

STONE BY STONE:

A Connecticut House Reassembled in Massachusetts

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EXTERIOR

pick up from feb 2004
page 22



Joseph Allen built his house to last, and it looks like it has stood on the tree-edged field in south coastal Massachusetts forever. But Allen erected the house in Scotland, Connecticut, where it stood virtually untouched for nearly 250 years until Richard Mecke relocated it to Rochester, Massachusetts, just thirty miles from Allen's native Bridgewater.

In 1725 Allen built a two-story half house with its corners oriented toward the cardinal points of the compass and the chimney centered on the wall between the south and east points. Two

doors—one opposite the single fireplace, the other on the west-south wall next to the chimney—opened into the 15-by-16-foot hall. A wall left of the fireplace partitioned a second room along the back of the house. A staircase in that rear utility room likely gave access to the unfinished room above.

The 1725 structure had two unusual features. First, the ridge pole defining the peak of its gable roof ran parallel to the fireplace—a newly recognized house plan found in Connecticut and Rhode Island. Second, while most early houses in New England face

south, Allen oriented his to the west, perhaps signaling his intention to expand it on its east side to create a center-chimney house facing south. In 1745 he did just that, more than doubling the home's size.

Allen's descendants lived in the house until 1906, when they sold it to the Ressaular family, who occupied it for most of the twentieth century. The last Ressaular family member lived alone for many years, still using the original well, privy, and underground buttery. A refrigerator, kerosene stove, and single electric light served as his



The house's c. 1745 stair hall features Georgian feather-edge paneling, beautifully balanced turned balusters, and a rubbed paint finish. The oak flooring throughout the house is original.

