staircase is from Maine. A stained-glass window, also from Maine, was made in 1870; it's the same age as the old house. The fireplace surround is from Connecticut and was made around 1890. Pat had a source of old-growth pine for the floors. We had the front windows custom-made of wavy, antiqued glass to replicate the

look of the old windows in the old house. I sourced a lot of decorative early-twentieth-century tiles, mainly from old European manors, for the baths, the kitchen, the pool house, and the pool. And the Smiths offered us the old Eastlake piano.

Tim Rush [of Rush & Fisher in Edgartown] called me one day and asked, "Do you know your house is on eBay?" It turned out to be a painting of the original house by Ruth Appeldoorn Mead, one of the founders of [Edgartown's Old] Sculpin Gallery. The painting now hangs in the study, where the music room used to be. It's still my favorite room.

Somebody said, "How about doing the shutters in green?" I said absolutely not. We wanted the Smith house shutters. We had the color matched exactly.

Nelson

When Mom passed away in ninety-eight, the house was left to all the remaining siblings. After Mark and Billy died, there were just four of us: me, Mike, Carol, and Mary. Carol and Mary were both married into the Larsen family and lived up in Chilmark. They didn't care about the house that much. But Mike and I wanted to keep it forever as the family home. It was so roomy, well built, and easy to heat. But none of us really could afford to keep it. So we all finally agreed to sell, thinking that the buyers were going to fix the house up. The house sold for less than it could have, probably, but one family member was pretty hard up and needed the money.

I wouldn't mind visiting the new house. I just wish [the new owners] had restored the old house. It probably could have been done more reasonably and better. It's still pretty but not as pretty as before. Too many zigs and zags in it. We had limited shrubbery on the property. You could see the beautiful portico out front.

Grey

We have two children. Our son is twenty, and our daughter is twenty-four. Someday they may want to use the Smith house to vacation with their own families and friends. When you open the gate in the fence, the two properties are more like a compound, surrounding the pool. In the meantime, we only use the High Street house. We rent the Smith house to summer tenants. No one in the family has ever lived in the Smith house, although I've sat inside the screened-in porch and used the pool.

So many people say to us, "I'm so glad you saved this house." They have no idea it's new. Mike Smith came to see it when it was finished. One of the Smith granddaughters asked to see it too. She loved it. I've done some searching on the Internet about the genealogy of the Smiths, just to learn more about this old Vineyard family whose property we inherited.

To us, it will always be the Smith house. ♦

The Hirschfelds first bought the house seen at far right, and when they later purchased the neighboring Smith house, architect Pat Ahearn saw an opportunity to create an inner, communal court and pool.

