Farmhouse Retreat

Architect John B. Murray restores an 1850s Greek Revival Farmhouse for his young family.

Text by J. Robert Ostergaard  Photos by Jonathan Wallen
Variable roof heights and angles enliven John Murray’s farmhouse exterior and reveal the orderly and organic configuration of the new additions. With a nod to agrarian buildings in the area, Murray chose a lead-coated copper roof for the porch. The bluestone terrace and stone wall were chosen for their natural, rustic aesthetics. The stone wall is dry set in the traditional manner, but the top course is mortised because Murray knew his children would be climbing and playing on it.
Gertrude Stein once wrote, “A house in the country is not the same as a country house.” It is a subtle distinction that architect John B. Murray can appreciate. Shortly after founding his New York–based architectural firm, John B. Murray Architect, LLC, in 1997, Murray and his family were seeking just the sort of country house Stein had in mind.

“Initially, we were looking for property to build on,” Murray says. “But in the course of looking, we found this particular property, which had a mid-nineteenth-century farmhouse on it. So we quickly changed course and decided to do a restoration rather than a new construction.”

Murray has a reputation for refined and gracious designs and renovations of fashionable residences—from grand country estates to New York City apartments and town houses. But for his Chatham, New York, country house, Murray would concentrate his talents on a smaller and more personal scale. What makes this 2,000-square-foot farmhouse most noteworthy is how this owner/architect was able to simultaneously restore its historical integrity while gently imposing a sense of design on the structure and incorporating the contemporary features his young family needed.

Restoring the Past

Flipping through prerestoration snapshots in Murray’s office, it’s hard to spot the home’s few original details. Indeed, it seems unlikely that very many significant features could have survived the injuries and depredations of time. And what remains must surely lie hidden beneath decades of imprudent alterations and expedient fixes.

“In the 1960s and ’70s there had been modifications that, well, you can probably imagine,” Murray says with a shake of his head. Some of the more egregious offenses included drop ceilings and fake wood paneling. “And there were hollow-core doors everywhere,” he says. “But the casings were original, and the mortises for the iron hinges were still present.” Murray points to the windows, noting that several retained their antique glass, and others still had their wood trim and paneled

Opposite The front entry hall is compact and welcoming. Simple, honest features, such as the 7-inch white pine floor and six-over-six single-pane window, hint at the care taken in restoring the home’s many historical details. Below To give the entrance more weight and a stronger composition, a window from the kitchen was relocated over the newly installed antique door. The carriage light adds balance. From left to right Gabriel, Jesse, John, Luke, and Antoinette.
bases intact. “So here were just the kernels of this really sweet design, and it was exciting for us to try and bring it back.”

Antique doors—located by the contractor—were hand-cut and fitted into the openings with iron hinges secured from an architectural salvage yard. Wood single-pane storm windows and bronze screen sashes took the place of aluminum triple sashes. (Murray changes out screens for storm windows each fall.) The asphalt roof was replaced by cedar shakes. New gutters and leaders of lead-coated copper were installed, the same material chosen for the roof of a porch addition. Paint was removed from the 7-inch white pine floor in the entry hall as well as from the stairs’ newel-post and banister. Where the floors had been damaged, dutchmans were cut—a time-honored repair method.

Appropriate new elements were introduced during the restoration, too, but these were informed by existing features. One notable exception was the addition of cast-iron radiators. Previously, the home had a forced-air heating system, and the second floor was unheated. Murray installed 10 refurbished radiators from a Hudson, New York, salvage yard, placing them mainly opposite each other at the outside corners of the rooms rather than directly under windows. The result improved heating throughout the house while enhancing the character of each room.

Establishing a Sense of Design

Although the house is ostensibly a Greek Revival, it owes much of its design to the region’s farmhouse vernacular and to sheer necessity. Unlike a traditional Greek Revival, for example, the front door is not on the gable end. The gable faces a steep western slope, so the door simply could not be located there.

“There was a certain quirkiness with no particular way to resolve it but to go with it,” Murray says of the entry. He installed an antique door with an overdoor and transom, added a carriage light, and transferred a window from the kitchen to a spot above the entry, balancing out another window on the second story.

“What we were trying to do was establish a nicer compositional feeling at that entrance,” Murray says. “The placement of the window above and the addition of the transom give it a bit more weight.”

Opposite With the creation of the larger living room, the farmhouse’s family room took on a new role as the Murray’s dining area. Below During renovations, Murray discovered the original location of the basement door—adjacent to the fireplace—and returned it to its rightful place. Here, as in all the downstairs rooms, color is found on the walls, while the trim is kept creamy white. Upstairs the conceit is reversed, and the trim becomes the color but the walls are white.
“Everything about the kitchen was studied in terms of balance and in respect to the massing,” Murray explains. The sink is centered under windows in the porch wall, and the cabinets are placed in symmetrical relation to each other. Period details include the schoolhouse light fixtures and ceiling fan, which are suspended from the tray ceiling. Kitchen counters are Kirby stone from the Lake District of England. The satin nickel finish of the cabinet hardware is “not deferring to a period look,” Murray says, “but we thought there is something of a fresh look to it that works in the kitchen.”
The new kitchen and porch addition on the house’s eastern side fulfilled a number of design goals. It offers much-needed living space and adds compositionally to a sense of organic growth occurring through the years. Additionally, the new wing activates this end of the house and connects it more closely to a small stone outbuilding on the property.

