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[ SPECIAL SECTION: Best of the Vineyard ]

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# Martha's Vineyard

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# Menemsha's oldest house

The more it changed, the more the Crosby house stayed the same



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PHOTOGRAPHS

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**N**EIGHBORS SUCH as Chilmark librarian Cathy Thompson were quietly worried when renovations began two years ago on “the Nickerson place” – Menemsha’s oldest house, and the house where she spent many summers, and later, a few full years.

Thompson’s grandparents had bought the farmhouse in the 1950s, and she says of the place: “My whole family – my mother and father, grandparents, uncles, aunts and some fifteen first cousins – would all sit on the screen porch and watch the sunset. We ate lobsters in the kitchen and played croquet on the lawn. . . . The house lent itself to a wonderful, barefoot kind of existence.”

Built in 1724 by members of the Norton and Mayhew families, the house was later bought by a mariner named Nickerson, whose name stuck to the property. The Nickerson place is a six-bedroom house off the Menemsha Inn Road, built into a protected hollow commanding panoramic views of the fishing village and harbor. Unassuming and elegant in its simplicity, the house consists of a central section from which various wings, added later, extend. With its small but functional rooms, fieldstone foundation, pockmarked floors and enormous hearth in a

ground level chamber that may once have been a fishermen’s tavern or chandlery or both, the building looks and feels like “old Vineyard.”

At a time when it’s not unknown for new property owners on the Island to tear down existing structures and replace them with starter castles, it’s understandable that when the backhoes rolled up to the Nickerson house, purchased by Player and Bobbie Crosby in the fall of 2000, the community held its breath. Now, with renovations nearly complete, neighbors are exhaling with a long, collective sigh of satisfaction and relief. Lots of work has been done on the house, and you can hardly tell what’s changed.

“What the clients wanted most,” says architect Kathy Joba of Jill Neubauer Architects of Falmouth and Vineyard Haven, “was to preserve the authenticity of the building.”

“The house as it was had a very quiet, wonderful feel to it,” agrees Bobbie Crosby. “We didn’t want to change that. I love old houses; it’s that simple.”

But not everything about the old Nickerson place was lovable. “When we first walked into this house, it smelled awful,” says Kathy Joba. The house is situated

in a spot with high ground water, and there were streams running under – and through – the basement. Decades, if not centuries, of moisture were causing the house to rot from the bottom up. Powder post beetles were chewing through timbers and floorboards. Mice, rats, mosquitoes and dozens of snakes had taken up residence. “There were more unwanted tenants in this place than you could count,” a caretaker is said to have remarked.

Bobbie Crosby acknowledges that the house’s challenges were evident from the start. “The floors were soft,” she says, “and the house was basically in the middle of a swamp, but it just had a feeling. Buying a house is all about chemistry: You walk in, and it either works for you, or it doesn’t. This one worked for us.”

So: The first order of business was to remedy what was causing the house to decay. Everything possible was done outside to keep water away from the foundation, and a system was developed to pipe remaining water neatly into a subfloor basement drain from which it is directed out the other side of the house. Inside the basement, dehumidifiers were put to work, and the stone walls were freshly painted. All of the first





Opposite: The Nickerson Place after its facelift. Left, the interior before sills were rebuilt; floorboards were taken up, numbered, stored and replaced. Above, after the renovation: not a huge difference, but that's the point! A new door to the kitchen was created allowing a better flow of light.





The kitchen, renovated forty years ago, was completely gutted. Windows were added, though they were built to be so identical to the old ones that you can't see the difference. Counters are soapstone, a material used in older homes.



floor floorboards were carefully taken up, labeled and replaced once the rotting sills beneath them had been removed and new ones installed. After a busy nine months, a great deal had happened and the house looked, well, maybe a bit cleaner.

"You do all this work, and at the end nothing looks different," remarks Joba. "That would be daunting to a lot of people."

Indeed.

Fortunately, the next phases of the project were more fun and more visible. First, the outside of the house got a facelift. Its roof was reshingled, chimney rebuilt, trim replaced and some exposed foundation walls were redone.

Next, the house's relationship to the outdoors needed improvement. Old houses, notes Joba, didn't take advantage of the outdoors in the ways our contemporary lifestyles look for. Outdoor terracing for recreation and relaxation was virtually unknown, and view or no view, windows were often small and limited in number to keep houses warmer in winter. At the Nickerson place, the architects worked with landscaper Kristen Reimann to create several levels of terraces for patios, a grilling area, flower beds and an outdoor shower. Inside, a number of subtle changes were made to bring more light into the house and take greater advantage of the view. Windows were added in the master bedroom, the kitchen and elsewhere, but so well matched are they to the old windows that even if you look closely, it's difficult to tell which is which.

One change that will have a large impact on the owners' daily lives was the refurbishing of the mudroom. As the most frequently used door opens into this room, most people entering the house pass through it. A "before" photo would show a dark, musty space, cramped by the unsightly washer and dryer. Now the appliances

have moved elsewhere to a hall, giving the space a more open and welcoming feeling. A door with window panes has been added directly across from the main one, so that the first thing one now sees when stepping into the house is a stunning view of the water.

The other rooms to be considerably overhauled were the kitchen and bathrooms. They "needed attention," according to Joba. Bobbie Crosby guffaws when she hears this. "We totally gutted them," she says. These rooms had been renovated in the 1950s and 1960s; now they have been redone to fit better with the older era of the house.

The kitchen has top-of-the-line modern appliances, but with its old wood floors, white cabinets with pewter pulls and subtle lighting fixtures, it retains a feeling of simplicity suited to an old farmhouse. The bathrooms have wooden floors, basic fixtures, wainscoting and unobtrusive tiling around the showers and baths. They're small, and there was never a thought given to enlarging them.

"The owners didn't want double sinks, Jacuzzis, and twenty-foot walk-in closets," says Joba. "They have a great perspective—the way they want to live here is more the way people used to enjoy the Vineyard."

Whenever there was a design choice to make, says Jill Neubauer, "we always went for the quieter one." Her firm prides itself on tailoring its design work to what a particular house or building calls for, and with an old house like this one, she says, "You don't want to do anything that raises a red flag indicating that someone came and renovated the place."

Everyone involved with this project seems to have shared a respect for the essence of the house, and they all worked together to preserve it. It was a sort of love-fest of like minds. Bobbie Crosby says: "Kathy and Jill understood that simplicity was what it was

all about." Jill praises the Crosbys' "quiet, classic good taste" and describes them as "the types of clients that, when you finish the job, you really mourn their loss." And everyone raves about the builders—John Early and his foreman, Tim Barnett. "Not every builder could do a job like this with the same level of patience and respect for something that is old," Kathy says. "It takes a certain temperament."

"The character of the house just screamed out at us," says Bobbie. "I've spent forty years of my life coming to the Vineyard; the last thing I'd want to do would be to tear up an old house like this." ♦

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