

Happily Ever After

A renovation strips away old additions to bring coastal New England charm to a family-filled Branford cottage.

BY JENNIFER CARMICHAEL



A simpler roofline and a welcoming front porch and second-story balcony are a coastal treat for the eyes.



For the past 20 years, Michele and Michael Heffernan have spent summers in Branford, where they grew up. Friends in high school, the couple reunited after college, married and settled in Hingham, Mass. Before having their first child, they bought a second home in the Pine Orchard section of Branford to be close to family and friends.

“A number of families from Hingham go to the Cape during the summer,” says Michele. “Hingham can get very quiet. That’s when we’d go down to Branford. About a year before having our firstborn, we looked to buy a house somewhere near the shore and happened upon a house near the Pine Orchard Yacht & Country Club. We were thinking long term, having more kids, and spending summers down here where we could enjoy more time with friends and family, as well as tennis, swimming and everything the club and close-knit neighborhood offered.”

Before the Heffernans purchased the property in 1998, the 2,600-square-foot, late-1890s house had undergone numerous additions and alterations that had not been in keeping with a New England cottage aesthetic. The couple loved it nonetheless—gray vinyl siding with white plastic columns and all—and lived with it as is. But after 20 years, it was time for a makeover.

“We were so happy and grateful to have a place to

come and enjoy, even though the house needed significant updating,” says Michele, who notes that the couple’s three children, now young adults, all made lasting friendships with the neighborhood kids and family friends. “We limited their summer commitments in Hingham so that they could spend as much time as possible in Branford. It’s just what we did. Even today, the kids look forward to coming down with their friends from Hingham and new friends from college.”

The homeowners enlisted the help of Joe Sepot of Joseph Sepot Architects, a full-service architectural firm based in Branford. Sepot has worked on numerous homes in the seaside village of Pine Orchard. In fact, he’s designing and building his own home nearby.

The Heffernans had just finished a kitchen renovation completed by Bill Murray of the Branford-based Murray Co., who continued as the contractor for the full renovation mapped out by Sepot. The new look of the kitchen was the impetus behind making more



(above) A bright first-floor living room is blessed with a fieldstone fireplace, which was retained for the renovation.

(at left) Another relaxed seating area sits alongside the living room, the two spaces separated by a wall with cutouts.



The attic was converted into a family room, and finished with white painted shiplap, custom cabinetry, and a tongue-and-groove wood ceiling.



The en suite bedroom was expanded and reconfigured, and now includes custom millwork and built-ins. The redesign also features French doors that open onto the second-story balcony. Full-height windows with lower-sash shutters were installed to enhance daylight and waterfront views.



A wooden deck made way for a lagoon-shape bluestone patio and pergola, with an outdoor kitchen and firepit.



A bathroom offers a combination of privacy and pleasant outdoor views.

improvements. Plus, thanks to a fallen tree, it was time to fix a leaking roof and the front porch.

“Typical of many of the homes in the area, the form of the original 1890s house was unrecognizable due to multiple additions,” says Sepot. “I suggested removing the additions that were made to the front facade of the house during renovation. This included the removal of a dilapidated, over-scaled, upper-story wrap-around porch and addressing the roofline for structural as well as aesthetic reasons.

Sepot sought to unify the fragmented rooflines facing the street, as well as work in a front porch. “By reconfiguring the main ridgeline, a cohesive elevation emerged that allowed for the creation of more usable third-floor living space and the redesign of the primary bedroom suite to better meet our client’s needs.”

Sepot’s efforts would pay off. The Connecticut chapter of the American Institute of Architects recognized the home in 2022 with an Alice Washburn Merit Award in the additions/new construction category. Named for the distinguished Connecticut designer and builder of the 1920s, the program acknowledges excellence in traditional house design through the thoughtful adaptation of tradition to address 21st-century needs. Jurors noted that the new house design “corrects many of the original design mistakes and clumsy details. Nice use of materials.”

The homeowners felt the same way. “Joe wanted to redo the roofline, and we completely trusted him,” says Michele. “He has such a good eye. It looks like a completely different house — much more in keeping with New England style.”

Large, high-performance windows replaced smaller casement windows, and gray-stained eastern white cedar shingles clad the exterior. Additional details include new copper gutters, a new entry door, and light fixtures. At the back of the house, Madison-based TEC Landscape Design and Tony’s Masonry of Branford replaced a wooden deck with a large bluestone patio and pergola, complete with an outdoor kitchen and firepit.

Inside, Sepot reconfigured the first floor and added a foyer. On the second floor, the primary bedroom was originally two rooms with a wall between them, and offered little closet space and no bathroom. Expanded and reconfigured, it now includes an en suite bathroom, custom millwork, and built-ins for storage. The redesign also



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features French doors that open onto the second-story balcony. Full-height windows with lower sash shutters were installed to maximize daylight and waterfront views.

“It’s completely changed—so beautiful, cozy and organized with lots of nooks and crannies where I can store things out of sight,” says Michele, a child psychologist who stopped practicing after the birth of their first child. “I have my favorite children’s book on one of the bookshelves along with others to read to future grandchildren. I’m not expecting them anytime soon, but I’m thinking ahead! The window seat is the size of a twin bed with the idea that grandchildren could someday sleep here too. It includes storage with drawers underneath. We maximized space wherever we could.”

The new roofline offered the chance to recreate the third-floor attic. Two small bedrooms stayed intact, but a large room, used as a bonus space where kids can hang out, was gutted and redone. Turquoise carpeting and poor-quality wainscoting were taken out, making way for white painted shiplap in a high-gloss finish, custom cabinetry, and a tongue-and-groove wood ceiling. Floors were redone in red oak and two seating areas both open into beds for guests to stay overnight.

“You go through the motions and demands of a year-long renovation, but it’s a distant memory once you get to the end and see a job well planned and well done,” says Michele. “We’re lucky because we have the best of both worlds. We’ve made life-long friends in Hingham, primarily raising our kids there, and we have very deep friendships and family in Branford.” ■

Every home has a story

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