

The GUIDE HOME

Artworks and family items are at home in granddaughter Sophia McGee's bedroom, which was also her mother's childhood bedroom. The painting is by the late Nantucket artist James deVries, a family friend. OPPOSITE, TOP, homeowners Alex and Jilly Walsh pose in front of the archway into the west garden; climbing hydrangea grows abundantly over the fence. OPPOSITE, BOTTOM, the living room features restored raised-panel shutters.



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The Evolution of 'Bachelor Hall'

For 30 years, artists Jilly and Alex Walsh have created a house of color and memory in the Connecticut countryside.

BY EDIE CLARK

What's unique about an old house is its history: who owned it, how they lived, the spirit they left behind. By the time Jilly and Alex Walsh came to live in the northeast corner of Connecticut, this Federal-style house, built in 1780, had already sheltered many lives. There was once a law office here, and then successive generations of clergy, followed by a "lone bachelor," from whom came the house's epithet, "Bachelor Hall." The house then passed to a family who raised dairy cows during the 1940s and who farmed with a team of mules before tractors were common.

In 1980, while living in New York City, Jilly and Alex saw an ad in the back of *Antiques* magazine for this venerable piece of West Woodstock history. "It sat on our desk for six months before we finally went out to see the house," Jilly recalls. At the time, Alex was managing an art gallery in Midtown and Jilly was raising their two children. Both artists, they'd met in 1965 during their first year at Rhode Island School of Design and married three years later. For more than six years, they'd lived in England, where they both had roots and family, before returning to the States, eventually settling again in New York. But they missed the countryside.





LEFT, the Walshes' gracefully appointed dining room reflects the home's Federal-era design. BELOW, interior shutters, original to the home, nicely complement 12-over-12 windows in the "blue room," where the family enjoys fireside film nights. BOTTOM, the silo and barn are reminders of the property's former incarnation as a dairy farm.



ABOVE, furnishings in the home's spare bedroom include a hand-painted Italian-made bed (with inset mirror) and side tables, dating from the 1920s. RIGHT, Sophia, age 10, relaxes in her bedroom. SIDEBAR, Jilly Walsh in her studio.

When they walked through the old plaster-walled rooms of this two-story, four-bedroom home, they admired the high ceilings and wide-board pine floors; the original raised-panel doors with black iron thumb latches; the arched doorway that provided an intriguing passageway between kitchen and dining room; the dining room's intricately trimmed cupboard; and the pine newel posts at the foot of the main staircase. (They seem simple at first, but lean closer and the subtle hammered decoration becomes clear, something like pierced tin, with images of kites, drifting.) They especially loved the nine fireplaces—every mantel distinct from the others—and the beehive oven.

Outside, they took note of the property's spacious, iconic barns, the leaning silo, the open fields surrounding the house. What artist would not love this canvas? They immediately put \$20 down and returned to New York to put their four-and-a-half-room apartment on the market; it sold for more than what they would pay for the house. "The idea of being able to swap what we had for the six acres, barns, and eleven rooms with nine fireplaces ... well, that amazed us," Alex says.

"We missed our home in England, and we thought this would be just like it, which of course it never was." Within six weeks, they'd moved in. "We moved to the back of beyond without any research," Jilly reflects. "It's a miracle we landed on our feet."

Alex started an antique art gallery ("Dead artists," he says) here, and Jilly soon founded her successful business, now known as "Jilly's Jubilee." They converted the old carriage shed into her studio. Jilly's business grew; Alex joined her as an artist. In the meantime, their children, Nick and Lisa, joined 4-H, and in the many rooms of one of those big old barns, they raised chickens, turkeys, sheep, a goat, a horse, and a pig named Snorker.



The Treasures of 'Jilly's Jubilee'

"When we first moved here, I was designing greeting cards and prints, but what I always wanted was hand-painted designs on ceramics," recalls Jilly Walsh. "So I started with trays. I took my trays and cards to the New York International Gift Fair, walked through the Italian section, and saw an exhibitor selling ceramics with fish [depicted] on the plates. That was Salvatore Termini. It was 1986. I got to know him; soon we all went to Deruta [a hill town in Italy's Umbria region], and he took us around to find the right factory, and that was the start of it. I launched soon after."

