

Total makeover

The Supplee Homestead at Beacon Hill Farms — named for a former owner, Thomas Supplee — after a massive reconstruction.

FEBRUARY 16, 2007 PHILADELPHIA BUSINESS JOURNAL PHILADELPHIA LIFE PAGE 12



Out of the Ashes

A 19th-century homestead ruined by fire and abandoned to the elements is resurrected in Lower Merion with period-sensitive Amish craftsmanship.

BY SEAN SCULLY

It wouldn't have taken much to destroy what remained of the grand old Victorian mansion on Merbrook Lane in Lower Merion back in 2003.

The 1850 house had been ravaged by fire and left to rot at the mercy of ice, rain and wind. The floors and roof had collapsed, internal fixtures were twisted piles of charred metal and the towering stone walls teetered precariously.

Yet a group of local builders and investors decided to save the home, one of the original farmsteads in the area. The scope of the task was breathtaking — starting with the simple fact that the walls were

too fragile even to allow workers to cover the gaping holes in the roof with a tarp.

“Any additional weight on the load-bearing walls would have caused a massive catastrophe,” explains Mark Jolliffe, general manager of Velducci LLC, the Bala Cynwyd-based builder that spearheaded the rebuilding.

Add to that the fact that the floors were gone, meaning the walls — three stories of decaying stone, nearly two feet

thick — had to be braced up at the same moment that they were being gently lifted from below to allow builders to pour a modern concrete foundation.

Once that was done, the interior had to be built from scratch inside the old walls, a task Jolliffe likens to “building a house inside a house.”

Builder and historic preservation expert Dean Tessarvich led the project for Velducci. He painstakingly researched what the house had looked like before the fire, and what it would have looked like in its 19th century heyday. He rebuilt the gutted interior with modern materials, yet preserved a historic feel. If you didn’t know already, you’d never suspect from looking at it that the house had once been a gutted shell.

“No wood, no metal, nothing but stone could be salvaged,” says Tessarvich, but “enough was left from the fire to have a

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DEAN TESSARVICH

good idea what this was like.”

The result, finished late in 2005, is amazing. Throughout the house are careful details: Handmade doors, solid wood wainscoting, reproduction copper gutters, custom cabinets made to the wider dimensions common in Victorian cabinetry. Tessarvich relied on his contacts among Amish craftsmen, who still use traditional methods common in the 19th century, to hand-make paneling, trim, molding and even the wooden garage doors.

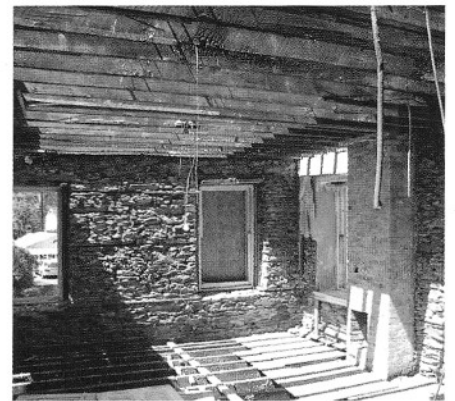
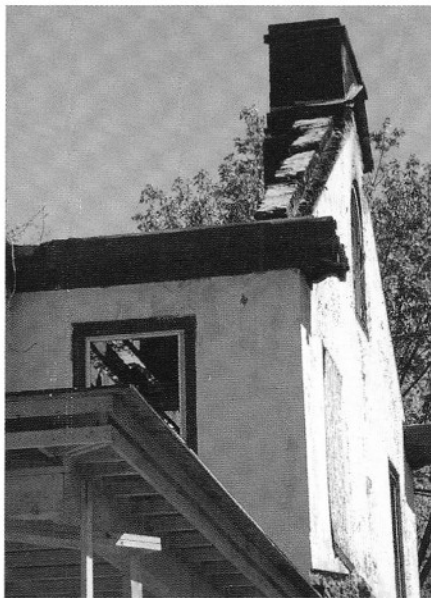
The exterior was restored to its 19th century appearance, complete with custom stucco work and new copper roofing. Even the garage, the only addition the builders made to the existing structure, is designed to match the historic part of the house, right down to the hand-hewn pillars and copper guttering.

