

**Historic Home**  
The Forster Leach house  
dates back to 1804.



# Setting Things Right

Reassembling a  
Federal home proves a  
satisfying challenge.

by **Jeanne O'Brien Coffey**  
photographs by **Michael J. Lee**



**Manchester Merchant**  
The restored Colonial is said to have been designed by architect Samuel McIntire.



**W**hen Susan and Jeffrey Parker first toured their dream house, the door had been left open and there was snow on the floor. Abandoned mid-renovation when the previous owner ran out of cash, the 200-plus-year-old Federal-period property was completely gutted with all the original moldings stacked pell-mell in the two-car garage.

They made an offer that day. “We walked in and fell in love,” Sue Parker recalls. “I’ve always wanted to live in a historic home.” The Manchester-by-the-Sea dwelling had all the features they were looking for: a village location for easy walking to shops and restaurants, a beautiful view of the harbor, and most of the original details were salvageable.

That love went unrequited for 11 long months. The property was a short sale, so in the agonizing time between the Parkers’ offer and when they learned they would be able to buy the house, the couple did a lot of

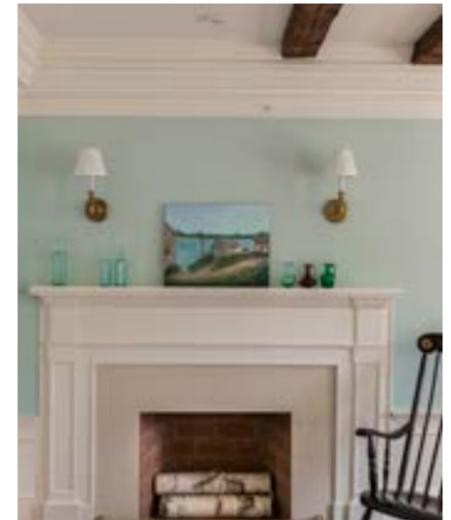
pinning—and a lot of exploring. “I had a lot of time to do research,” Sue recalls. Known as the Forster Leach house, the property was built in 1804 for Manchester merchant Israel Forster and remained in his family virtually unchanged for the next 200 years.

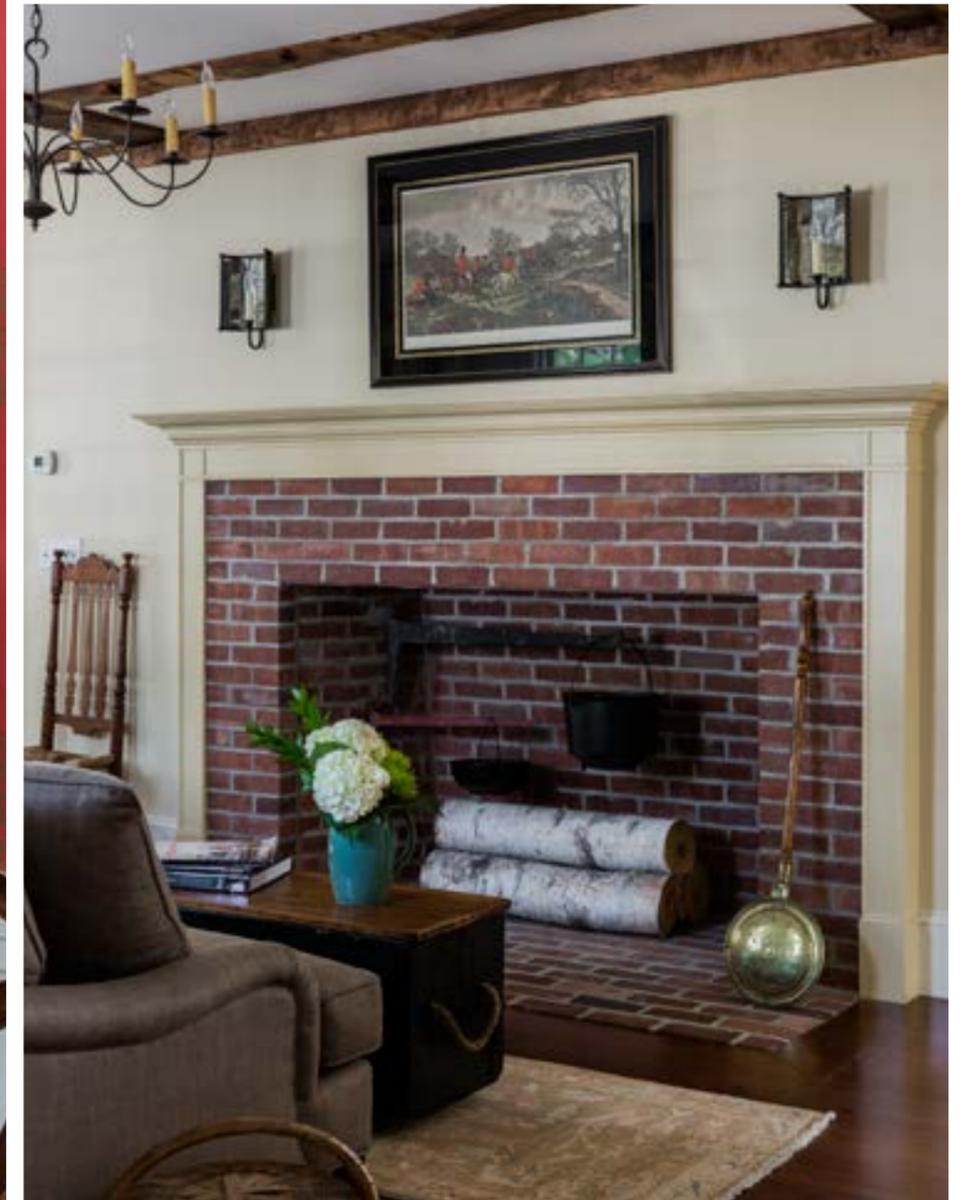
Family lore claimed the house was designed by Samuel McIntire, one of the first architects in the United States, who was known for his elegant work for many of the wealthiest citizens in New England. While curators from the Peabody Essex Museum agree that McIntire’s hand can be seen throughout the house—he carved

