

# BERKSHIRE HOME & STYLE

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COMPLIMENTARY



## OUR REGION

by Peter Cipkowski

# Hillsdale Cottage

*Renovation: Past as Present*



Elizabeth Sherwood in the door of her home, July, 1923  
Photo provided by Peter Cipkowski



Exterior from the garden showing both old and new structures  
Photo: Michael Fredericks

The way houses evolve has always intrigued me. Living in Columbia County, it is easy to admire the way they sit on the land, expand over time, integrate farm buildings, and benefit from the shade of strategically placed trees. There is something valuable about the inherent efficiency of old houses.

I had been renting what was originally an icehouse in Claverack for five years when I heard through a friend that a small farmhouse was to be put up for sale on a quiet country road in Hillsdale. The house had many of its original furnishings, including a remarkable box of photographs that told the story of its transformation, in the early 1920s, from a tenant farmer's barn to clapboarded summer cottage. I knew at the moment I heard about the old photographs that I wanted to live there.

The house I soon owned that summer of 1994 had humble beginnings. Three of its four rooms had originally

been separate farm structures and were cobbled together to create a house. Nestled among collapsing stonewalls, vanished farm buildings, ancient peonies and overgrown shrubs, the house was positioned under what had been an enormous American Elm tree—now a mere stump.

The old photographs had been carefully dated—they told the story. Elizabeth Sherwood purchased the land in 1920 after a fire destroyed the original farmhouse. She led a group of women “with careers in the city” (as put by a neighbor, the nephew of one of Elizabeth’s companions, now in his late eighties). Together, they parceled up the little farm, renovated the barns and set up summer retreats for themselves. The photographs show Elizabeth working on her house—creating openings for windows, attaching clapboard and shutters, applying a bit of paint, sitting in a doorway. An American Elm towered over her

property.

The photographs also illustrate how Elizabeth added rooms to her house by moving and connecting an old shed and a chicken coop. Interior images show the primitive sub-structure and sparsely appointed rooms. More than anything, Elizabeth’s photographic record convey her profound affection for the Hillsdale retreat she called “Dooryard”—inspired by the famous Whitman poem, “When lilac last in the Door-yard bloom’d.”

Though the inspector’s report gave me every reason to believe Dooryard would soon need attention, I made only the most necessary repairs—replacing rotten sills and insulating the walls of the loft bedroom. My focus was to rejuvenate the old garden (also captured in early photographs) and enjoy quiet weekends in Elizabeth’s house.

It took me a decade to approach my friend, architect Dennis Wedlick, for advice. The time had come, I told him,

for Dooryard to reflect the current inhabitant and bring both of them into the 21st century.

Dennis, recognized for his cheerful simplicity, straightforward design and a unique capacity to interpret dreams, knew I was committed to a project that would be in keeping with the sensible spirit of what Elizabeth accomplished in the 1920s. What she did, we agreed over dinner one night in 2004, was what Yankee farmers have always done—connected their barns to their house and gradually incorporated them into living space.

Many people who undertake a renovation and a minor expansion, especially when their projects are small, choose not to use an architect. I quickly came to appreciate the benefits of working with one.

The first assignment Dennis gave me was to create a wish list, including some of the problems I wanted to solve.



Living room interior  
Photo: Michael Fredericks



Kitchen interior  
Photo: Michael Fredericks



Elizabeth Sherwood & her mother in the original interior.  
Photo provided by Peter Cipkowski

Here were some of my priorities:

1. More natural light/open to garden. Though the house sits in full sun most of the day, you wouldn't know it from the living room.
2. After painful deliberation, it's time to replace the quaint kitchen (former chicken coop) with something that's functional and beautiful.
3. Two bathrooms, utility area, mud room.
4. Here's stuff you will have to translate: authentic, contemplative, connected, efficient, grounded, simple. Good luck.

We spent a year conceptualizing the project before any construction began. Leveraging the photographs as a primary source for inspiration, Dennis' initial designs carefully illustrated how

the house evolved from one room in 1920, to two, three, then a total of four small rooms. One appropriate plan emerged—grounded in the site's agrarian roots.

By reflecting the scale and features of Elizabeth's house and its succession of modest spaces, Dennis introduced two new structures—a system of connected barns. He replaced the chicken coop with an efficient one-story transitional area that unifies old and new and added a second, taller section that mirrors the original barn. The result is a perfectly pitched blend of new and old, both in its exterior and floor plan.

The contrast between the relatively confined, older part of the house and the new addition could not be more clearly

expressed on the exterior. Well-placed oversized windows capture light and breezes—the most used rooms of the house are the kitchen and one of the older rooms that now includes a large window facing the garden.

Bluestone floors in the addition have the effect of suggesting a utilitarian past as well as knitting it to the roughly stacked stonewalls sprinkled around the garden. One of the ideas behind the kitchen design was to emulate a scaled-down service kitchen—

space to mill around and cook, soapstone countertops, hanging pots and pans. The kitchen also accommodates a long butcher block used by my grandfather at his Hudson market dating back to when Elizabeth was settling in Hillsdale.

Also suggesting the kitchen may have long ago served as a functional space, its stone surface is level with the ground outside. The thinking, Dennis suggests, is simple and intends to merge past with present.

Hundreds of years from now, Dooryard's inhabitants may wonder how the house was assembled and which part came first.

I intend to leave Elizabeth's photographs behind—along with some stories of my own. ☺

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