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BEST RESTORATION  
BY A HOMEOWNER  
— 2015 —



ARCHIVAL PHOTOS BY RAYMOND BARBER



## *A vernacular 1881 farmhouse and one man's preservation passion*

Embued with the spirits of the original family, the Italianate house on Long Island was a relic, a sentimental gateway to a time gone by, and, for preservationist Bert Seides, an object of reverence. He restored it, largely through his own labor and by leaving well enough alone.

BY JOYCE JACKSON | PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE GROSS & SUSAN DALEY



The 1881 gable-front Italianate house is situated in the East Moriches Historic District, out on the South Shore of Long Island in New York. It had been preserved, almost unchanged, by its long-term residents, the son and daughter of the couple who built it. Bertram Seides bought the house in 1979 and renamed it Woodlawn; it would become his passion and his home.

In the year of their marriage, a mason named James Wells Barber and his wife, Sarah Terry Benjamin Barber, built the house in the area then known as Benjaminsville, after Sarah's great-grandfather, Amariah Benjamin, whose descendants owned many of the local farms. The Barber children, Lila and Raymond, never married. Ray ran a general store and was an accomplished amateur photographer; he produced many glass negatives in a primitive darkroom set up in an outbuilding that also housed the family milk cow. His photographs documented Benjaminsville's old houses and farms; he also shot humorous images of "ghosts," cats, double exposures, and self portraits. (The photographs today are part of the collections of the Center Moriches Historical Society.) Lila kept

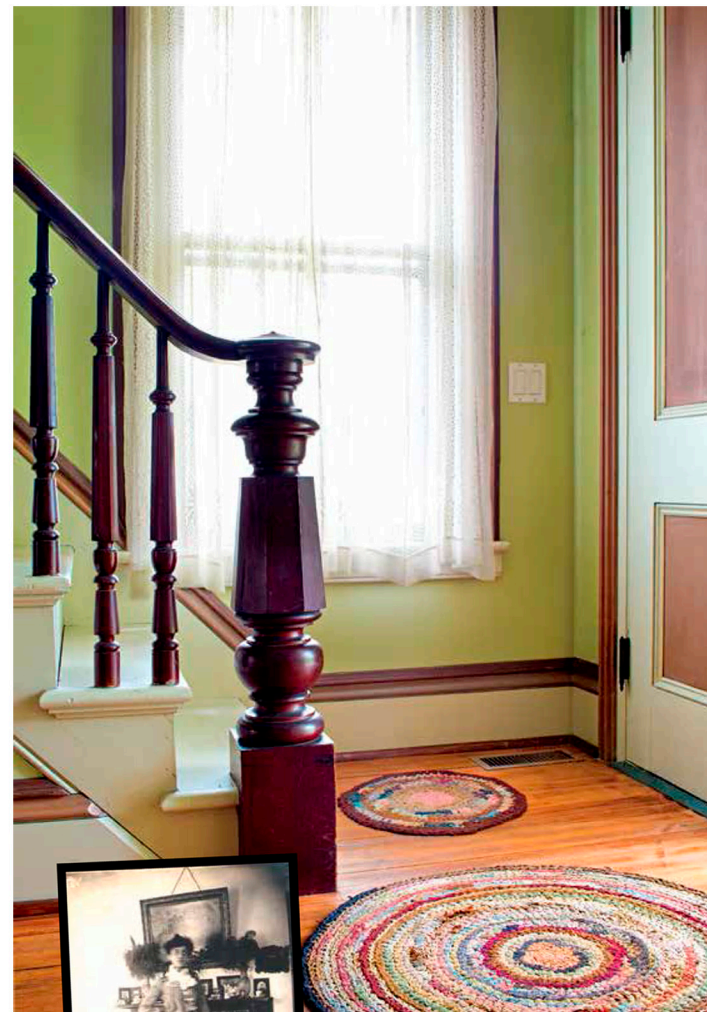
house, played organ for the Presbyterian Church, and gave lessons on the square grand piano in the parlor. She passed away in 1979, leaving the Victorian farmhouse to a distant nephew. When Bert bought it, many Barber furnishings remained in the house.

Bert's involvement actually started with another building, a 1720 settlement cottage, in nearby Eastport, slated for demolition to accommodate widening a stretch of the Montauk Highway. "The first time I saw the cottage, I fell in love with it...no one had lived in it for years," Bert remembers. "It was covered with a gorgeous climbing rose, and crowded by massive, ancient boxwoods. I was reminded of a Wallace Nutting image. It was timber-frame construction and, like every building I take on, it was in pretty rough shape. I wasn't going to let it be lost."