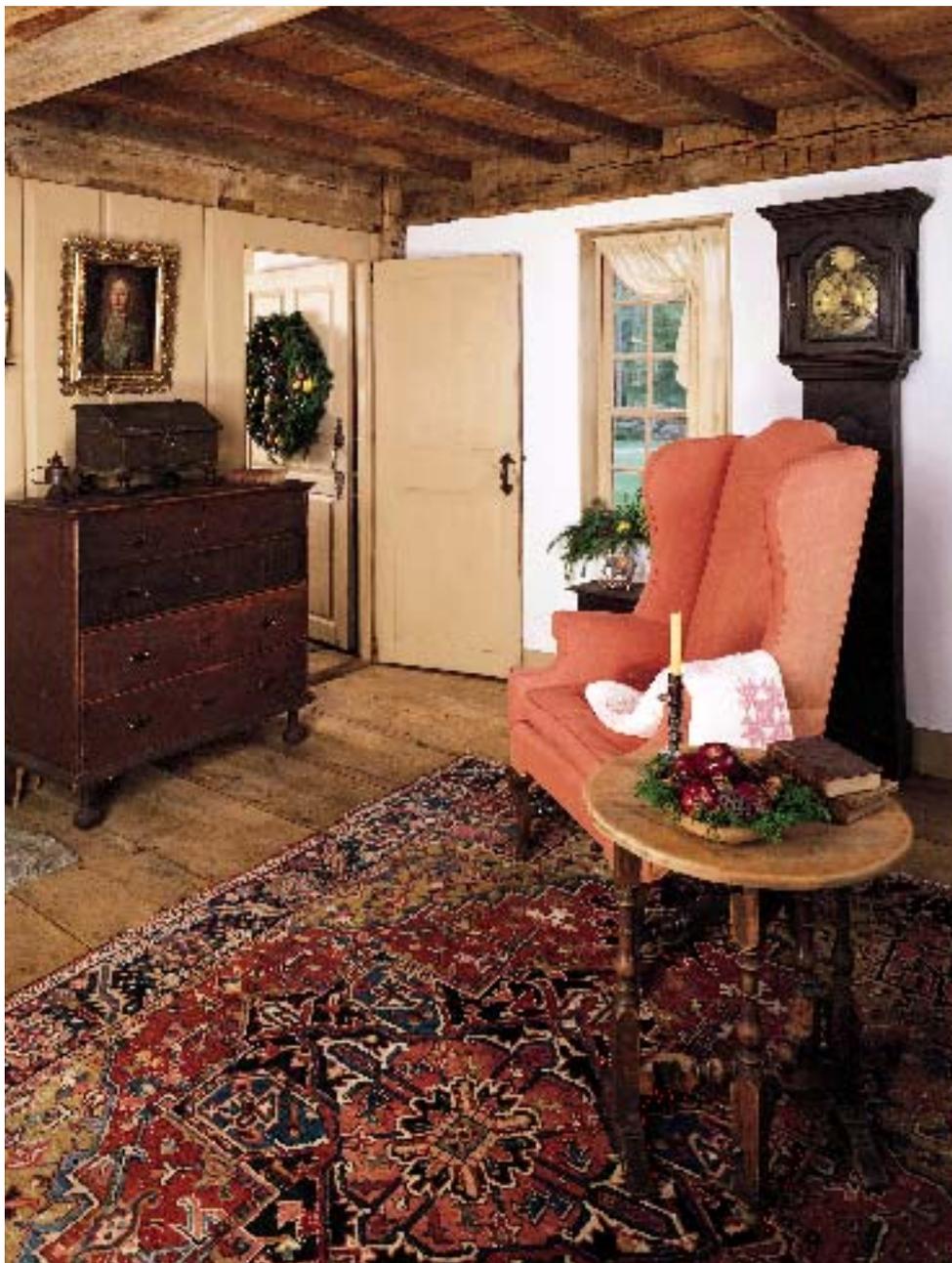


The front doors, dating to 1745, are decked out for the yuletide season with natural decorations, including a wreath by Charlene Perry. Mecke roughed up the clapboards with a wire brush before painting to give them a weathered appearance.

OPPOSITE:

Richard Mecke meticulously reconstructed, restored, and repainted Joseph Allen's house in its original c. 1725 red hue. The house now comprises, from left, a 1995 master bedroom addition, the original 1725 half-house structure to the left of the doorway, the 1745 addition to the right of the doorway (which completed the center-chimney south-facing house), a 1750 addition housing the new kitchen, a 1995 carriage house made of old components, and a reconstructed early-19th-century barn, now a garage.

In the 1725 section of the house, the hall now serves as a living room. The notch above the doorway shows where the 1725 door frame connected to the chimney girt. The 1756 museum-quality tallcase clock is by Richardson Minor of Stratford, Connecticut, who made only seven clocks. The c. 1710 blanket chest, a William and Mary piece, retains its original feet and finish and some brasses. Atop the blanket chest is a rare late-18th-century kerosene lantern, one of the first, and a box with ball feet (shown in Wallace Nutting's *Furniture Treasury*). The portrait and tuck-away table are late 17th century, while the wing chair is a Centennial piece, draped with a late-19th-century quilt. The carpet is a Heraz.



only modern amenities. After he died in 1989, the house remained vacant until Mecke bought it. With its earliest section dating to 1725 and its most recent to 1995, the house has the venerable presence of an antique and the crisp appearance of new construction. It is both.

Mecke, who specializes in the reconstruction of early buildings, was just the person to appreciate the unaltered structure. Having started in the building trades as a mason thirty years ago, he became a builder and devel-



oper, took up woodworking and reproduced antique furniture as a hobby, then began reproducing colonial houses. Although he has some 600 new homes to his credit, Mecke's passion is First Period (1640-1730) post-and-beam structures. He began studying their architecture long before he began dismantling threatened early barns and houses and reassembling them.

"If you're going to tackle this kind of project, you'd best do your research," Mecke says. "It's not like

Allen installed feather-edge paneling in the hall during the 1745 renovation. At that time, he also had the summer beam and girts boxed and a plaster ceiling put in. To showcase First Period craftsmanship, Mecke chose not to replace the cases or the plaster ceiling. The summer beam and joists, smooth and hand-planed with chamfered edges, were meant to be exposed. Mecke coded each stone in each of the five fireplaces to facilitate exact reconstruction. The c. 1700 settle next to the fireplace is of oak and pine. The keeping room, in the rear of the house, is visible through the doorway. The sconces are reproductions by Classic Lighting Devices, LLC; the striped stockings are from Swell Company.



Allen created the keeping room in 1745. The hewn granite sink is mounted in its original whitewashed base, which is decorated with red dots inside black concentric circles staggered in a diamond pattern. To the right of the sink is a Brewster chair with a later rush seat, and at the end of the table is a Carver chair. Both were made in Plimoth Bay Colony in the 17th century. The trestle table, dating to 1690, is given period treatment with a table rug. On top is a late-17th-century English squat wine bottle. Mecke aged the reproduction lantern by Hurley Patentee by hanging it outside for a year and glazing it with brown putty. Mecke made the cupboard.



In a corner of the keeping room, a late-18th-century high chair with beautiful wear on its upper rung retains old red paint and its original rush seat. The “Charlie Brown tree” sits in a cast iron Victorian stand.

you just gather up a bunch of carpenters and go over and have at it.”

