

narrative of the pink house

“We wanted the old house to reflect its history,” say these owners, “but also to embrace the hearts and artifacts of all the people who once lived here.” Their restoration doesn’t pay tribute to one period. Rather, they added their own story to the narrative.

By Bruce D. Snider | Photographs by Randy O’Rourke



For as long as anyone in Ghent, N. Y., could remember, the big Federal-style farmhouse had been known by its distinctive color. “It was always called the Pink House,” says owner Renee Iacone, a Manhattan-based artist. “I think it had been pink for the past hundred years or so.”

So when Iacone and her investment manager husband, Steve Clearman, bought the house as a weekend residence in 2001, they had no intention of changing that. “We just chose a nicer pink,” she says. And when some needed repairs morphed into an extensive two-year addition and renovation project, the couple took a similar approach, celebrating the farmstead’s layered history while filling out the narrative with colorful new passages of their own.

The oldest part of the house is the dining room, which dates from the 18th century and features a wide-plank wainscot and a Federal-era fireplace mantel. “It was probably the first kitchen,” Iacone says. “The rest of the house [circa 1820] grew piecemeal around that room.” Their renovation project began there, with a deliberately light touch. Except

for some plaster repair and a new coat of paint, Iacone says, “it’s basically the same room it’s always been.” The furnishings, most prominently an early 19th-century dining set, pay homage to the era, but reflect the owners’ impressionistic type of historicism. A landscape by Hudson River School painter John Frederick Kensett hangs above a found-object assembly of wooden clothespins by contemporary sculptor La Wilson, which somehow evokes the same period. A framed paper-cutout piece, by a local artist, suggests a colonial sampler.

Architect Kate Johns helped smooth out kinks in the existing floor plan—removing awkward earlier additions and shifting doorways to improve sight lines and traffic flow—but without breaking with the building’s elegant austerity. Johns also drew a Federal

ABOVE: A pair of new arched openings frames the passage from the center hall to the later side entry. In the fenced garden, the fountain was made from an old granite trough. The stone bust at its center is by a contemporary sculptor from New Mexico.