The structure was stabilized, but would have to be moved. Bert bought it to save it, then looked for a property where he could "plant the old cottage. The Victorian house was on that property." His subsequent restoration of the two buildings took about ten years. A third project came along in 1989, when he spearheaded efforts to save the historic Ketcham Inn.



Once the parlor where Lila Barber taught piano, this cozy room is now for formal dining. The room has its original kerosene lamp and hook, along with a pull-chain chandelier added in 1910. Fir strip flooring was laid over painted, random-width pine in 1910.



At the foot of the mahogany staircase, colorful rag rugs were made by Lila Barber (shown in the archival photo), who was the last of the original family to live here. Rugs pick up the paint colors.



## THE PRACTICE OF PRESERVATION

Bert Seides took a balanced approach that skewed toward pure preservation, but also embraced restoration (removing asbestos siding, for example) and gentle renovation (adding indoor bathrooms). His DIY tasks:

- After power-washing the exposed clapboards, Bert applied two coats of linseed oil cut with thinner, then a pigmented primer and finally the finish coats, matched to original colors.
- He rebuilt the rotted porch, saving columns and ornate brackets for reinstallation.
- He reroofed the house with cedar shingles.
- To conceal a small refrigerator and freezer, Bert built a beadboard island matching the original kitchen finishes.
- He scraped and painted plaster inside, and redid the old faux finish in a bedroom.
- Although new plumbing, heating, and electrical systems were done by pros, Bert reports he helped the electrician fish wire so plaster wouldn't be harmed.



A rare surviving example of the modern kitchen ca. 1880, the room was updated with a 1952 range.



**ABOVE:** Bert Seides found the Chambers gas stove at a Salvation Army store—in working condition. **TOP:** The cupboard was used for cool food storage; it opens both to the kitchen and back hall. The low tin-lined box was probably used to store milk. **RIGHT:** A wooden island houses the small fridge and freezer. [The marble table is temporary, destined for a visitor center related to the Ketcham Inn.]



#### PAINT COLORS

Original paint colors, now restored, remained under a coat of whitewash that was scraped off the walls.

#### PLUMBING THE SINK

The dry sink is original; a neighbor provided the vintage porcelain sink that fit perfectly inside, and running water was added.





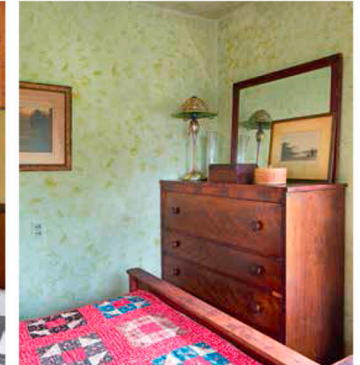
The farmhouse was in a state of neglect. The property was densely overgrown, the barn long gone, some outbuildings in danger of collapse. The house was not attractive to any other buyers; for one thing, there was no indoor bathroom. But it was also remarkably preserved. "I removed asbestos-shingle siding to find the original paint," Bert says. "After slathering it in linseed oil, I gave the house its second-ever paint job."

Inside, many doors had only the factory coat of paint. "Once the Barbers built their house and did their color schemes, they never changed anything. It was a rare find," Bert says. "This is the most original of all the houses I've been in. It embodies Victorian architecture in its heyday. Sure, there are many Victorians in San Francisco, or Long Island, but very few that haven't been rebuilt and remodeled. I was interested in every detail of this house. I wanted to preserve what had survived."

Bert had a shoestring budget and tackled most restoration jobs himself, from nailing shingles on the roof to building a cabinet for the original kitchen. Doors and trim were left as they were. Ceilings and walls, however, needed work. Unlike most Victorian homes, this one had no wallpaper. The Barbers instead had chosen bright, bold colors done in calcimine paint. Calcimine is a water-based mix of chalk and glue binder, which later paints will not bond to. "It was a nightmare," Bert says. "I spent hour upon hour scraping, washing, and rinsing repeatedly to get rid of the chalky residue." Then he primed and painted everything in oil paint, exactly matching those original colors. "I never used a roller, but hand-brushed to get the right texture."

