

Not Quite Negative

A WEEK BEFORE IT WAS TO BE TORCHED, JEFFREY MORGAN UPROOTED A 1710 DUTCH HOUSE IN NEW YORK AND REPLANTED IT IN KENT, CONNECTICUT, MAKING IT INTO HIS PERSONAL MUSEUM OF HUDSON VALLEY FURNISHINGS.



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Space

BY WINFIELD ROSS
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STEPHEN JOHNSON



IT'S A COMMON PROBLEM with collectors—the collection outgrows the space available to contain it. “That’s why we had to go with another house,” explained Jeffrey Morgan. “Works like a charm.”

When we last visited Jeffrey and his now-husband Robert Coururier (they were married in 2013) in our October 2010 issue, they had an impeccably restored 1743 saltbox in Kent, Connecticut. Little did we know that sitting in a nearby trailer was another house—this one dating from 1710 and rescued from a farm in Dover Plains, New York—waiting to be rebuilt.

“It was on a farm on the way to the train station over there, and I watched it go from occupied house to ruin over the course of many years,” Jeffrey explained. “One day the farmer was there, and I asked if I could take a look at it. He said he was going to have the fire department burn it down the next week.”

When Jeffrey saw the inside, he knew he had to save it. “It was a really good building. I asked if I could purchase it, and the farmer looked surprised. He said if I filled in the hole, I could take it away.”

It proved to be a treasure. “The Dover historian was positive it was standing in 1710, and the architectural features bear that out,” said Jeffrey. For example, indications on the studs showed it started with no glass in the windows and instead had wooden shutters hinged on the inside. The summer beams are gumwood (also known as red gum or sweet gum), favored by the Dutch of the period for furniture. The chimney was originally outside, made internal by a circa 1760 addition.

It would be the second restoration Jeffrey did for himself, although

as a professional he’s done between twelve and fifteen for other people, all in Connecticut. “When you have dogs, it’s hard to go away,” he noted.

Over the course of three months, Jeffrey supervised a crew that numbered, photographed, and disassembled the house. “We had initially thought to put it where our new house now sits, but the building department gave us so much guff about re-erecting it, we decided to build new,” Jeffrey recalled.

So the Dover house slumbered in a trailer for nearly five years. They lived in the newly built house across the street and used the 1743 saltbox we featured in our previous story as their guesthouse. Finally, about four years ago, they got permission to restore the Dover house.

“We went through all sorts of gymnastics with the zoning people and finally declared it to be two home offices for which the code requirements are somewhat more relaxed,” Jeffrey explained.

But that was only the beginning of their problems. “Our first contractor threatened to kill me,” said Jeffrey. He had specified how to frame and trim the exterior doors, and the next day discovered the contractor had done it in a different manner. The discussion escalated from there. “He was having a really bad day,” Jeffrey noted.

Contractor number two fell victim to zoning problems, which stretched out for so long he had to find other work.

But three was the charm—Tommy Fisher. “I had known him since he was two years old,” said Jeffrey. He was the third generation of a family of carpenters. “There’s a good-carpentry gene in the family. And he brought great people with him.” He cited David Pitts, as well as independent carpenters Mark Peterson and Bill Kearns.

When he moved the farmhouse, Jeffrey Morgan brought as many of the original stones for the fireplace as he could to rebuild it. The original wooden lintel had been cut to accommodate a stovepipe—and it would not have passed fire codes—so he replaced it with salvaged granite. The granite hearth came out of a New Milford house being torn down—a case of being “in the right place at the right time.” The c. 1740 banister-back chair came from the upper Hudson Valley. It retains its original rush seat and black-over-bright-green paint. The salt-glazed stoneware jug is German from the 1700s. All of the fireplace iron is American. The utensil rack above the left corner of the fireplace was a gift from a friend.



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The settle bench, made in New York State in the 18th Century, has a paneled back and "great original surface," Jeffrey said. The seat cushions are stitched from old ticking. The old blanket over the back came out of the attic of a local house. The ceiling shows some of Jeffrey's whitewash treatment. "I love it," he said. "People don't use it enough."

The house was originally bank-built, so it is again on Jeffrey's property. The replaced clapboarding is painted Burnt Hickory by Cabot stains. Smith Restoration Sash in Providence, Rhode Island, rebuilt the window sash. Jeffrey also had to replace the door, using new wood on the outside and old wood inside.

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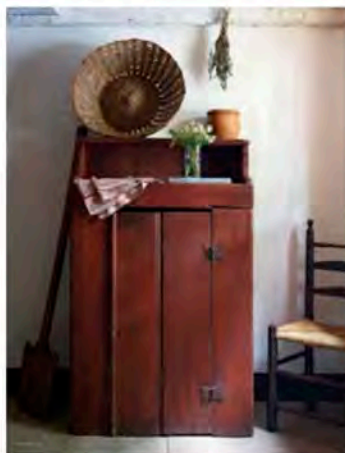
With few exceptions, the Dover house as they rebuilt it remains original. "All the floors are in original surface condition. They are all hard pine," said Jeffrey.

The exceptions included new sills and the siding, which was cut by the Ward Clapboard Mill in Vermont. Jeffrey also replaced two chimney girts in the kitchen. "They got brutally whacked off when they plastered in the 19th Century, and when the chimney settled, they cracked," he explained. "We had to hew two new ones ourselves. It was heavy work, so we all took turns."