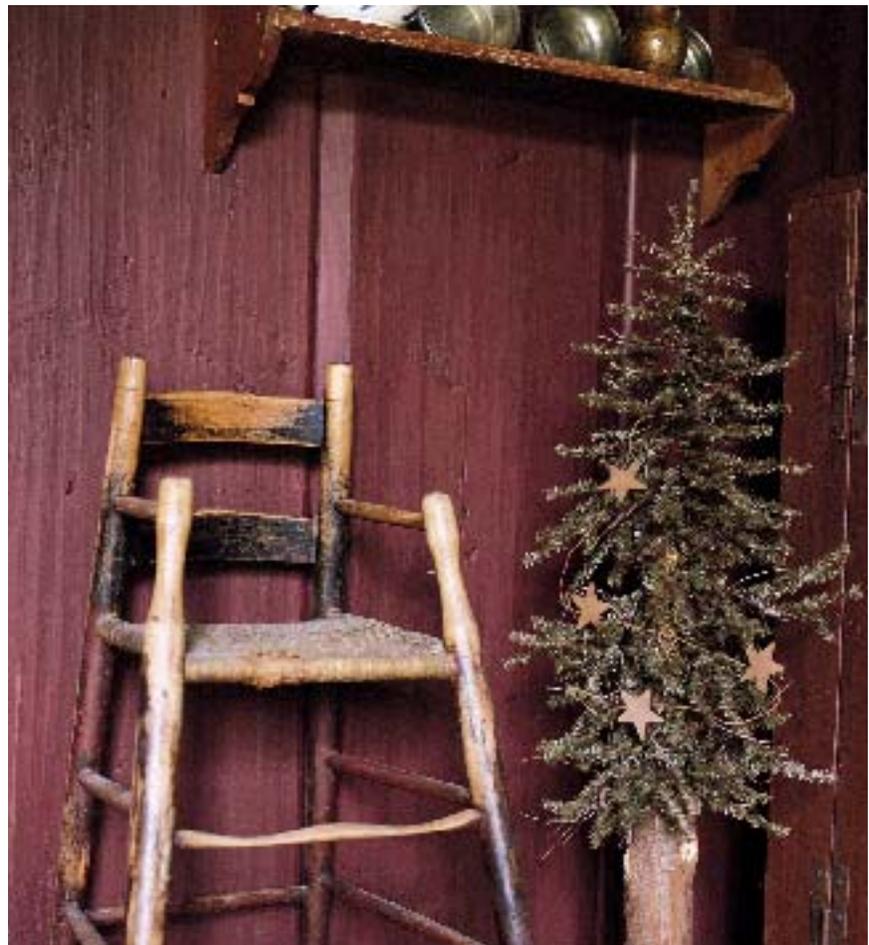
Dismantling a post-and-beam house requires understanding how it was built, so you can work backward through the same sequence of steps, he explains. “Reconstructing it requires following exactly the same steps its original carpenters did, using simple common sense and painstaking attention to detail. Without them, the modern builder will miss significant information, resulting in a house that has lost its historical significance and is perhaps structurally inadequate.”

Before touching a thing, Mecke measured and photographed every inch of the house and made field drawings, which he converted to scale drawings. He and his crew removed and coded every nail and hinge, every board and beam, every chimney and fireplace stone, documenting the process in photographs. Metal tags, stamped with numbers corresponding to those on the drawings, ensured that later power washing wouldn’t erase important information and that every end of every

piece of the frame, flooring, and paneling would go into the right position.

Despite an irate raccoon and a swarm of bats that didn’t much like it when the chimney came down stone by stone, the crew deconstructed the house piece by piece. First they removed the plaster, but saved the wooden lath to reuse. It took five hours and a crane to dismantle the last piece—the post-and-beam frame. They loaded everything, including foundation stones, huge round lye stones for making soap, stones from the well and buttery, fence stones, and door stones, onto eighteen wheelers and transported them 85 miles, close to where Allen once lived. Dismantling the house spanned five weeks, six to seven days a week, ten to twelve hours a day.

While taking down the Allen house, Mecke decoded what Allen had done during the 1745 renovation. Allen completely rebuilt the chimney stack and created five fireplaces canted in the Georgian style. He rotated the charred 1725 oak lintel, embedded it in the front of the stack, and nailed the





The curved 18th-century settle next to the keeping room fireplace, installed in the 1745 "new kitchen" for cooking, retains its early green-brown finish. As befits a kitchen, this one contains a 19th-century wooden barrel, a candle rack and wooden peel dating from the 18th century, and early crockery. Wooden sconces are reproductions from Hurley Patentee.

strings of a new staircase to it. He installed newly fashionable raised-field Georgian paneling.

