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Back to Basics

A Pennsylvania couple turns back the clock on their 18th-century farmhouse by removing multiple layers of misguided updates.

STORY BY CLARE MARTIN ♦ PHOTOS BY ANGLE EYE PHOTOGRAPHY

When they first happened upon it, Mike and Kathy Dolan's 1776 stone farmhouse wasn't much to look at. In fact, the yard was so overgrown with brush that Mike couldn't even see the house from the road. Yet, having just lost a bid on another nearby house, he was compelled by the "For Sale" sign to pull into the driveway.

"It was a total mess," he remembers. White stucco encased the stone façade; inside, the house's simple colonial-era features had been covered with cheap paneling, drywall, and carpet. The house had been long neglected and vacant for several months, and the attic was filled with black walnuts brought in by invading squirrels. Mike and Kathy even glimpsed a dead mouse in the bathtub. But the couple had always dreamed of owning an old house, so Kathy's directive was clear: "Don't let this one get away."

Determined not to lose out on another bid, the Dolans made a bold move, put



LEFT: The Dolans painted the living room's new fireplace surrounds in historic colonial-era colors. **ABOVE:** To complement the newly uncovered stone façade, the breezeway's vinyl siding was replaced with salvaged hand-hewn log siding.



BEFORE

LEFT & BELOW: Kevin McGinnis removed unsympathetic paneling and created new fireplace walls. The door at left hides an office cubby with the family computer. **OPPOSITE, TOP:** In the dining room, plasterer Jack Thompson maintained the traditional curves around the windows and doors, called “witches’ corners.” **OPPOSITE, BOTTOM:** When Mike and Kathy bought the house, the kitchen had been split into two rooms; they opened it back up by removing a pantry.



AFTER



PRODUCTS: Living/Dining Room: New hardware, Heritage Metalworks; Antique hardware, Monroe Coldren & Son; Fireplace surrounds, McGinnis Millwork; Paint, Authentic Colors of Philadelphia line, Finnaren & Haley; Living room table and chairs, McLimans Furniture Warehouse; Chandeliers, Irvin’s Country Tinware. Master Bedroom: Four-poster bed, McLimans Furniture Warehouse. Exterior: Windows, Marvin Windows & Doors; Shutters, Vixen Hill; Stone restoration, Ambris Residential Masonry.

ting an offer down without getting a home inspection first. The house was soon theirs, and Mike immediately realized that the problems ran deeper than inappropriate updates and resident vermin—not only was the roof leaking, but the heating system was on its last legs, too. “I sat down on the stairs,” Mike recalls, “and thought, ‘What the hell have I done?’”

Digging In

Despite the major challenges that lay ahead, the Dolans remained excited about their purchase. “I couldn’t sleep all night

after our initial walk-through because I was envisioning its potential,” says Kathy. The couple was fortunate to have a valuable ally—Mike’s brother, Jeff, an architect who specializes in old houses with the firm Period Architecture Ltd. Having already sold their previous house, Mike and Kathy moved in and slowly began removing layers of updates to reveal the house’s remaining original features.

The living-room ceiling, for example, had been covered with layers of drywall, a band-aid approach to help stave off failure of the original plaster, likely caused by the house settling over time. “When we started peeling it back, we found these beautiful joists,” says Jeff. “I couldn’t imagine why anyone would want to cover them up.” They cleaned the joists with water and a

brush to remove built-up dirt and debris without affecting the wood’s time-worn character.

Also original to the living room are the twin fireplaces flanking the space, which had been remodeled with unsympathetic surrounds. Jeff used his knowledge of similar homes of the same era to design replacements. Although today the room is one large, open space, “we think this would have originally been a two-bay, three-room house,” he explains, “so they would have done different treatments for the fireplaces on each side of the building.” For the dining side of the room, cabinetmaker Kevin McGinnis (Mike and Jeff’s cousin) made a raised-panel surround, while the living-room side features tongue-and-groove paneling.