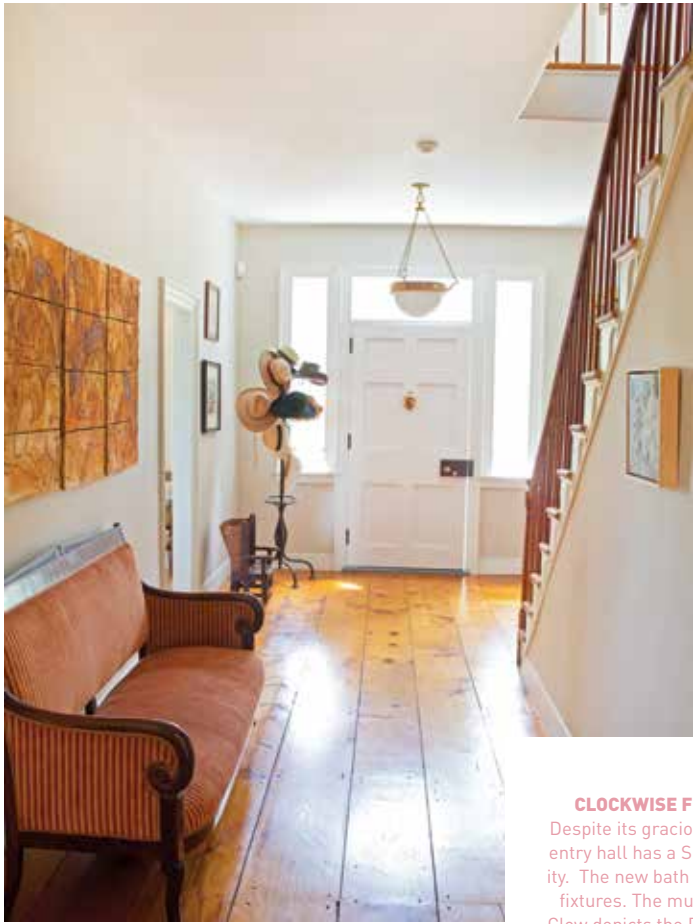


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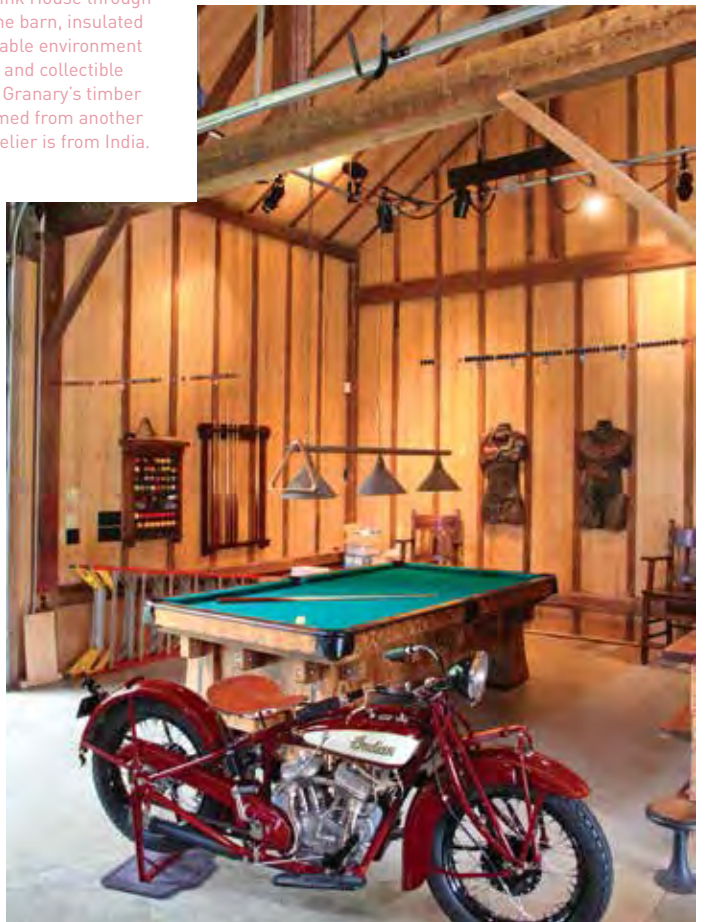
The self-winding pendulum clock that hangs in the new mudroom entry, a revival piece from the turn of the 20th century, was made in Massachusetts.

ADDING IN KIND

Dry-laid brick pavers make a suitable flooring for the new mudroom, which has a simple wainscot and door casings to reflect elements of the original house.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
 Despite its gracious proportions, the entry hall has a Shaker-like simplicity. The new bath is outfitted with old fixtures. The mural by artist Ginny Clow depicts the Pink House through the seasons. In one barn, insulated walls provide a stable environment for both people and collectible motorcycles. The Granary's timber frame was reclaimed from another site. The tin chandelier is from India.





ABOVE: The dining room, dating from the late 18th century, is the oldest part of the house. The early 19th century dining table can be extended by the addition of the drop-leaf table in the corner. The decorative plates are from Sicily.

style restoration for the front door surround, which had been “Victorianized” late in the 19th century. Iacone and Clearman opted to preserve the Victorian side entry and porch, however, even extending the metaphor with a semiformal fenced side garden. “We wanted to maintain a house that illustrated its history,” Iacone explains. “We didn’t want to stop it in time.” The interiors are an inspired mash-up of local antiques, found objects, and artwork by Iacone, her friends, and such notables as Kensett, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Hart Benton.

The sense of an historic house as an evolving entity is perhaps most striking in the new kitchen and mudroom. When Iacone and Clearman bought the house, the kitchen, probably dating from the 1950s, was “like a hallway with linoleum floors and tiny windows,” she says. Its replacement turns back the clock to an imagined moment in the 1930s, with painted wood cabinets, nickel hardware, and linoleum countertops with Monel edging. “We have a restored gas stove that’s probably from 1915,” Iacone

says, “and we kept the farmhouse feeling with a big table at center,” surrounded by classic Windsor chairs. There’s no question that the current owners have added their own stories. Clearman’s hand-built bicycle sits under formal arches in the entry; a modern leather chaise is juxtaposed against a lovely divided-light window in an upstairs hall.

