



Colonial Roots

A farmhouse from 1686 transforms from an abandoned building into a historic gem.

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Can an old abandoned farmhouse regain its former glory, or should it fade into history to make way for newer structures? This is the question many homeowners face with historic properties, especially in older settlements such as Ipswich, Massachusetts, one of the oldest cities in America. Founded in 1634, the city is a hot spot for historic renovations—that is, when a homeowner has enough vision to restore their property correctly. Mathew Cummings of Cummings Architects works alongside homeowners to reconstruct derelict buildings into fully functional homes, and has worked his restoration magic on Lummus House.



LEFT: The exterior, while new, keeps in tune with the 18th century farmhouse. “We redid the siding, because the house had been abandoned for 20-30 years,” says Mathew. “Raccoons were living in the house. The exterior had no original windows or siding. All of that is replicated, but it’s authentically done.”

ABOVE: Even smaller pieces such as doors and windows are accurate to the time period. “The front door is made with a joiner,” Mathew says. “Back then they didn’t have surface planers or sand paper. A joiner planes it by hand: hand planes, hand saws and all authentic.”



The kitchen has all the modern conveniences of today, while keeping in touch with the home's historic roots. "The kitchen is in the back and has a more open space floor plan for more modern living," Mathew says. "There, it's not so much preservation as playing on the historic details."

If you want your décor to be simple and authentic, leave most of the furniture a solid color and don't put too much on the wall. Then add in a few patterns that match the shades of the home.



HOME HISTORY

Like many historic homes, Lummus House has a name that transcends any current owner. "This house is named after the original homeowner," says Mathew. Lummus House was built in both 1686 and 1746. "The older house was built in the first period when the settlers arrived," Mathew says. Sometime in the 18th century, the building either burned down or was demolished—both of which were common occurrences at the time. "When that happens, the foundation is reused with the cellar, and the fireplace might

also be kept," Mathew says. "The rebuild affects whether the fireplaces are kept." In this case, the new builder decided to keep the original fireplaces from 1686 and build the new structure around them. There are a few other leftovers from the earlier structure, including a few pieces of timber, but most of the timber frame is from 1746.

Even though historic properties have value for home enthusiasts, the mass market often considers an old structure to be a detriment. "Usually these houses are only worth the value of the property, because the house is in




the way at that point," Mathew says. This was even more true for Lummus House because it had sat abandoned for several decades. "[The previous owner] couldn't sell it," Mathew says. "It's not uncommon for these old properties that are abandoned to be unable to sell, because it's too daunting to fix them up."

RESTORATION CRAFT

And yet, Mathew had a friend who he knew would be interested in a historic farmhouse, and he convinced the couple to purchase the home. It would be a lot of work to restore the

LEFT: When it came to furnishings, the homeowners wanted to stay true to the historic home, just as its architecture does. "He's probably read 200 books on historic architecture," Mathew says. "They bought pieces from local antique shops and some custom furniture."

ABOVE: Like the front of the house, Mathew used exposed beams to tie the kitchen island into the historic portion of the home. He also added skylights to let in the natural light, and the back door to the yard helps with the open feel.



To make your farmhouse feel older, add a few exposed beams made from reclaimed wood, which will add depth and dimension to the space.

The hall contains the original fireplace from the 1686 build. This is where the family would have spent most of their time, especially because the large fireplace would have provided the most warmth. Today, the hall retains its historic character, and not even electricity trespasses into the space. "We take out the electrical, and it feels like it's 1746," Mathew says.

3 STEPS TO STARTING YOUR RESTORATION

Here are Mathew Cumming's tips on how to get going on the restoration process.

Do your homework. Find out everything you can about the history of the house. Search records at the library and locate any documentation you have on previous owners of the home. "Go out to the local historic society," Mathew says. Find out if they have any records, and then piece together the story of the property.