ABOVE: The master bedroom's exposed stone wall contains a flue for the dining-room fireplace, which was too damaged to save. **LEFT:** A restored antique door latch by Monroe Coldren & Son adds a note of authenticity to the stairwell door.



FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- Ambris Residential Masonry:**
(215) 426-9098
- Finnaren & Haley:** fhpaint.com
- Heritage Metalworks:** heritage-metalworks.com
- Irvin's Country Tinware:** irvins.com
- Marvin Windows & Doors:** marvin.com
- McGinnis Millwork:** mcginnis-millwork.com
- McLimans Furniture Warehouse:** mclimans.com
- Monroe Coldren & Son:** monroe-coldren.com
- Vixen Hill:** vixenhill.com

Throughout the house, Mike and Jeff made a point to uncover original finishes wherever possible, replacing them with like-minded materials when they encountered unsalvageable deterioration. In the master bedroom, they again peeled back layers of failing plaster, exposing chestnut log joists (along with a few thousand black walnuts stashed by the squirrels who had invaded the house). They replaced the plaster with rough-sawn cedar planks at the attic floor level, which also allowed for extra storage space in the attic.

When removing deteriorated plaster walls, they uncovered stone matching the house's exterior underneath one wall, evidence that the master bedroom and dining room below were a later addition to the house. They left the wall exposed,

and Mike seized the opportunity to drill channels within it to run electrical wires. Plasterer Jack Thompson then re-plastered the bedroom's other three walls with a slightly textured finish. "It would have been easy to put up drywall," says Mike, "but we wanted them refinished like they would have been originally."

Stone Freed

Another major layer that needed to be removed was the white stucco encasing the exterior, which Mike and Jeff suspect was added to avoid having to repoint the historic lime-based mortar. Based on the home's age, Mike guessed that the stucco façade might be harboring stone underneath, but he wasn't quite sure what he'd find when he chipped a piece of it away with a ham-



BEFORE



DURING



AFTER

ABOVE: Removing the stucco from the house's stone exterior took mason Cleveland Ambris three months. Beneath the stucco were pitted fieldstones, accented on the corners by massive irregular stones. **BELOW:** Hardwood floors, beadboard paneling, and traditional décor help the family-room addition blend with the rest of the house.

mer. "On a lot of houses of this period, the corners might be really nice, but the middle might be brick or inferior stone," he explains. After stonemason Cleveland Ambris had removed a full wall's worth of stucco, Mike was relieved to see that the house was a uniform fieldstone with a distinctive pitted texture. "It's almost like lava rock," says Jeff. "I've never seen stone like this before."

Working single-handedly, Ambris carefully chiseled off all the stucco, then repointed all the joints with a lime-based mortar mix based on samples of the old mortar, carefully replicating the original crown point. "The entire process took him about three months," Jeff says.

The windows were another important project—a previous owner had haphazardly fitted off-the-shelf vinyl replacements into the original casings, using 2x4s and trim to compensate for the differences in size. To bring the house back to its original look, Mike selected custom six-over-six wood windows from Marvin, which Kevin helped to fit in the original casings.

The finishing touch for the house's exterior has yet to be added. Forced to

find a quick solution to their leaky roof, Mike and Kathy had it replaced with asphalt shingles when they first moved in, but plan to eventually upgrade to a more period-appropriate cedar shake roof.

Here to Stay

To help the 2,100-square-foot-house better accommodate the Dolans' growing family, Jeff designed a board-and-batten-sided family room addition off the rear of the house. While the addition features new flooring and drywall, the original stone exterior wall remains exposed to connect it to the rest of the building. "We probably spend about 90 percent of our time there," says Mike.

With three kids now, Mike and Kathy plan to expand their living space again; Jeff designed a master-suite addition to fit on top of the mudroom and garage that pays



homage to the style of early 20th-century farmhouse revivalist R. Brognard Okie.

"As our family has grown over the years, we've looked into bigger homes," says Kathy, "but after sinking so much sweat equity into this one, nothing else measures up." 🏠