

Priceless Early American houses threatened with demolition are being moved to a Connecticut site for centuries more in the sun



**Bill Oberg (above, at left) and Skip Broom look over plans to restore a 1788 house they spirited away from Tiverton, R.I., just as a bulldozer was moving in. Specialists in antique house preservation, the partners are sitting on one of the stone walls they added to their 35-acre site in Lyme, Conn. Top: This nine-room federal house from Mendon, Mass., was built circa 1800 by a Colonel Flynn. Oberg and Broom were attracted by its richness of detail. Opposite: The magnificent front door of the Flynn house features Adam-style urns, a webbed fan light. All the original glass survived the move.**

Photographer ROBERT BENSON



# OLD HOUSE HEROICS

By JANE GENIESSE

**W**hat many of us yearn to do, they have done—and intend to keep on doing.

When most of us see the bulldozer closing in on a once-splendid old house whose former glory has been dimmed by neglect, we find it painful to watch. It is difficult to witness the burial of our architectural past—the loss of a lovingly wrought mantel or fluted pilasters or the hand-rolled glass of a demi-lune window. To see proud craftsmanship gone to dust diminishes us.

But H.P. “Skip” Broom and William L. Oberg of Sterling City Properties in Lyme, Conn.—members of a small, scattered band of dedicated hands-on preservationists—are doing something about it. “There are more antique houses being destroyed than you can imagine. We’ve discovered there really is a network of people interested in the preservation of old houses. In fact, I just got a letter from a woman in Pennsylvania who has an old farm house she wants to sell,” said Skip Broom, whose 17-year-old construction company, H.P. Broom—Housewright, is one of the best-known and respected in this

pleasant coastal community. Long before he got together with Bill Oberg, he employed some 35 artisans, restoring old houses for year-rounders and wealthy weekenders.

Five years ago Broom was introduced to Oberg, a young Wall Street entrepreneur who was looking for property and was attracted to Lyme’s wooded landscapes and 18th-century architecture, which seemed to him the very essence of a New England picture-postcard town. “I had always loved old houses and always wanted to save them,” recalled Oberg. “I grew up in a little Massachusetts town that had a lot of old gems—but it was destroyed by developers. When I was working in New York I realized that if I was ever going to do something about this dream, I had better do it now.”

Oberg was shown a property owned in part by Broom. By the time the two men had talked and Oberg had seen Broom’s own 18th-century house (which once belonged to the classical scholar Edith Hamilton), they realized they were on the same course and might as well go it together.

In the space of a year the two were able to put together a prime 35-acre lot with a brook running through it, Nehantic State Forest

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"We want you not to know where the old leaves off and the new begins"



**Top right:** The 12-room Captain Billings house has an unusual gambrel saltbox roof and five original fireplaces. **Top left:** Lock was copied from Skip Broom's own 18th-century house. **Above:** The modern Billings kitchen under original chestnut beams. **Left:** New staircase has old chestnut treads. **Opposite:** 240-year-old paving stones lead to 1792 Loomis house. The big sugar maple is one of many mature trees the partners have planted to create a proper setting.

to look out on and two marinas within walking distance. Then they began the soul-satisfying labor of putting up antique houses rescued from imminent demolition. Their aim was to have a total of 12, each on its own secluded two-and-a-half- or three-acre site. So far they have built three. One was a former tavern built in 1753 and found in Salem, Conn. They call it the "Captain Billings" house after its first owner. Another, from Mendon, Mass., they have named after Colonel John Flynn who built it around 1800. The Loomis house was brought to Lyme from Colchester, Conn. and dates back to 1792. Two more wait in a warehouse for assembling.

"Our workmen," explained the builder, "take a tremendous interest in the projects. They are full of ideas on ways to restore or enhance the buildings. They even bring their wives out on Saturday to see what has happened during the week." He added with a laugh that there were some carpenters he employed who "hate working on old houses. They don't like it because everything is out of square. They have been trained in a sort of traditional carpentry where everything has to be plumb—so an old house frustrates them."