Jilly began designing hand-painted Italian-style ceramics of all kinds. Today, these objects are collectibles. In 1996, Jilly sold her first business and in 2000 took up design work for Mariposa and Henri Bendel, among others. Now she's launching her new line of ceramic designs, Jilly's Jubilee (jillysjubilee.com): individually hand-painted majolica wares produced in Deruta, and yet another enterprise emerging from Bachelor Hall.



BELOW, SIDEBAR, climbing hydrangea creeps in through the walls of the bullpen (which the Walshs have dubbed “the little house”). Note, affixed to the wall to the right of the white wicker chair, the original tether for the bull.

THE DETAIL

The Bullpen

Like the house, the property’s bullpen has had many lives. This stout little post-and-beam barn sits on a solid foundation of quarried granite. Inside, the ring that once held a bull in check by his nose remains embedded in the stone wall, but not much else is the same. At first, Jilly and Alex Walsh housed the children’s sheep here. After the animals were gone, the Cape-shaped building made a lovely showroom for Jilly’s expanding product line. It has also served as a playhouse for the grandchildren and as a sleeping place for an overflow of guests. Some years ago, Jilly and Alex added an arbor off the back and used old louvered shutters, found in the barn, as a wind screen. Their old kitchen windows brightened the interior. Jilly planted ‘American Pillar’ climbing roses at the base of the trellis. Those efforts have paid off, especially in midsummer when the roses are in full bloom, growing abundantly up the framework and onto the roof, Nantucket style. Out the back door are a café table and chairs. On good summer days, Jilly and Alex take their lunch out there in the shade of the roses’ bloom.



ABOVE and RIGHT, a family lunch in the east garden: Nick, wife Louisa, and sister Lisa (in pink) are at left, while Sophia (Lisa’s daughter) and grandmother Jilly share one side of the table, with Alex on their right. OPPOSITE, TOP, the view from inside the Walshes’ vegetable garden looks out across the field behind the bullpen.



All the while, Jilly and Alex were redoing the house, leaving it just as it was and yet gloriously transformed. Two artists and all those walls! Alex painted panels and murals, and all the rooms assumed unending hues, changing color with the owners’ moods. It was nothing for either of them to paint a room, decorate a chest, make an old table into a festive *objet d’art*. Eclectic and imaginative treasures filled the shelves and decorated the mantels. In the attic they discovered enough interior shutters for all the front rooms; a neighbor and craftsman helped restore and install them. “I love them,” Jilly points out, “because they let in the light. At night, we close them for privacy, but during the day, they’re open. I really have never liked curtains; they block the light.”

And, of course, there were gardens, vegetables, flowers, climbing roses, and climbing hydrangea. The gardens grew and the children grew up and left home, their rooms kept just as they were for their return visits, with the special small bedroom near the bathroom set aside now for the grandchildren: 30 years of a life well and happily lived, in a house filled with the accumulations of that life and of their art. A visit reveals abundant antiques, books filling shelves and toppling from stacks on tables and chairs; bright walls decorated with Alex’s paintings and Jilly’s colorful and playful ceramic platters; floors painted the color of the blue sea and of pumpkin pie; and moss-green shutters. Color dominates their lives.

Of the “lone bachelor,” a brochure devoted to the history of the houses of West Woodstock notes: “He belongs to the old school of aristocracy. Educated, eccentric, and effervescent ... exceedingly entertaining.” The house, it says, is filled with antiques and treasures and “his living room is actually littered with books and pamphlets, old and new ... For recreation, he has decorated the beautifully paneled doors, wainscoting, and shutters with paints of various hue.”

When the history of West Woodstock is updated a few generations hence, similar words may be used to describe the years when the Walshs occupied this big, beautiful house of color and memory. 🍷

For two of Jilly Walsh’s favorite recipes, visit: YankeeMagazine.com/more