And yet for all the historic detail, the house is thoroughly modern, with high-end appliances in a spacious kitchen, marble counters in the kitchen and baths, Jacuzzi tubs and insulated windows custom made to resemble 19th century window frames. And those hand-built Amish garage doors? Opened by a new commercial-grade garage door opener, complete with remote.

The builders changed the original Victo-



Amish craftsmen replicated the structure's original 1850 details with hand-made paneling, trim and molding. For contemporary tastes, a matching garage was added.



rian layout somewhat in a bow to modern tastes. They cut up a number of small rooms to create the larger living rooms, bedroom and office spaces that modern buyers demand.

The builders won’t say exactly what all this cost, but they admit that even if they get their current asking price — \$1.49 million — they will likely lose a little bit of money. They hadn’t really meant to do so, Tessarvich says, but “we didn’t know the

The floors and roof of the home had collapsed, leaving only a tired, teetering shell of two-foot-thick stone upon which to rebuild.

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MARK JOLLIFFE

housing market would fall off.”

Still, the builders and investors — Barbara Fleisher and Dr. Michael Ginn — didn’t go into this unaware that it would be costly, far more costly than tearing it down and building from the ground up. And they knew that Tessarvich, who has made a career of high-end historic renovations, was not one to scrimp.

“There’s a lot of money spent here that you don’t see,” Tessarvich says, ticking off a list of small design features that only an expert would notice. “You just assume it is here and was here” before the fire.

There’s the butler’s pantry, for example — a nook for storing glassware with a small wine cooler. Under the counter top is all the plumbing necessary to install a bar sink. You’d never see it, you’d never know it’s there, he said, but it’s there if the new owner likes that kind of sink.

“I just don’t like them,” he says, but he felt he owed it to a future owner to provide the option, so he did most of the work in advance, just in case.

Why go to all this effort?

There are, of course, some practical reasons. It gives Velducci and others involved in the project, including Philadelphia-based Mike Rosen Architects and the many craftsmen who contributed, a showpiece to put in their portfolios or display on their Web sites. And living in a historic house makes it somewhat easier for professionals such as doctors and architects to apply for home office permits, a possible plus for a would-be buyer.

But for everyone involved, there was something almost mystical about the project.

“We owed it to the neighborhood,” says Jolliffe. “We’re not the only historic house in this neighborhood. It would have been a shame to take down this property.”

Tessarvich seems to take an almost child-like delight in taking an old wreck like this and turning it into a showplace. As he gives a tour, he begins to refer to the house as an “old lady,” and he becomes progressively more animated as he shows off the clever ways he turned the house’s quirks — particularly the hodgepodge



From left: Dean Tessarvich, Barbara Fleisher and Dr. Michael Ginn, in front of the house they rebuilt in Lower Merion.

CURT HUDSON

of stairwells and spaces built up as the old owners added onto the house — into attractive and useful spaces.

“If something’s bad, I don’t bury it,” he says, demonstrating how he turned the badly matched stairwells between the second and third floors into an inviting landing area. “I try to bring it to life. I find a use for it.”

Local preservationists seem to appreciate the extra effort. The Lower Merion Historical Commission and Historic Archi-

tectural Review Board gave the project an award last year, citing the owners’ “daring leap of faith” in undertaking the difficult renovation.

“That’s an ideal thing,” says Historical Commission Vice Chairman Christian Busch, himself a preservation architect. “A building that is old, that is still preserved, that has been added to carefully and thoughtfully and has been completely modernized and upgraded so that it has every amenity that a modern, well-to-do



individual who would be settling their family in Lower Merion Township would want ... I think that's a win-win and that's why they got the award they did."

Ginn, one of the owners who renovated the property, said the restoration project appealed to his artistic side. In addition to being a prosthodontist, a specialized form of dentistry, he is a musician and an artist and he appreciates watching the architects and builders perform their art.

He said he had initially seen the project in purely business terms, as an investment. But, even though the project will likely lose some money, he remains proud of having restored an important part of the area's history.

"It is unfortunate that a lot of other construction companies don't care about keeping the beauty and tradition to the past," he says, "because it's something that children should see, get used to, learn from and continue ... There's no doubt in my heart and my mind that we did the right thing — and we'd do it all over again." ■



The builder combined historic details like wainscoting and Victorian cabinetry with modern amenities and a larger, contemporary floor plan.