

History of 222 Tucker Hill Road – Norwich, Vermont

The house was built from 1977 to 1979 on the 4.1 acre plot of the old Hazzard farm. It was started on spec by a remarkably skilled carpenter/builder named Brian Smith. We understand that the house was under contract to a New York City writer in the summer of 1979, but the contract fell apart. Thus in 1980 spring and summer we became the first actual owners of the property (and had many opportunities to discuss its origins with Brian, and others who knew him). Shortly after, we acquired the 10 acre parcel across the road (a 3 acre field, and the hillside beyond), from the nearby “old Vermonter” who had committed to selling it to whoever bought Brian’s house.

He reported that he created the exterior design after a drawing in an Eric Sloane book, showing an inn in Machias, Maine dating to the 1790s. He said that he had no measurements to go by, but was surprised to find when he visited the original that the exterior dimensions were almost exactly what he had arrived at! He told us that the only external difference was that his window spacings were more even.

He had been a member of a builder’s commune in Greenfield, Massachusetts, which we understand disassembled old houses and barns from Maine to Delaware. As a result, he apparently had access to substantial amounts of antique lumber and bricks which he employed in the house. The basic structure of the original house (which extends from the front to the back of the kitchen area) was post-and-beam, but it appears that the beams were set up using the available lengths. Most were sheathed in pine, but the kitchen area shows some of the bare beams employed. The central kitchen beam is obviously oak of a size one might never find now!

Brian wanted to retain the exterior look of a large central chimney, but this came in conflict with his wish to create a more open interior plan. Rather than the traditional foursquare layout of rooms arranged around a central fireplace, he created a masonry arch over a central passage and stairway. For us (and most friends and visitors) the first experience of starting up the stairs and seeing a complete arch of antique brick rising above to the second floor ceiling has been awesome! It brings together six flues. To the north is a large living room fireplace, a small master bedroom fireplace, and a basement flue which now connects to a small wood stove. To the south are sizeable fireplaces in the large south side rooms, and a central flue which serves the furnace boiler for the heating system. They all converge to join into the traditional external central chimney. We heard from him that he was unable to recruit masonry assistance help to create this remarkable structure, so had to teach himself how to do it – creating a plywood

frame over which he could lay the narrow concrete structural blocks, then facing the arch with his supply of antique brick.

Another unique design and engineering feature (for the time) was his approach to central heating. Brian was unwilling to have the antique appearance of his rooms cluttered with visible radiators or baseboard heaters. Thus he created radiant heating – in the ceilings! This was before there were modular systems for this approach, and because the expansion/contraction cycles would have been too much for the wide pine floors. He told us that he got the specifications for the tightest bend radius for ¼ inch copper tubing, and hand-formed loops for the ceilings of 7 of the rooms. These were fastened in place and then embedded in actual plaster ceilings. The system has been functional and effective, and no slower than the more current floor systems.

Brian's attention to detail and the particulars of Shaker design is seen throughout the interior. There are many wide boards in the walls, both below the wainscoting and sometimes full height panels. It appears that he hand-planed most of them, and added the single narrow bead at the meeting of any two boards. This was not a thick bead of solid feeling, but a simple line defining the panel edges: the Shaker design approach.

There are also cabinets throughout the house with framed raised panel faces. Many of these were individually crafted from salvaged pine boards, which had aged into the “pumpkin pine” color often requiring very little staining. The most striking of these panels is the reason we have kept an aging dishwasher going: he replaced the conventional front panel with a 23-inch square raised panel to match the rest of the kitchen cabinetry! We haven't found a new dishwasher whose front panel design permitted the transplantation of this piece of dedicated craftsmanship.

Brian apparently started the cottage below as a workshop, but later converted it into a pleasant small residential unit, in the same style as the main house, and adding bathroom and kitchen functions and water supply. Water and electrical are both supplied from the basement of the main house, through a conduit at the margin of the lower driveway. It had tenants already when we moved in (Brian's sister and brother-in-law), and was continuously occupied as a rental unit until September 30 of 2023. Originally well-heated with a wood stove, that was replaced with a propane heater when it became evident that some tenants were not prepared to cope with wood heat!