Each of the three houses, as reassembled, has at least three bedrooms, a large kitchen-family room, a dining room, a library and a living room. Both partners feel strongly that a house must be comfortable, equipped with modern conveniences. In this they might find themselves in conflict with historical purists, but it would be hard to take issue with the sheer comfort of the state-of-the-art kitchens and bathrooms that Oberg and Broom have designed or with such amenities as electronically powered garage doors, ceiling spot lights, walk-in cedar closets, spacious laundry rooms, and alarm systems. At the rear of the house, where it will not disturb the look of the original, may be found an addition such as a porch or French windows to ensure good light.

"We want you not to know where the old leaves off and the new begins," said Broom. Oberg added: "We make sure that every old beam or wall has been checked and is in good shape. How many owners of old houses can know that?" He pointed out that the windows each include enough antique glass panes to create a charming aged effect, but not enough, as Broom put it, "to get dizzy looking out." Hardware, if not original, has been carefully reproduced from pieces and traces Skip has found in his own 18th-century house.

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**“It’s a fussy business to take apart an old house so it doesn’t collapse into a heap of sticks”**

Although Skip Broom and Bill Oberg have added modern kitchens, bathrooms and conveniences to their rescued houses, it is the fine old details and some fine new ones that give them the most pride.

**Opposite left:** Each of the four mantelpieces from the Colonel John Flynn house has a granite facing and hearth. The top mantelpiece is original to the house, and the bottom three were copied by master carpenter Bill Lawlor from an 18th-century woodworking pattern book.

**Opposite right:** Many layers of paint obscured the intricate design of this original parlor mantel and it had to be painstakingly stripped by hand.

**Above:** Federal dignity is expressed in the keystones above these windows and the rusticated quoins. The graduated clapboard is true to the period, but is not original wood. Bill had the urn finials for the fence copied five times before he was satisfied that they were slim enough to meet the standards of the great neoclassical architect Robert Adam.

**Left:** A view from the kitchen–family room to the front door shows glowing pine floors that are original to the Colonel Flynn house. The partners had wrought-iron box locks, perfectly suited to Georgian style, copied for use throughout the house.

The restoration company in charge of this endeavor is Sterling City Properties, 162 Ferry Road, Hadlyme, Conn. 06430; 203-526-9836. The actual work of taking the houses apart and putting them back together is carried out by H.P. Broom–Housewright, same address; 203-526-9836. ►



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In their search for imperiled old houses, Oberg and Broom have focused on buying the best available buildings that are "interesting and most intact," although sometimes it means that they must turn down beautiful relics. "It is a fussy business to take apart an old house so that it doesn't collapse into a heap of sticks," Broom said, explaining that the earliest houses are the easiest to disassemble because they were constructed of solid beams.

To move a house, "first you get in and label, measure and photograph everything as it stands. Then you start to take out the window and door trim, paneling and cornices, hardware and mantels—everything you see worth saving.

"The next step would be to strip all the plaster out of the house and remove the interior partitions." Next the windows come out, as much as possible of the siding, and the floors. "Eventually you take the roof off and you end up with a standing skeleton. Then you take the frame apart—that's when you need the real specialty fellows like our master carpenters Paul McMasters, Steve Kearns and Bill Lawlor to come in. They have to take the pegs out while keeping the frame from collapsing; nail braces must hold it together. As I say, it's a very fussy process to take a house apart to the point where a crane can put it on a flat bed truck." Then it takes at least eight or nine months, Broom said, to put a house back together.

While he is responsible for overseeing construction, Bill Oberg has also taken over the landscaping of the site. "I wanted it to be just like the traditional New England setting with sugar maples and the daylilies that were brought to this country in the 1600s." Oberg has planted 110 maples, 550 hemlocks, 300 white pines, 11,000 lilies, 4,000 daffodils and no end of wild flowers. "This doesn't count the laurel, forsythia, dogwood—and of course if you are going to have rambling roses, you have to have stone walls for them to ramble over." So Oberg and Broom hired two men to work full time building 5,000 feet of running wall.

The twin villages of Hamburg and Hadlock that make up the town of Lyme initially looked askance on their project; any undertaking, no matter how high-minded, that smacked of "development" would run into controversy. However, after a year of attending meetings, articulating their vision, and placating the indignant, they obtained not only their sub-division approval but the respect of the community. And once they have sold their restored houses, will any restrictions be imposed on the owners? Absolutely, they say. But only those that will preserve the character of the place. ■