Inside, Murray opened up the northern views by installing windows on either side of a new fireplace in the living room. The fireplace was built of old brick, and the fireplace tools, spark arrester, and andirons were all fashioned by the head blacksmith at Hancock Shaker Village in nearby Pittsfield, Massachusetts. In the family room, Murray returned the basement door to its original position, adjacent to the fireplace. The new fireplace surround incorporates this door, reintroducing an idiosyncratic element that had been lost decades earlier.

Contemporary Sensibilities
Among the challenges facing anyone renovating an old home are finding ways to utilize the existing space better and—if necessary—to enlarge the space appropriately. As home buyers, the Murrays were attracted to the structure’s compact, tidy, and uncomplicated design, and it was important to them to preserve it. But as an architect, Murray also recognized there was a need to update the building to accommodate a contemporary family—in this case, his own.

The house as they found it was a simple L shape. On the first floor, a family room was located to the east of the entry and a dining room, small kitchen, and bath were located to the north. A beam between the dining room and kitchen was replaced by a steel beam, and the newly opened space created one large living area. The new kitchen, with adjoining porch, bath, and mudroom, was then constructed at the rear of the house. The kitchen opens onto the dining room, which, as Murray explains, “for all intent, has become our family room.”

The new kitchen offered an opportunity for Murray to flex his creative muscle and even play a bit. “I was very attentive on this layout,” he says, “partly because it was fun.” For example, he literally raised the roof in the kitchen, specifying a ten-foot six-inch tray ceiling. “Elsewhere the house has eight-foot two-inch ceilings, and I felt it was important to have a contrast in terms of the volume of the room.”
Mason Hill
Farmhouse

Second Floor
1 BEDROOM
2 GUEST BEDROOM
3 STUDY
4 BATHROOM
5 BEDROOM
6 HALL

First Floor
1 STONE ENTRANCE
2 HALL
3 LIVING ROOM
4 DINING ROOM
5 KITCHEN
6 MUDROOM
7 BATHROOM
8 PORCH
Murray restored an outbuilding on the property as well. Today it is used as a garden shed.

Murray carefully considered how the furnishings and fixtures would fit into this volume, too. “Everything about the kitchen was studied in terms of balance and in respect to the massing,” he explains. The stove and hood form a center point at the rear of the room, with an upper cabinet and a window placed symmetrically at either side. Cabinets are balanced on either side of the doors to the dining room.

Other updates and improvements appealing to a modern homeowner’s sensibilities were undertaken upstairs. Closets were enlarged, and two small bathrooms were combined to make a large one with a standing shower and tub. The tiny fourth bedroom was converted into a study by removing the doorway to the hall and making the room accessible only from the master bedroom. Murray erected a small interior window in the study overlooking the stairs. “When I’m at the desk, I can see the hall and still be engaged in what’s going on,” he says.

These alterations were carefully enacted to preserve the building’s character and what Murray refers to as the “simplicity and manageability” of the house. “My wife [Antoinette] says the house was fortunate that we came across it. And there is just something right about regenerating a building like this and knowing there will be those who will enjoy it past us.”

Robert Ostergaard is a freelance writer living in New York.

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Historical Outbuilding

Outbuildings have always been an important component of family farms—whether a barn, toolshed, woodshed, or springhouse. And the Murray’s house is no exception. A small stone building stood a few yards to the east of the house when the Murrays purchased the property, but its charms, not to mention its original purpose, were well hidden. “It may have been a summer kitchen, not a springhouse. It’s really just not clear,” Murray says.

The outbuilding required considerable work to tie it visually to the farmhouse and, simply, to save it. “We had to remove all of the stone and reestablish those walls,” Murray explains.

Because many of the barns in Columbia County had metal roofs, the stone outbuilding was given a lead-coated copper roof, which also matches the roof of the farmhouse’s new porch. “Barn roofs may have originally been tin or zinc, and they may have been painted later. But we wanted something that stays in a more natural fashion,” Murray says. The shed doors had been sheathed in boards, and when Murray’s team removed the sheathing, they discovered the original doors beneath, Murray had the doors refinished and reglazed with antique glass, like those in the main house.

To establish a stronger overall design to the structure, Murray specified a small two-over-two window in the gable end, just above the doors, with a carriage light below.

Although the stone shed is no longer used for major agrarian pursuits, Murray’s property still yields corn, oats, and hay, which are harvested by a local farmer. Today Murray is concentrating on ways to enhance the farm’s productivity, ensuring the historical use of his property is preserved along with its historical architecture.
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**EXTERIOR**

Windows:
original (double hung windows
with original antique glass)
new (single glazed double hung
windows manufactured by Brosco)
www.brosco.com
Circle 15 on the resource card.

Paint: Benjamin Moore
www.benjaminmoore.com
Circle 16 on the resource card.

Roof: cedar shakes and lead coated
copper standing seam

Siding: cedar clapboard (painted)

Exterior Finishes:
All exterior metal finishes (gutters,
leaders, and flashing) are lead coated
copper

Exterior Lighting Fixtures:
Post & House Lanterns were manufac-
tured by Classic Lighting Devices
www.classiclightingdevices.com
Circle 17 on the resource card.

**INTERIORS: KITCHEN**

Cabinetry:
custom manufactured by Peter
Cosola Incorporated with antique
restoration glass

Stone:
3 cm thick Kirby stone with honed
finish from Lake District in England