the home’s elaborate mantelpiece in the parlor, which took an artisan six weeks to restore, using dental tools and removing some 25 layers of paint. Other parts of the home were likely designed and crafted by relatives or employees from his shop.

While Sue has strong family ties to Manchester—her family goes back 13 generations—they were surprised to find that

**Architect at Work**  
McIntire’s practiced hand can be seen in many of the home’s details.





Jeff had a deep personal connection to the house. He is actually related to McIntire, according to a relative who is an amateur genealogist. “That was a delightful surprise,” Sue says. While the couple didn’t know the connection when they made the offer, Jeff admits with a laugh that part of his attraction to the house might have been this lurking family tie.

The couple brought in the interior design firm Wilson Kelsey Design to oversee

the project, starting with an extensive series of meetings in February and March in the unheated house.

“This was the most disarray we’ve ever encountered,” says John Kelsey, principal at Salem-based Wilson Kelsey. “Things were taken down and there was no documentation as to what had been there. No photography, no drawings, nothing that said, ‘When we take this down, here’s where it belongs and here’s how it should

go back.’ This project took us to places we’d never been before.”

But Kelsey and his wife and business partner Sally Wilson were unfazed by the challenges that came their way, says Sue—from figuring out which pieces of

**Order Restored**  
The Wilson Kelsey duo reconstituted what had been left in disarray.

woodwork from the hundreds stacked in the garage went in which rooms to fitting a comfortable modern staircase in a Colonial home. “They are expert problem solvers,” Sue says. “There was no issue that arose that they were not able to remedy.”

Once the puzzle pieces in the garage had been identified and put in their proper places, the couple was dismayed to discover that nothing remained of

the home’s original hearth room, where the cooking fire would have been. “We had to do some research to recapture the style and spirit of what it might have been like,” Kelsey says, adding that historic documents from the Peabody Essex Museum and research on the Internet led the dialogue between the designers and the homeowners to craft something that seemed fitting for the space.

“Their direction to us was very clear: They wanted to put things back to the extent they could and make things right,” Kelsey says. “They see themselves as caretakers of the history and the house.”

Of course, the couple wasn’t prepared to go back to open-hearth cooking, so the other directive was to add the technology needed for comfortable living today as unobtrusively as possible, Kelsey says. An addition created a modern kitchen—one



that stayed true to the historic charms of the rest of the house.

“This is one of those kitchens that, rather than coming out and hitting you in the face, there is a quietness to it that speaks very gently and softly,” Kelsey says. Creating a harmonious flow between the new addition and the old restored house was actually not that difficult, Kelsey says. “In all these older homes, the vocabulary is already there. If you listen, the home will tell you what materials to use and how to use them. So actually, designing the kitchen was quite simple. We looked at the details in the rest of the house and adapted them to the detailing on the cabinetry in the kitchen.”

One compromise the couple did make that was out of character for their Federal-period home was the ceiling. The previous owners had pulled down the flat plaster, a characteristic of a Federal period house, to expose structural supports. The Parkers liked the height of the

#### Contemporary Colonial

While the design stayed true to the Federal style, allowances were made for the homeowners' lifestyle and personal tastes.

ceilings and the look of the wood beams and didn't want the expense of putting in new ceilings throughout.

“We went back and forth,” Kelsey says, but, ultimately left the beams exposed. Which meant carefully fitting the original crown moldings around the exposed beams. The thoughtful preservationist team came up with a design that would allow the Parkers, or future homeowners, to slip in a new plaster ceiling if it was ever desired, without removing or damaging the original crown.

Thinking of future owners is typical of the Parkers' entire approach to the project. “We strongly believe that old houses should be restored for future generations,” Sue says. “We feel that we are simply the current stewards of this historic, beautiful home.” [wilsonkelseydesign.com](http://wilsonkelseydesign.com)

