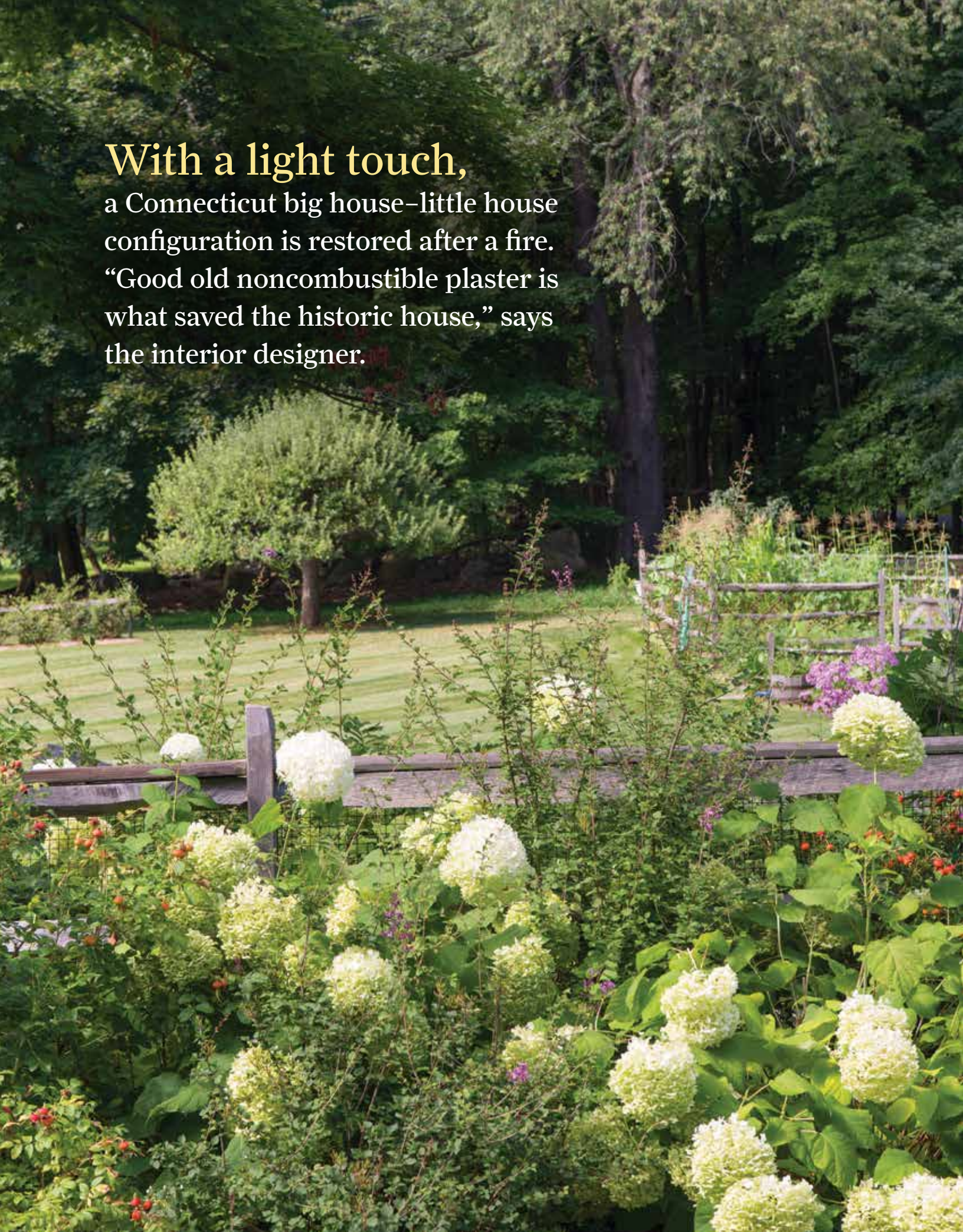


With a light touch,
a Connecticut big house–little house
configuration is restored after a fire.
“Good old noncombustible plaster is
what saved the historic house,” says
the interior designer.





