



Opposite:  
The original mahogany door at  
the front entry was restored.

Above:  
A new glassed-in breezeway  
connects the house and the  
garage.

# Grace Rediscovered

*A historic home is laid bare, then given  
new life through Knickerbocker Group's  
meticulous ministrations*

words Jorge S. Arango  
photography Darren Setlow

In a perfect world, old houses, like people, age gracefully. Even as they adapt to modern ideas of comfort and livability, they acquire patina while remaining true to their young hearts. Through no fault of their own, however, some houses are subjected to botched procedures that disfigure them in ways unnatural to their organic processes. This was the case with the kitschy 1970s kitchen addition tacked onto a circa-1900 coastal home in South Portland, which was once occupied by an eccentric pastor (he purportedly kept a monkey, which he let roam freely throughout the house).

“It was less than sympathetic,” says Bob Francisco, the Knickerbocker Group designer who oversaw the project, of the awkward add-on. “It was shaped like the prow of a ship and had a flat rubber roof that collected water and froze in the winter. It was like a wart growing on the side of the house.” Other additions in the ’30s and ’40s had similarly given this grand dowager a weary countenance. Solutions were tricky. If the new homeowners simply removed the unfortunate blemishes, they would have had to comply with modern setback requirements, the absence of which at the turn of the century had allowed the residence to be erected much closer to the property line than would be acceptable today.

The home’s new stewards, Linda and Richard, are Cumberland empty nesters looking to move closer to the city, where Richard worked. They could see the beauty underneath the successively indelicate remodels. “He loves stone,” says Linda of her husband. “This house had a lot, and it was so charming. I loved the view. I wanted to see water, especially when I was in the kitchen.” To her delight, the rear of the house faced lighthouses at Portland Head and Ram Island Ledge.

“The main goals were a new kitchen, master suite and master closet,” says Francisco. Shortly into the project, it became apparent that more than a little work was required, including a complete reconfiguring of the upstairs floor plan, which subsequent renovations had left choppy and impractical. “We took the whole house apart,” he says.

Most immediate was the garage adjacent to the prow-like addition (today a spacious butler’s pantry, mudroom and laundry). “The original foundation might have been good 100 years ago,” says Peter Haber, Knickerbocker’s project manager, “but it had issues. We had to shore up the walls while we laid new footings. It was like peeling back an onion. As soon as you start taking down walls, you find all sorts of things, like roof rafters that were undersized or not engineered properly, or the long, narrow boards that were



The water side of the home offers views of Portland Head and Ram Island Ledge.

supposed to be doing structural work in the attic. It’s amazing the attic hadn’t collapsed.” That reimagined space is now a nautically themed bunk room that sleeps four young visitors in yacht-like cabin berths masterfully executed by Bowdoinham-based Scott M. Libby Woodworking. Knickerbocker Group’s own woodshop did the rest of the millwork.

The team also discovered old paper and seaweed insulation and a severely bowed ceiling in the living and dining rooms. Haber dealt with the latter by coming at it from the second floor to add new rafters. Francisco also designed a new garage with a gym on top and connected it to the main house with a wide, glassed-in breezeway “to make it feel like we were bringing the outside in,” he says.

The prow-shaped addition was reoutfitted with a generously proportioned kitchen sporting modern appliances and granite counters whose grain, Linda says, “looks like sand and water, which reminds me of the beach.” But, Francisco adds, “We tried to not do many trendy things and stay true to the character of the original house.” Extensive new stonework by Isaac N. Labbe Masonry deployed stone quarried from the

#### PROJECT TEAM

**Knickerbocker Group**  
Bob Francisco, interior architecture  
Claire Anderson, architectural designer  
Peter Haber, project manager  
Stig Smith, site manager  
Walter Shea, woodworking manager  
knickerbockergroup.com

Scott M. Libby Woodworking

Isaac N. Labbe Masonry  
labbemasonry.com



**Above:**  
The original dining room features a built-in china closet.



**Left:**  
The nautical-themed bunk room was created from existing attic space.

**Opposite:**  
A new kitchen was on the homeowners' wish list.



- Bob Francisco's FAVORITE ...**
- Maine view?** Squeaker Cove, Monhegan Island.
  - Drink?** Now that the chilly weather is here, Bulleit Bourbon on the rocks with a good roaring fire.
  - Maine restaurant?** The Lost Kitchen in Freedom ... best dining experience of my life.
  - Place you've traveled to as an adult?** Nantucket.
  - Shoes?** Lucchese cowboy boots.
  - Ways to relax?** Gardening, building dry-stack stone walls.

same local source as the 1900s structure. "We also matched the new oak floors to the originals," adds Francisco. New interior doors perfectly mimic their forebears, too.

Haber inserted a new steel lintel over a partially enclosed back patio to remove a post that stood incongruously at the exact center of the view. A rolling screen retracts into a recess at one end so the owners can watch the now-unobstructed parade of schooners and cruise ships sailing in and out of Portland Harbor and Casco Bay without having to worry about mosquitoes.

Slowly, as Francisco and his team integrated the clumsy old interventions into a more cohesive whole—and as Louisa Ruth of Dwellings in Falmouth helped Linda blend new furnishings and upholstery into the couple's own possessions—the house seemed to grow back into its authentic skin. "With aging, you earn the right to be loyal to yourself," Oscar-winning actress Frances McDormand once said. Thanks to Knickerbocker Group and thoughtful new homeowners, the ageless beauty that comes from being true to one's nature has reemerged.