Other houses in the area belonging to the extended Barber family are said to be very colorful, too. (One was moved up island to the Old Bethpage Village Restoration.) "The Barbers lived here, in this house, and experienced these colors," Bert muses. Amidst his own family heirlooms, antiques, and collectibles, Bert lives with things that belonged to the Barber family: Lila's braided rugs, a table in the kitchen, Ray's quilt. A large Victorian mirror still hangs in the parlor. Lila's room holds an

**RIGHT:** Curtain rods remain in place; the bedroom has some of the local furniture, from primitive to Victorian, collected by the homeowner. **BELOW:** In the bath addition downstairs, an antique clawfoot tub and porcelain sconces are period touches. The bed and red quilt remain in "Ray's room," where the current owner re-created the original, sponge-dabbed finish damaged by calcimine paint. **OPPOSITE:** Louvered shutters and exterior paint colors are original.



### ANOTHER PROJECT DEAR TO HIS HEART: THE KETCHAM INN

In 1989, the historic Ketcham Inn, at the heart of Center Moriches, was threatened by the wrecking ball. Bertram Seides and a group of local people launched a grassroots effort to save the building. During the Revolutionary War, Benjamin Havens ran an inn and tavern here while spying for the Patriot cause, possibly as a member of George Washington's Culper Spy Ring. It was Havens and other innkeepers who in 1772 proposed that there be a coach route (King's Highway), from

Brooklyn to Sag Harbor, which would make at stop in Moriches.

Around 1790, Havens sold the inn to William Terry; Terry's Hotel was visited by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Terry descendants sold the inn to Andrew Ketcham of Huntington in 1852. During the Ketcham era, the inn also was used for voting and local court proceedings; volunteer soldiers drilled on the property during the Civil War. The inn stayed in the Ketcham family until 1912. Later named the Clinton Inn, Wayside Inn, Hitching Post, Colonial Arms, and Stage Coach Stop, the inn would remain

in continuous use until August of 1989. At that pivotal moment, a destructive though contained fire set the stage for its rebirth as a landmark.

Bert received the Howard C. Sherwood Award from the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities, for his dedicated advocacy of preservation. This past Fourth of July, the building was opened to the public for the first time in many years, a living-history museum interpreting over 300 years of history here on Long Island's South Shore.

To learn more, visit [ketchaminn.org](http://ketchaminn.org)



**ABOVE:** The earliest portion may date to the late 1600s. Additions followed over the next hundred years. **FAR LEFT:** The Foundation has mounted a thorough restoration of the inn, inside and out.



*Every object tells a story... shards from a dig at the Ketcham Inn, a chair found in pieces crafted from tools on display now at Winterthur.*



**BELOW:** The 1920s cabinet on the left is from the time when the room was an office. This owner built a matching bank to make the room a library. Visiting art-school friends painted the plaster ceiling, which had failed and was replaced. **LEFT:** Humorous antique silver salt and pepper shakers and an ancient Chinese bowl sit with fragments found under the floor of the Ketcham Inn. **BELOW LEFT:** The antique chair was in pieces in a nearby barn.



The gilded picture rail is original. One remaining picture hanger prompted a search for antique tassels and cords. The lemon-silk sofa is from the Center Moriches Historical Society's museum shop. Seeing the same mantel in the double exposure of Lila, taken by her brother, Ray Barber, provokes goosebumps.

old jelly cupboard and a portrait of her father, James Barber. Ray made the sailboat model that sits in the library.

The house is rich with stories. Bert found an antique chair in pieces when he was cleaning out an old barn in Quogue. It turns out to have been made by the renowned Dominy family (active 1750–1850), from whose East Hampton workshops Henry du Pont bought 800 tools to display at Winterthur. Over the stove hangs an Eastlake-style oil lamp, original to the house but missing its fragile mercury reflector. Bert replaced it with one he'd been given when he was 12 years old.

Every repair or improvement was carefully considered. New lighting added by Bert is operated by switch, for example, but the original lights retain their pull chains. A bathroom window casing is original, unused millwork dating from the 1881 construction and found in an outbuilding. The bathrooms are the only major change to the house.

"I thought about how to add a bathroom," Bert says. There had been only a kind of attached outhouse. "I didn't want to disfigure the house, so I saw no choice but to build an addition." (It's visible to the right of the house in the photo on p. 12.) The small two-storey structure, clad in shingles, provides a bathroom on each floor. Access is unobtrusive: through a former closet door under the stairs, and from the upstairs landing. The house's original clapboards are there on one wall of the downstairs bath.

Bert was born and raised on his parent's mink farm in Center Moriches, where hired hands used to call him "the little architect." He studied architecture in New York City but remains a full-time resident of East Moriches. He serves as president of the Ketcham Inn Foundation and also of the Center Moriches Historical Society. Bert Seides is quite literally at home with history.

FOR RESOURCES, SEE PAGE 95.



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