

Full Circle



Architect Patrick Ahearn Imagines Three Centuries of History

Story by John Budris Photography by Taylor Ahearn



Once hidden by overgrown bushes and brambles, Architect Patrick Ahearn transformed this 1712 Vineyard Haven mariner's homestead into a 21st century jewel. And in the process, he revealed 300 years of history and the changing face of Main Street.

A lot can happen in three centuries. And on what became 83 Main Street in Vineyard Haven, a lot sure did. How far back should we go? When the 1600s flipped to the 1700s, much of that part of the Vineyard was owned by the Chase family, which bought shares in large tracts of land from Governor Thomas Mayhew. Many of the Chases were tavern owners, innkeepers and ferrymen, but one, Thomas Chase, was a deep sea mariner, who in 1712 built his modest home overlooking what was then called Holmes Hole. *continued on next page*



The demure cottage was a gift to his new bride, Jane Smith. The three-quarter, timber-framed home was but the third residence in what would become the “town.”

Chase was not a sea captain, so he could not afford the kind of prestige home seen in Edgartown a century later, when the profits of whaling were evident with widow’s walks on the roof peaks and elaborately carved woodwork in the parlors. In fact, Thomas Chase’s home doubled as an inn to help make ends meet during his trips to sea, the Air B&B of its era. After his death in a shipwreck during a gale off the



The humble Thomas Chase House on Main Street, Vineyard Haven when Patrick Ahearn started the renovation

Virginia coast in 1721, Chase’s widow maintained the inn with her new husband, Thomas Cathcart.

As the decades unfolded, and the Revolutionary and Civil Wars came and went on the Vineyard, and while the home’s ownership passed between a who’s-who of Vineyard family names, the house and grounds evolved

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The steep slope to the harbor (top) provided Ahearn with the opportunity to create a garage and utility structure without interfering with the marvelous water view.



All about the view: The wrap-around decks and generous glazing bring the outside into the interior spaces throughout. Some of original rubble rock foundation was repurposed in robust stone walls.



The transition spaces from the outdoors to inside life (above) were something far from Thomas Chase's design back in 1712. For architect Patrick Ahearn, merging these two was a welcomed challenge. The elegant outdoor living and entertaining space on this sheltered porch with a fireplace (opposite) is the result.

and adapted along with the growing commercial and merchant activity on Main Street. New owners built a carriage house and other outbuildings as need required and resources were available. At times the home did double-duty as a store.

On a windy Saturday night on August 11, 1883, everything changed on Main Street. A tannery adjacent to the home - then on the site of today's Stone Bank development - caught fire, and the northerly gale that spread the inferno southward, in fact, spared the "Chase House" from major harm. The home was hardly scorched and was but a handful in

Vineyard Haven which the fire did not burn to ashes. The tragedy of the Great Fire pushed the Thomas Chase house's rank to the oldest surviving home in town.

In the wake of the catastrophe and rebuilding of Vineyard Haven, the home continued its place as part of Main Street's commercial and residential marriage. Fast forward to contemporary times, and when architect Patrick Ahearn FAIA was given the task to bring the home up to 21st century standards, the challenge would have frightened many away.

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In the three centuries of the Thomas Chase house, exposed rustic, post & beam framing and rough-sawn board interiors were replaced with an array of renovation coverings. The modern kitchen (above) opens onto the brightly lit formal dining area (opposite). Ahearn's use of painted paneling and various profiled beadboard added a classic nautical touch.



"The fact is that Main Street became more commercial during the years, in the late 1800s after the fire and more in the 1900s," says Ahearn. "This has a special meaning in my way of thinking to really get it right and do it right. Because it tells the tale of a different Main Street from a historical point of view."

In every home Ahearn addresses, the history of the dwelling and context of its location direct his vision. Even when building brand new, the implied history of what "could have been" is his architect's compass.

"But here we had real history. We went through the archival photographs from the late 1800s, when photography came on the scene, and you can see clearly what was the original house from 1712," says Ahearn. "Over time, some really weird additions were stuck on it, one particularly at the backside



Architect Patrick Ahearn on his way to his next meeting.

that just overpowered the house."