He also built a two-story addition with a 16-by-16-foot parlor that opened from both the front and rear. He partitioned the back into two small flanking rooms, one of which held a second staircase. Between them he created a large keeping room with a cooking fireplace and a granite sink that drained through a hole on the rear wall. Allen finished the second story with five rooms, two fireplaces, and paneling. Mecke also discovered that in the

1750s or thereabouts, Allen added a one-story room on the east-south end of the 1745 parlor. (See "Creating an 'Early' Kitchen," *Early American Life*, February 2004, for a description of how Mecke adapted this space.)

In the process, Mecke found original four-over-four window sash with panes of glass measuring 7 by 9 inches, and 1745 windows using the same pane size in a nine-over-six configuration. He also found original red paint used inside and out, and later layers of mustard and Spanish brown. He learned that Allen had moved 1725 doors to new loca-

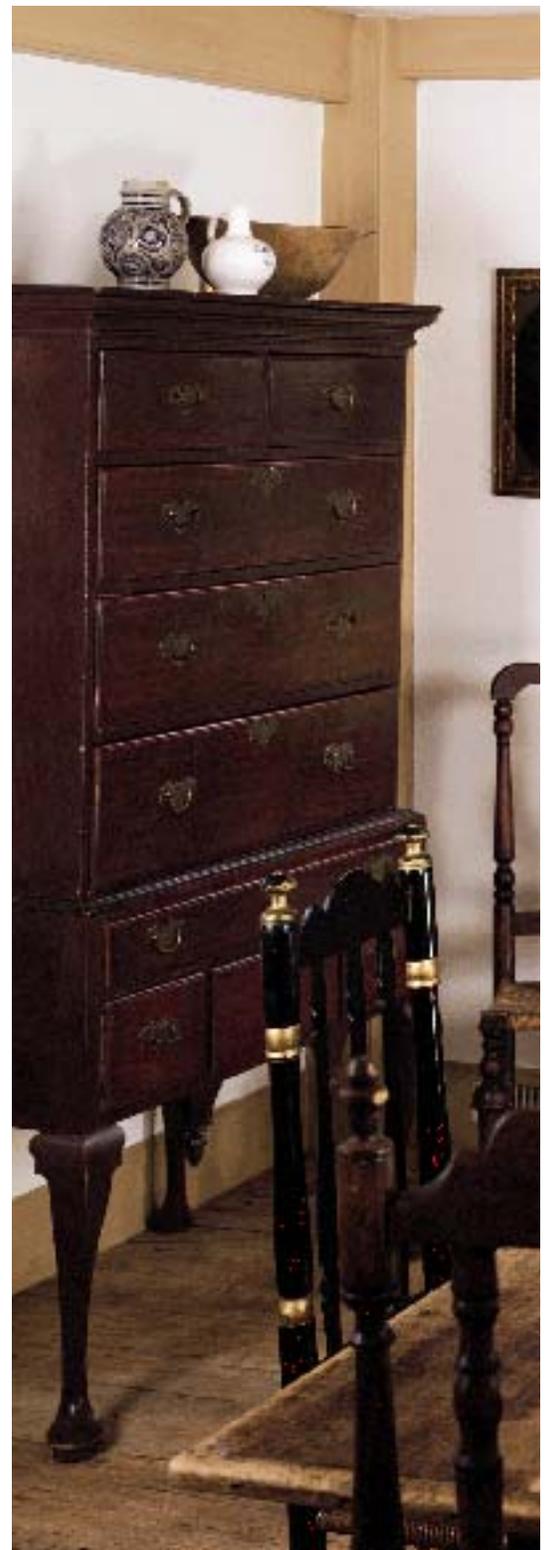


The keeping room's late-18th-century step-back cupboard displays a collection of antique pewter, Delft plates and mugs, and graduated pewter measures. On the table is a mixture of antique pewter and reproductions, the latter from Woodbury Pewterers. The chair at the near end of the table is a 17th-century Carver chair from Plimoth Colony in its original black finish. The chair at the far end is a Wallace Nutting Colonial Revival reproduction; except for its brown finish, crisper turnings, and relative lack of wear, it is virtually identical to the original. To the right of the door, a three-tier shelf in its original red paint hides the thermostat. To the left are a 19th-century double-tier wall box and an 18th-century bucket bench, both bearing their original paint. The bench displays Barteman jugs, a 15th-century German tankard, stoneware jugs, and a firkin dating from the 19th century.