Rebirth *of a ca. 1830* **Farmhouse**

BY PATRICIA POORE / PHOTOGRAPHS BY STACY BASS

THIS STORY IS ABOUT THE RESCUE of an antique Connecticut farmhouse, which got a sympathetic renovation after a fire. Parts of it were severely damaged from smoke and water. Then, inspections turned up structural problems and areas that needed to be brought up to code. Happily, the main house was mostly intact. A small bath had been added many years ago, upstairs at the end of a hall, and a kitchen put into the old, one-storey ell.

“I saw a house with plenty of history to preserve,” says interior designer Sarah Blank, “yet it needed to be made functional for the 21st century.” Sarah’s clients, the Ross family, had an emotional tie to the old house and agreed to a preservation approach. “We decided to add a second floor above the ell, for a master suite to include a needed second bathroom. Although the original chestnut



ABOVE Unfussy but pretty, the gardens surrounding the house include a private pool area and a vegetable patch. (inset) A classical bust is among the garden ornaments. **OPPOSITE** Like the Federal-period farmhouse and rooms inside, the garden is a simple country affair, with split-rail fences and hardy cottage-garden shrubs and flowers.



RIGHT Purchased at an estate sale, the antique dry sink with its original blue paint survived the fire and was professionally cleaned. The Victorian bird cage is a favorite piece. **LEFT** The house's original framing was all chestnut. Reusing and exposing some of it during the restoration added to the ambience.



LEFT In the family parlor, the embellished mantelpiece and split door (which leads to a closet) are original, and suggest that part of the house dates to ca. 1820. **BELOW** (left) Original iron hardware in the house has been supplemented with new, blacksmith-made pieces. (right) Chestnut timbers were repurposed to frame the new master bedroom. They were painted white to brighten the room. **OPPOSITE** (bottom) The boxed back stair remains in its original location, leading from the dining room to bedrooms upstairs.





the millwork

Some elements survived the fire to be cleaned and restored or reclaimed: windows, a mantelpiece (above), the back stair. The chestnut frame was largely intact and reused or repurposed. After reconstruction according to modern building codes, the interior is virtually new, but woodwork and trim were patterned after what was here before.

framing and wall boards were found insufficient by the building inspector, the wood from this area of the house was salvaged and used for decorative purposes in the rebuild.”

Sarah Blank, a Connecticut native who continues to study classical architecture, has been involved in the restoration of houses dating back to the mid 1700s. “I’ve spent a lot of time with Thomas Hubka’s *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn,*” she says, referencing the seminal book about New England’s historic vernacular dwellings.

“When I got here, I realized that this house is a jewel, with its classic simplicity untouched.” The main block is the “big house,” with a “little house” connector to a “back house” later addition. Blank insisted that the ell and back house remain secondary to the main house in size, finishes, and importance, but the original proportions carry throughout the whole.

Using the old glass, the original windows were salvaged and restored, and new windows upstairs match exactly: They are single-glazed, multi-light wood windows with lead counterweights. “We had heat-loss calculations done,” Blank explains, “and due to the thickness of exterior walls and adequate insulation, the single-glazed ‘new old’ windows meet code. The house is quite warm and cozy.”



VENETIAN CARPET

Affordable, woven wool striped carpeting was very popular for staircases in the 19th century. This one is by Thistle Hill Weavers.



ABOVE Based on its framing and the local historical society's estimate, the vernacular house dates to ca. 1820, the ell to ca. 1830. The white body and trim with black shutters is a classic 19th-century New England color scheme.



ABOVE Painted walls in the dining room were ragged by a decorator friend of the owners.

The chandelier, a Colonial Revival take on an original, is by Scofield Lighting.

LEFT The old wood floor was painted in a traditional checkerboard pattern, set on the diagonal, with a plain border.



