

One for all

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North Downtown*

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In a mix-and-
match house,
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History house

An interior designer fashions a storied
James River home anew



LIVING *Lithic delivers a careful update for a bicentennial property* HISTORY

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY
VIRGINIA HAMRICK

It's almost like a mini Monticello.

Situated on high ground, commanding a majestic view, the house is likely close to two centuries old. With its brick foundation and chimneys, and many other classic Virginia architectural details, it looks eminently at home among the mature trees that surround it. It holds a place on the National Historic Register and even boasts the ultimate Albemarle pedigree: It was owned by a member of the Jefferson family.

The home may not be a world-class tourist stop, but it is plenty special—and its current owners, a couple whose primary residence is in Portland, Oregon, know it. Since they purchased the house in 2014 (and nearly 14 accompanying acres, perched on a bluff above the James River), they've been carefully updating it, always with an eye toward the integrity of the house. Yet what they bought was already a *mélange* of eras.

"It wasn't a grand house," says the wife, an interior designer, of the original portion owned by Peter Field Jefferson, a relative of the third president. Indeed, the central section of the house—deeded to Field Jefferson in 1836—is, by today's standards, quite humble in size. "But he clearly wanted to make it grander," she says. Fine millwork dresses up the formal parlor: chair rails, an ornamented fireplace mantel and window and door trim.

Twentieth-century owners added on to increase square footage and modernize—two small side wings in the 1950s, which preserved for the moment the house's strict symmetry, and a larger 1970 addition on one end. Just before the turn of the millennium, the house gained a terrace room with more contemporary touches: French doors and a high cathedral ceiling. Still, on the exterior, the additions have for the most part been kept very consistent with the original look: clapboard siding, metal roof and white porch columns.

'Not too fusty'

The central, 19th-century portion needed little but fresh paint and refinishing work on the floors. But the newer sections came in for remodeling; because they house the bathrooms and kitchen, they were the most obviously outdated. With Lithic Construction as the contractor, the owner-designer embarked on a spot-by-spot renovation that aimed for comfort while still paying historical respects.

"I don't want it to be too fusty," she says. Through a design career spanning Oregon, Minneapolis and the East Coast, she's assimilated many influences, from mid-century modern to antique French, and likes to mix styles. Accordingly, architectural choices here are sympathetic to the era in which each house section was



In the lower level of the home, the current kitchen (below) flows into a sitting area.



built, yet the home does not function as a museum. "I've tried to make the rooms accessible," she says.

That goal was literal in the case of a '50s-era guest bathroom with a closet that partially blocked the doorway. "This space had black-and-

white linoleum floors," says the owner. "It needed to look more like the house." She chose ship-lap wainscoting, travertine tile and a painted pine floor to brighten things up, and rearranged the layout so that the sink is nearest to the door, while the tub and toilet are in their own separate space with a sliding door. A corner closet near a window replaces the previous obstruction.

At the opposite end of this floor, the master bathroom demanded even deeper changes. While the adjacent bedroom only required painting, the bathroom was, says the owner, "a warren of little spaces." It even had two doors, which after much thought the team decided to keep. "There was something I liked about it," says the owner. The room became one of her favorite parts of the renovation. "Once I said, 'You can go without a tub,' I gave myself free rein."

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The dining room (top right) locates in the original portion of the home, near the kitchen addition from the 1950s, which now serves as a wet bar. Though it has such a rich history, the home's pedigree didn't intimidate the homeowner when it came to design. "I didn't feel compelled to give it a period look," she says, instead mixing patterns, styles and design eras. A cozy "keeping room" in the home's original portion (top left). A '50s-era guest bathroom (opposite), once with black-and-white linoleum floors, now looks right at home with shiplap wainscoting, travertine tile and a painted pine floor to brighten things up.







The homeowners relined all the chimneys so they could enjoy fires in each of the fireplaces. While the master bedroom only needed repainting, the master bathroom required a new glass-walled shower stall and vanities.

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Instead, a large glass-walled shower stall anchors the center of the room, awash in Carrara marble and porcelain tile that closely mimics the marble. Custom vanities have a traditional look with a stepped-back profile for, says the owner, “a little more movement.” The two doors allow easy flow, and the closets at one end have mirrored doors to save space and to keep light moving through the entire room.

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Historical touches

Yet she and her husband clearly value the fact that this historic property connects them to layers of the past. They had all the chimneys relined so they can enjoy the simple pleasure of a fire in the fireplace—even, laughs the owner, when it’s not quite cold enough outside.

Old skeleton keys dangle from hooks near most of the doors, and a weathered, wooden sign, which once marked the end of the driveway, hangs on the guest room wall. It’s painted with an image of the house prior to the 1970 addition.



The lower level, with brick floors and exposed ceiling beams, is partially below-grade, less formal than the upstairs, but equally redolent of the past. A cozy “keeping room” once served as the kitchen and now offers a place to sit before the fireplace. In the 1950s, the kitchen moved to a tiny space off the paneled dining room.

“It was done in old French tile,” says the owner—with words like “champignons” and “oregano” painted in blue on white. She kept the cabinetry and hardware, but updated the space with soapstone countertops and backsplash. It now functions as a wet bar.

The current kitchen is much more ample, flowing into a sitting area and a separate terrace room. Traditional cabinets in white, with Calacatta marble countertops and a farmhouse sink, make the space feel fresh. “There was a big square island in the center, and it felt tight,” says the owner. “We created the peninsula instead,” managing to reuse much of the cabinetry in the process.

Artwork and antiques are beautifully displayed here, but nothing can outshine the James River, resplendent through all the rear windows and from the modest back porch, which the owner says is her favorite spot of all. “This is a therapeutic, healing kind of place,” she says.