Central to Ahearn's planning was keeping the original footprints of both the main house and all of the additions right where they were. "On the primary facade of the original house, we didn't really change anything other than new materials and windows and things like that," says Ahearn.

The mutual goal of both Ahearn and his clients sought to preserve and support the historic shell while reimagining the interior in a classic Vineyard tradition. Recalling that Thomas Chase built the main house some 300 years ago with available materials and a workingman's budget, this would be no easy challenge.

The first task was to lift and secure the home so the crumbling fieldstone foundation could be excavated and

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Light and airy: Upstairs bedrooms opening to the wrap-around decks and ample glazing floods the second story and welcomes the light and ocean breezes.

evolved from the 18th century to the 21st. “Even with the flooring and other details, with the things you touch and feel and see, we wanted to recall the past, even though we used some poetic license,” says Ahearn. “We wanted it to



feel that there was a history, an implied history in the interior that told the story of this house in a more modern way, but always reminiscent of what came before.” In a reference to what might have been in his adherence to implied history, Ahearn chose to use bead-board on the walls and ceilings. Typically employed by more wealthy homeowners in the early Colonial period to provide insulation and reduce draft, in this application, Ahearn’s choice added a coastal character to the informal spaces. During the home’s long life, the original post and beam structures - which would have been initially exposed - gradually were covered up in the

ensuing three centuries, as tastes and uses of its owners changed. So that early timber frame character was not well-expressed by the time Ahearn took on the project. “So we re-used some old timbers in the living room to highlight the interior, and to telegraph that post and beam history,” says Ahearn. What puts the Thomas Chase House in a league of its own is its location, perched above and overlooking Vineyard Haven harbor. “We obviously wanted to take advantage of being on the water and maximizing the views to the harbor and beyond,” says Ahearn. “And we took



The homage to time: In a gesture to the home’s history, Ahearn employed exposed re-purposed antique beams and reclaimed flooring (above, left & top) as an echo to the past. He preserved the original staircase built by Thomas Chase more than 300 years ago.

removed. Once a new, poured concrete foundation was in place, the restoration and rehabilitation could commence in earnest. The structural floors remained while the joists were all sistered to further stabilize and strengthen the home’s bones.

And then the fun began. The property’s history informed the new detailing on the home’s interior. The now exposed reclaimed beams, wide plank floors, and significant architectural wall paneling all reinforce how the home

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some license about making the house 'live' the way people want to live today - in terms of opening up these views to the rear and the porch."

At the home's rear, water side, generous banks of windows now bring harbor views into every room. A sheltered porch with a fireplace is a natural transition between outdoors and inside, bringing the delight of the exterior views together with interior-like comfort.

On the second floor, decks span the full length of the house, with French doors connecting the interior rooms with the open-air environment.

While some architects might see the site's steeply sloping grade toward the harbor as a detriment, Ahearn saw the hill as a welcomed challenge, like poet charged with writing a sonnet.

"So we built this little folly building that's tucked into the hill. It looks just like a little shed, but it also doubles as a garage heading to the lane down below," says Ahearn. "The shed really doesn't block the view, but gives the family the ability to store a car in the off-season and secure bicycles, kayaks and all the beach goodies in the summer."

The devil is always in the details, and Ahearn spared none. Window boxes now overflow with flowers on the street facade that once was so overgrown with shrubbery that the house was camouflaged behind a wall of unruly vegetation.

In keeping with the theme of a sea-side cottage, he added new brick and stone retaining walls, and veneered the new concrete foundation by re-purposing some of the very stones Thomas Chase hefted himself when he first dug his cellar some 311 years ago.

Things have come full circle, and the new owners are indeed pleased. And one would suspect so would Thomas Chase. **vs**

To find out more about

PATRICK AHEARN ARCHITECT

Click: patrickahearn.com

BOSTON OFFICE:

160 Commonwealth Ave.

Boston, MA • Tel: (617) 266-1710

VINEYARD OFFICE:

Nevin Square, 17 Winter Street

Edgartown, MA • Tel: (508) 939-9312

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