The Pink House’s agrarian heritage is something the couple worked hard to preserve and elaborate upon. “This definitely was a farmhouse,” Clearman says. “And, for being out in the countryside, some farmer had made pretty good money to build a house like this.” But the building was sited on the land in a curious way, with an abrupt drop-off crowding one side of the house, and a steep embankment to the rear. To gain outdoor living space around the house, landscape architect Robert Toole carved away at the embankment to create level ground for an apple orchard and a gentler slope down to the lower field, into which he tucked a secluded swimming pool.

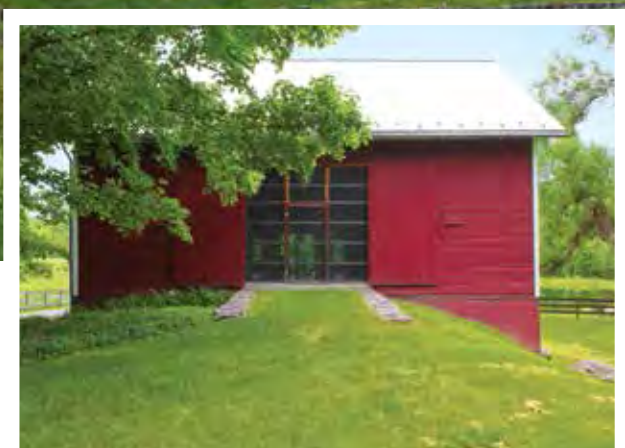
CLARA
CHICKEN WITH FUR
LIKE A RABBIT.

WRINKLES
ELEPHANT SKI
DOG

GIANT
MOUSE
EATING
PROG

UTILITARIAN
features include the
Holophane shade, open
shelving, and a big center
table. Not seen is a ca.
1915 stove that grounds
the room in history.

EVOKING THE 1930s,
the kitchen has painted cabinets,
nickel hardware, and linoleum
countertops. The granite sink
was cut from a single slab.



ABOVE: A new open farmer's porch faces east, where the hillside was regraded from yard to pasture. **LEFT:** The bank barn now houses a motorcycle collection and workshop; the screened opening behind original barn doors can be sealed off with an invisible overhead door.

pasture perfect

Shortly after Renee Iacone and Steve Clearman bought the Pink House, a 1,200-acre farm just down the road went on the market. "It was a very important part of our neighborhood," Clearman says, "and I got concerned about what might happen to it." So he and Iacone bought the property and partnered with friends Lee and Georgia Ranney—a farmer and an artist, respectively—to found Kinderhook Farm, a pioneering grass-fed beef operation. The timing couldn't have been better. "The market developed just as the farm developed," Clearman says. "Now we're one of the largest producers of grass-fed beef and lamb in the Hudson Valley."

Along the way, the pastoral setting inspired the partners to open Kinderhook FarmStay, with bed and breakfast-style accommodations in a converted red barn that Iacone describes as "simple and elegant, and a little farmy." Guests are invited to wander the pastures, pick vegetables for meals, and learn about sustainable farming from the staff and interns. "They'll direct you to the swimming hole," she says. "They'll bring the kids out to collect eggs or see the new chicks and piglets. But it's very loose. If people just want to sleep in the hammock, they can do that, too."

Perched on the slope between the house and the pool stands a small, unpainted outbuilding that arrived at the site as an antique timber frame and was repurposed as a rustic retreat. "It has big shutters that open up the whole building," Iacone says. "[Inside] it looks like a chapel. It's a great place to have dinner." Dubbed the Granary, the building is one of several barn-like structures on the property, some original to the farm and some relocated here. Iacone's art studio occupies the upper floor of one. Another houses Steve's collection of classic motorcycles and the workshop where he maintains them.

With the Pink House as its centerpiece, this rural compound supports its owners' pursuits in an atmosphere that feels deep-rooted yet still growing. "It isn't a museum showcase of some specific period," Steve Clearman says. "You definitely have the sense that this place, this house, was created over time. It's like when you were little and you went to Grandma's house out in the country...it has a little bit of mystery. To us, that's the charm. It makes Renee and me feel good."

FOR RESOURCES, SEE PAGE 95.

RESOURCES

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