For Jeffrey, surface condition is everything. "That's what makes a successful restoration, the preservation of original surfaces or a plausible re-creation."

The paintwork was the most important re-creation. Jeffrey white-washed the ceilings with period materials but used modern paint elsewhere. "We did use modern paint on the

walls for practicality," he explained. To make it a "plausible re-creation" he diluted it, distressed it, rubbed it back, and used other techniques. "All of the paint work is mine," he noted. "One of my great frustrations in life is that I am not a great carpenter, but I am an excellent painter."



Inside, the Dover house shows an entirely different decorating style from the 1743 saltbox. Where the saltbox was near bursting with antiques, the Dover house feels much more open and relaxed.

"I like negative space," Jeffrey explained, but the relative sizes of his collection and the saltbox did not permit much of it.

Jeffrey decorated the Dover house to be a true representation of early-18th-Century life in the Dutch Hudson Valley, almost a museum. "It's what seemed right," he said.

Despite his comments about

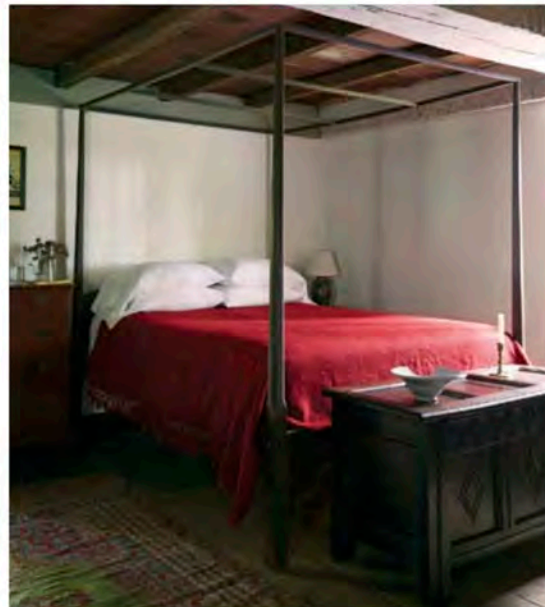
This late-17th-Century New York cabinet is the only example Jeffrey has seen with curly cutouts, shadow molding, and butterfly hinges. He bought it from a Massachusetts antiques dealer. The chair of the same vintage came in pieces in a box Jeffrey bought at auction for \$20. It's part of a set of four, and the box held all of the pieces save for a single stretcher.



The c. 1760s Mohawk Valley cupboard came from the collection of antiques dealers Kinnaman & Ramaekers. It retains its original, albeit cleaned, surface. The bottom shelf holds four antique delft chargers, two English and two Dutch. The lobed delft bottle on the second shelf (between 18th-Century English pewter plates) is one of Jeffrey's favorite pieces. The oval box on the top shelf has his initials—a gift from a friend. An early-1700s copper jug with an iron handle sits on top, along with two treen bowls, one unpainted and one in old red.

BOTTOM LEFT The lattice-door Hudson Valley cupboard has traces of linen once attached to the inside of the door. Jeffrey believes the cupboard once held food. The top displays a pewter charger with a multi-reefed rim, engraved with the owner's name, Jacques Riviere, and "the best sugar bowl" from the early 1700s. The Carver chair dates to c. 1660-70 and retains part of its original rush seat.

BOTTOM RIGHT The late Bill Ross built the poster bed, topped by an 18th-Century worsted wool coverlet Jeffrey owned in the 1970s, regretted selling, and finally bought back a few years ago, in part for its "spectacular braided fringe." The 1670s English oak coffer holds an undecorated delft shaving bowl. The "spectacular" color on the ceilings resulted from natural oxidation.



The oak table from the 1670s was built in Leiden, Holland. Surrounding it are four chairs from the lower Hudson Valley made in the 1770s with what Jeffrey calls "interesting crests." Although the hanging candle holder might not be period, Jeffrey liked the look.

more space for his collection, he moved little from the saltbox into the Dover house, notably the mid-18th-Century lattice-front cupboard. But when he bought it, he already had the Dover house in mind. It spent time in the saltbox only for expediency. "It was such a cool thing, I wanted to make sure I owned it," he confided. He bought a settle particularly for the Dover house, as he did the chairs, which, despite originating in the Hudson Valley, he found in Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

Although the Dover house was Jeffrey's project, he found Robert incredibly supportive. "He loves it and thinks it is incredibly beautiful," said Jeffrey. More than that, he's contributed to it. "He's responsible for the astounding pewter cupboard," Jeffrey continued. "I had seen it in New Hampshire and told him about it, and he found it in Woodbury and bought it for the Dover house."

All homes are works in progress, and so is the Dover house. "It's done," said Jeffrey, then he hesitated. "Except for the bed hangings." He's having them made now. "I finally decided on a fabric and scheme, and they are coming from Thistle Hill Weavers."

Of course, they will be early-18th-Century Dutch in style. And they will have to be beautiful. After all, that's why Jeffrey restored the Dover house.

"It was such a beautiful building, I had to save it." *

Winfield Ross is a contributing editor to *Early American Life*.

Thistle Hill Weavers is reproducing this document fabric found on an 18th-Century bed chair in Virginia for the bed hangings in the cottage. The linen check/stripe fabric in shades of green will line a mustard plain weave on the outside.

