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Keeping its *Authenticity*

**An antique
home gets a
master suite
makeover and
maintains its historic
look and spirit.**

If you're considering buying an older house, there are two key things to understand. First, you're buying a piece of history and something that's not perfect. Second, if you have a romanticized image of what it's like to live in an older home while also thinking about all of the things you'd like to change about it, you probably shouldn't buy one. So says Laura Payne, business manager for Wilton-based Benchmark Builders, LLC. "An older house is not necessarily going to have straight walls and flat floors, and you're not going to get a big, spacious walk-in closet," she says, "but you should enjoy the house for what it is." Her points are well taken, especially in Lower Fairfield County where some folks are drawn to owning an antique house without always understanding all it can entail.

Kathy and Steven Knapp understood these points and more when they decided to purchase an antique house in Westport more than a decade ago. After living in the home for several years and putting their energies into the raising of three sons, the couple decided it was time to focus on themselves and create a master suite with a connecting bath. (Little did they know then that post-renovation Kathy would become pregnant with the couple's fourth child, a baby girl.)

The homeowners contacted Andrew Payne, founder of Benchmark and a licensed contractor. Since the house was circa 1880 and Andrew didn't know what he would find once he began demolition, he and the Knapp's agreed the project would be priced out hourly according to time and materials.

At the time, the home's upstairs consisted of four smallish bedrooms and a single shared bath. To get the expanded space the Knapp's desired without going overboard, Benchmark combined two of four existing bedrooms in the house's upper level into one master bedroom with a separate bathroom.

Independent of an architect, Benchmark gutted the whole space and had frequent field consultations with the homeowners. Literally everything from ceiling and subfloor to electrical and plumbing needed to be reworked while keeping with the integrity of the house. Much of the architectural detailing that Andrew is known for—and which has earned his company several local and national awards—had to be created from scratch.

Left — The renovated bathroom features a comfy overstuffed chair, a sleek slipper tub, and a custom-built cabinet with brass chicken wire accents perfect for storing linens and toiletries that fit nicely into a cozy corner framed by a water closet and the master bedroom.

Right — A slanted shed roof was replaced with airy cathedral ceilings. The interior design—a mix of blue-and-white, Victorian-inspired patterns and prints—was coordinated by Audrey Morgan Interiors of Westport.

"We wanted to create that spacious, master-suite feel you get in today's average, Fairfield County, million-dollar house without having it look modern and refreshed," says Laura.

To open up the bedroom, a slanted shed roof was replaced with cathedral ceilings, and, an elliptical window once in the attic and covered in cobwebs was exposed and painted. To better frame the room and draw attention to the newly exposed window, Andrew acquired an original-looking wooden beam from a supplier of antique reclaimed wood specific to match a pre-existing beam already mounted along the ceiling of the bedroom and had it placed symmetrically to the first.

Cracked plaster walls were restored and covered with Victorian-inspired wallpaper and paint coordinated by Audrey Morgan Interiors. Hardwood floors, which were lifted to address electrical and other issues, were able to be salvaged and relaid. A custom 3/4th-width bead board door was installed as the entryway to the bedroom (as well as in the bathroom ceiling) and gave the room an older look.

In the bathroom Kathy Knapp wanted an old, cast-iron combination tub/shower from the 1950s replaced with a sleek slipper tub and coordinating fixtures from Klaff's. Another must-have was a custom-built cabinet with brass chicken-wire accents used for storing linens and toiletries which fit perfectly into a cozy corner framed by the water closet. For comfort, an overstuffed chair was nestled into a corner by the sink.



To better access the view of the Knapp's backyard garden, an old, double-hung window was replaced with two new French Marvin Casemaster windows. When the windows are closed you can see a mullion running down the center, but when the windows are open, there's no bar at all. Other contemporary touches included the installation of a frosted glass French door that closes to the commode, as well as a frameless shower door.

The renovated area, including a walk-in closet, ended up totaling 300 square feet and was 22x14 feet. The project took about three months and cost \$130,000, considerably more than the initial estimate of \$70,000. "This is a perfect example of how people can get in over their heads...When we opened things up, we realized that it was going to be like starting all over," says Andrew.

Right — A mullion is attached to one of the new Marvin Casemaster windows (right), so an expansive, unobstructed view of the Knapp's beautiful country backyard is possible when the windows are cranked open.

So if you're considering purchasing an antique home, or renovating the older house you currently live in, remember: the costs and time incurred are most likely going to be more than you had expected, but the result will be worth it. ■

Photos: Olson Photographic, LLC.