Several years after moving in, we retained Brian to finish the central part of the basement, which he did with the same dedication to Shaker design conventions, matching the feeling of the upper floors. Also notable here was his skill in matching wall panel margins to the edges of the brick chimney foundations – which he referred to as “large scale dental work.” Of note, while a previous radon test had been entirely negative, we insisted on applying epoxy paint to all the walls which would be covered with sheetrock.

By 1990, we had young children outgrowing the bedroom space, and leaving us no room for guests. We were worrying about how to add on without spoiling the classic look of the house. Expanding into the garage footprint seemed logical, but shed dormers above simply felt “wrong.” A local architect and friend, John Anhorn, visited and came up with the design we adopted: a parallel, slightly smaller gambrel over the garage space (which allowed for adding the deck on the north side). This involved creating a new post-and-beam structure for that part, and extending further to add a 3-bay garage beyond. The size of the latter seemed useful, but we realized that the grade was such that it was actually easier to include a basement rear-entry bay as well, under the 3rd garage bay. Brian was not available, but we were fortunate to engage another local builder for this project. Christian Klinck is actually Brian’s ex-brother-in-law, and had worked with him previously, although not on this house. He would not claim to have Brian’s skill level, but did a remarkable job of replicating the style of the original house.

The landscaping has obviously evolved since we moved in, but began with some existing antique fruit trees and some rock garden areas. The twisted plum trees flower in spring, but have produced little fruit except in the rare seasons when we have had them sprayed. The apple tree on the north side of the lawn, on the other hand, produces very reliable fruit of two different varieties (clearly grafted in the center many years ago). The stump in the lawn is the remains of a large butternut which gradually lost major limbs until it became unrecoverable. The enormous horse chestnut on the north side (an Ohio nut, or “Buckeye”) has continued more successfully. It has flourished 2 climate zones north of its normal habitat, apparently because the north slope reduces the range of the winter thaw-refreeze cycles that would stress it at this latitude. The site has also had extravagant annual crops of wild lupines, which have only spread further every year in the wildflower patch above the driveway and across the road.

Shortly after moving in, we planted the crabapple at the corner of the driveway. A few years later, we planted the tree lilac above the driveway – it blooms impressively most years with limited fertilizer. We have added the shrubbery around the front of the house. The Beauty Bush on the south side of the house keeps growing, even with its root system traumatized by the removal of the original in-ground oil tank. The Burning Bush at the southeast corner seems rather ordinary pleasant green until fall, when it indeed becomes striking orange-red. Most dramatic in early June are the rhododendrons at the northeast corner. We originally planted them in full sun at the southeast corner, and they were clearly unhappy. The horticulturist who provided other shrubbery moved them to partial shade, and they grew spectacularly. With some fertilizer, they explode into stunning purple blooms every year. Blueberries, plus poppies and peonies, fill in the south side of the house.

The low-walled garden space at the side of the road has been largely untouched since our arrival. The old Ford tractor wheels have been left in place since they seemed so appropriate to the character of the property. The rock garden in the lawn has been upgraded substantially, however. We had it partially excavated a few years after our arrival, and realized it was on the collapsed stone foundation of one of the original farm buildings. After filling in with soil and using some of the stone for more surface decoration, we were left with a substantial supply of aged stone which now resides beyond the low stone wall at the northeast side of the lawn. The rock garden has an evergreen and a variety of perennials including daffodils, irises, small flowering shrubs, and a wild white rose (an original welcome gift) flourishing in the center.

It will be evident that we have loved this property for more than 40 years, and felt privileged to live in a house created by an artisan who appeared to have incorporated the soul of a Shaker builder from 200 years ago. I still recall the afternoon when my then 8-year-old son came up from the lower driveway describing an unusual animal he had just seen. It was the size of a cat, but dark brown with a long bushy tail. With only a few more questions, I was able to tell him that he had had the rare treat of seeing the famously elusive Fisher in the wild. Just then, an enormous bird soared by overhead – the sun glowed through the tail feathers of a Red-Tailed Hawk. I was overcome as this child exclaimed spontaneously, “Dad, this place is Paradise!” I could not have said it better. We leave with many such memories, and hope that it will pass to people who appreciate its unique qualities.