In a corner of the dining room, a Jacobean oak chest of drawers with geometric decoration displays a c. 1730 Barnstable, Massachusetts, desk box and a 1650 Westerwold jug with its original lid. The early-18th-century chair is from the Fairbanks House in Dedham, Massachusetts, one of the nation's earliest. The early-18th-century shoe-foot tuck-away table folds up. The harbor scene is 19th century; the portrait is by Thomas Hudson, who was known for painting the faces of his subjects while delegating the painting of the drapery to his students.

In the dining room, built in 1745 as the parlor, is a c. 1740 Queen Anne tall chest. The white sack wine bottle on top of it was made 100 years earlier; the Westerwold mug dates from 1680. The William and Mary chair is a transitional piece with slipper feet on trumpet-turned legs. The candle stands are Centennial pieces in the Queen Anne style. The stool at right is Jacobean with its original tapestry. An assembled set of c. 1745 banister-back chairs surrounds the William and Mary tavern table, which has a single board top. The Massachusetts Queen Anne blanket chest has a single drawer and its original paint, while the William and Mary box on top, possibly from Pennsylvania, has its original finish but replaced feet. The 18th-century portrait is of King George III. Frederick W. Smith of Kennebunk, Maine, painted the lighthouse scenes at Situate and Cohasset on Massachusetts' south shore in the late 19th century.



tions; notches in the girls showed their original placement. Allen used oak, the preferred wood in early New England, for everything, including the flooring, window frames, and clapboards.

Mecke also found differences in craftsmanship. The 1725 summer beam and joists, meant to be exposed, were smooth, hand-planed, and had chamfered edges. The early posts were water sawn, while those built in 1745



were hand-hewn, meant to be covered by boxes. The original sheathing was feathered and chamfered to create an impeccable overlap; later sheathing was butted end to end. Although its 1725 room had a floorboard instead of plaster on the ceiling, the Allen house dispels the myth that early construction techniques were primitive.

Before putting up the house, a structural engineer recalculated the

loads. "Every post-and-beam house I've ever taken down has met modern-day codes with no problem, including this one," Mecke says. Power washing eliminated dust and dirt. Only one 1725 girt, located under a window, had to be replaced—apparently the window had leaked, rotting away part of the girt. Mecke found no evidence of insect damage but as a precaution had an exterminator spray the structure

when the frame and sheathing were up and again when it was insulated.

Reconstruction, restoration, and finish work took fourteen months. Mecke reused wooden lath for the plaster and commissioned a blacksmith to make thousands of replica nails. Mecke's crew was meticulous in repeating the original construction process, from the new concrete foundation faced with the original stones above grade to the roof,



In the dining room, the original 1745 chimney cupboard was reinstalled during the house's reconstruction. A c. 1700 rope cradle, Centennial stool, and early-18th-century portrait create warmth, but the focal point is a rare 18th-century Taunton chest, made by Robert Crossman, a second-generation drum maker, and purchased at a Skinner's auction in 1996. Only twelve are known.

In the rear corner of the 1725 living room, Georgian paneling is the perfect backdrop for the c. 1710 eastern Massachusetts William and Mary blanket chest purchased at a Skinner's auction. On top is a c. 1660 Plymouth Bay Colony oak valuables box with carved sawtooth decoration and a door with applied geometric cedar moldings and bosses, highlighted with black paint. The box was deaccessioned by the Chicago Art Institute. The maple yoke-back, banister-back chair dates from about 1710.

where 24-inch cedar shingles are laid 6 inches to the weather with an 18-inch overlap. They installed modern systems—400-amp electric service (which also powers a modern wood shop), nine zones of hot water radiant heat, and three zones of air conditioning, with returns concealed behind paintings. They tucked three of five new bathrooms into rear rooms and added a master suite off of the 1725 room.

Mecke followed Allen's lead in expanding the house on its east-south side, connecting an early-nineteenth-century barn (over the wood shop) to the 1750 kitchen with a new carriage shed made of old components. The completed house has the look of the expansive "little house, big house, back house, barn" structures seen northern New England.

With Mecke's help, Allen's house—relocated, restored, expanded, and adapted to meet twenty-first-century demands—stands to last for another 250 years. ★

Gladys Montgomery, a writer based in the Berkshires, specializes in period architecture and interiors.