Find the right architect. It's important to work with an architect who specializes in historic preservation in your area. "Be careful of when a professional says 'I do' or 'I've done' old houses," Mathew says. "Anybody can do something, but the question is, do they specialize in it?" You can ask them a few pointed questions to make sure they really know the time period. "What's the difference between Federal style and Georgian style molding? That's something that anyone who specializes in historic farmhouses will know," Mathew says.

Pair the history with the architect. Once you've hired a professional, give them all the information you've dug up about the home. If you're considering purchasing the home, this should happen before you put in an offer. "You might buy a house that someone says is old and wonderful, and then you buy it and it's not actually old or wonderful," Mathew says. "I see a lot of houses that have good cosmetics but the frame is in really bad shape." Get an architect's opinion before you make the leap and commit yourself to restoring the home.



structure, but he also knew there wouldn't be any surprises along the way.

When Mathew approaches a new project, he does all his homework. "We do a historic study of the home," he says, which includes research at the local library for old records and building plans. "We knew there was historic plaster, fireplaces and timber behind the newer construction," he says. Once he's pieced together the history of the home and knows exactly what he's getting himself into, he reconstructs the original look of the home through plans and drawings. "We figure out what it used to look like," he says. "When we do these houses, we bring them right back to how they were."

Then comes the construction. "We keep the historically significant rooms," Mathew says, which includes the front of the house: the hall, the parlor and the two bedrooms on the second floor, the hall chamber and the parlor chamber. Utility rooms that need modern conveniences such as the kitchen and bathrooms stay toward the back of the house. "[Those rooms] tend to have been worked on in the past, so there's not much left of them anyway," Mathew says. At Lummus House, he converted a lean-to against the back of the house—itsself an add-on—into a modern kitchen, complete with an island and skylights. "We typically put modern amenities into the newer add-ons," he says.

GETTING IT RIGHT

Mathew makes sure to do his renovations and additions in an authentic way so that they work with the rest of the house. In the kitchen, he used exposed beams to match the front of the house, and made sure the architectural style matched the 17th century building. "It's a time warp," Mathew says. "In the back we have fun interpreting the historic structure, and then you walk to the front of the house and it's like you've walked into a time machine."

When Mathew was reviewing historical documents, he discovered that all the fireplaces in Lummus House are original to the first build in 1686. They also knew there was original molding and plaster behind the modern additions. "This frame was in good shape, but the cosmetics were a mess," Mathew says.



The front door opens up into the staircase that leads upstairs. The home is divided into the right and left rooms, so the front door and stairs are in the exact middle of the home.

HISTORIC HOME LAYOUT

When settlers came to the New World in the 17th and 18th centuries, they built homes that usually had a similar layout. Imagine you're standing on the curb, looking at the front of the house. If the front wall were to pull away like a dollhouse, this is what you'd see:

The staircase. The front door is located in the middle of the house, and when you walk in, you'll be greeted by a staircase right away. This stairwell divides the right and left sides of the home, both on the first and second floors.

The hall. Located on the bottom left of the home, the hall is the main living area. "The hall is where everyone hangs out, the wife would cook and the family would spend time," Mathew says. In Lummus House, the hall contains a giant fireplace left from the original 1686 building.

The parlor. This room occupies the bottom right of the home, and was the formal living area where the family might entertain guests and meet with important visitors.

The hall chamber. The hall chamber is the bedroom ("chamber") that sits above the hall, on the left side of the house. If the settlers were less wealthy, their home might only contain a hall and a hall chamber where the family would sleep at night.

The parlor chamber. Following the same layout as the hall chamber, the parlor chamber is the bedroom above the parlor. This room would only be in the home of a wealthy settler, as it was an extra bedroom, just like the parlor was an extra living room.

Other living spaces. The current Lummus House doesn't just contain these four rooms. Additional living areas have been added to the back of the house, where a lean-to was added at a later date. These rooms are now more modern, as they were additions to the original structures.



The hall chamber sits above the hall, and would have been the main sleeping area for the family. Today it acts as a master bedroom with authentic old furniture to match.