LIGHT FILLED

The kitchen in the ell had to be completely rebuilt due to structural concerns. Its design was kept simple: Shaker style, honed stone, plaster walls—and almost no upper wall cabinets.

kitchen's tale

The kitchen in the ell had to be dismantled and rebuilt, in order to support the second floor, which contains the new master bedroom and bath. All the old timbers were reused in the reconstruction.

Befitting the farmhouse, the kitchen design is frank, simple, and functional. Simple cabinets have a Shaker feeling. The refrigerator is masked behind cabinet fronts. A modest island holds a prep sink and beverage cooler.

New plaster-on-lath walls in the room were left unpainted, their hard surface beautiful as-is. Neutral grey paint on the cabinets softens the transition from the pale plaster to the black-granite counters. Everything feels timeless and elemental: wood floor, metal hood, stone counters, wrought-iron hardware.

On the window wall, the absence of wall-hung cabinets is period-sensitive, and opens up the room to light. The custom range hood is standing-seam metal. Hardware is blacksmith-made wrought iron.





OVERSHOT

Overshot-weave coverlets were made with a plain woven undyed cotton warp and weft; repeating geometric patterns were made with a supplementary dyed woolen weft.



LEFT Trim in the master bath matches that in the en-suite bedroom. **ABOVE** The guest bath has the only tub, a historical and functional built-in with a soapstone cap on the surround. The sink area and WC are separate.



Many interior details were restored or re-created, and many furnishings and artwork conserved. “I have to say, Chubb Group was amazing,” Sarah Blank says about the insurance carrier, who offers a historic-house policy. “The company understood the family’s love of this house and its history. They were present through the entire project.

“We were able to save the original chestnut framing, which was reincorporated in the reconstruction and design,” Blank says. The restoration, including the upstairs addition and kitchen and bath remodeling, was completed in record time in 2011. “Brian Ross, the homeowner, loves this old farmhouse,” his designer says. “He wanted to preserve its architectural heritage. All new walls are real, hand-troweled, three-coat plaster on wire lath. The finish is beautiful . . . there’s no drywall anywhere. In the kitchen, new plaster walls were left unpainted.

“I am a realistic designer,” Blank says. “We are all getting older, not younger! Brian’s office on the ground floor can become the master bedroom, if necessary, in the future.” Next to it she specified an accessible bathroom with a three-foot doorway and curbless shower—the shower floor is recessed into the basement.

DECORATING AND FURNISHING was a collaborative effort between the designer and Ross. “This is a country house,” Sarah Blank explains. “In general, we returned the house to what it had been before the fire. Plain plaster walls, plain window treat-



ABOVE The hall window is above the front door. The large cupboard is very old and was purchased at auction. The fixture is an authentic reproduction.

OPPOSITE Tall-post beds in the house are 20th-century reproductions. This one was repainted. The appliqued pillow shams were made by a local woman, who also made the draperies.



Renovation returned the country house to its roots, “what it had been before the fire,” says the designer. Plaster walls and simple treatments are the rule, even in new spaces.

ments. We added bathrooms, of course, but they are naïve in their design: wood floors, very simple vanity cabinets, a built-in bathtub. Everything simple.”

Furnishings include a mix of antiques and comfortable leather and upholstered pieces. A lot of the furniture already in the house was salvageable, after being professionally cleaned and reupholstered as necessary. Artwork, too, was restored.

“The house did not have a name, as far as we knew,” says Blank. “I asked the Rosses to pick one: It’s Colinwood, in honor of their son. In so many ways, this project was a labor of love.”

FOR RESOURCES, SEE PAGE 95.

ABOVE The study fireplace was replaced in kind, as the original was charred in the fire. In several rooms, trim colors were matched to what had been in the house, but it’s unclear if they are the original colors. **LEFT** The designer reverted to double-hung windows, replacing a 1960s picture window in the study. **TOP RIGHT** A full basement went in under the rebuilt ell, becoming a wine cellar with board walls made from the original chestnut sub-flooring.