

Traditional Design, Modern Construction

A new farmhouse features historically inspired details executed with low-maintenance materials

BY IAN McDONALD



In the 1840s, Gabriel Crook, a local carpenter, builder, and architect, designed and built four Greek-revival houses on Shelter Island, N.Y. In the tradition of the time, all the materials used in their construction were milled or manufactured locally and transported by boat from Long Island and New England. Crook left the island in 1849 to seek fortune in California's gold rush, but his houses remain and continue to inspire those who live and visit here. As a resident of Shelter Island, I once had the great opportunity to study one of the four Crook houses in detail. I planned one day to build myself a house that would be inspired by his work.

When new clients approached me to design their new house, they were under contract to purchase 2.6 acres that backed up against Sylvester Manor, the original island homestead dating to

1652. The property also edged Dering Harbor, a village with approximately 30 formal, white-painted colonial houses. Like many who decide to build on this island, they were looking for a traditional design that would fit the regional architecture. However, instead of a historical reproduction, they wanted the house to have a contemporary quality and be easy to manage and maintain. The house also had to be large enough in size to accommodate visits from their extended family.

In one of our early meetings, I showed the clients a sketch of the Greek-revival farmhouse I was planning to build for myself, based on my study of Crook's house. They were instantly drawn to it. So began the challenge of constructing a new house that looked old to complement a modern way of living and a rich island history.

My interpretation of a pattern-book style

As the Greek-revival style made its way from cities to the countryside through the use of pattern books, the details were often simplified or changed as the result of builder interpretation and the availability of local building materials. Just as the old carpenters interpreted details from pattern books, I chose to interpret the details of the old house that I had studied. Looking at a house that is 160 years old, you can't always tell whether all the details are original to the structure or if they were replaced or altered in the course of its history.

During my study of the Crook original, I took careful measurements of the various elements, down to the size of the different dentils. I made adjustments, but the old house served as my pattern throughout the process. By working through its details, I believe that the original spirit of

the old house has been realized in this new structure.

House shape suggests a long history

After developing a list of requirements with my clients, I typically go through a few rounds of hand-drawn sketches that try to accommodate and organize all their requests. Instead of placing all these spaces or functions in a simple one- or two-layer box, I try to break them apart. This way, the house is allowed to develop additions or wings. The end result is often a house that appears to have been added on to over many years: a new house with historic charm.

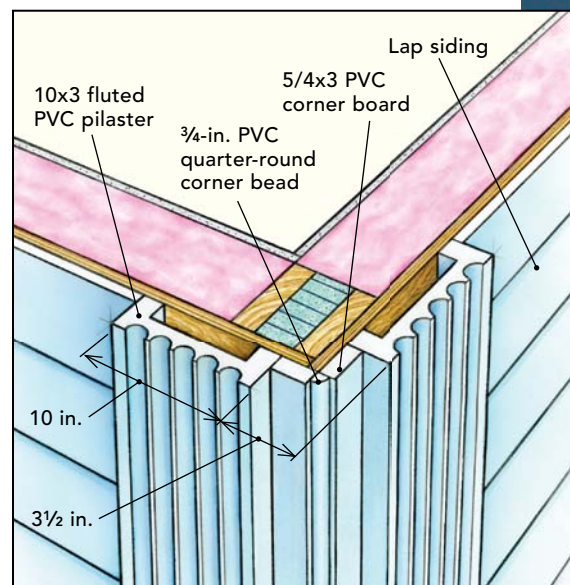
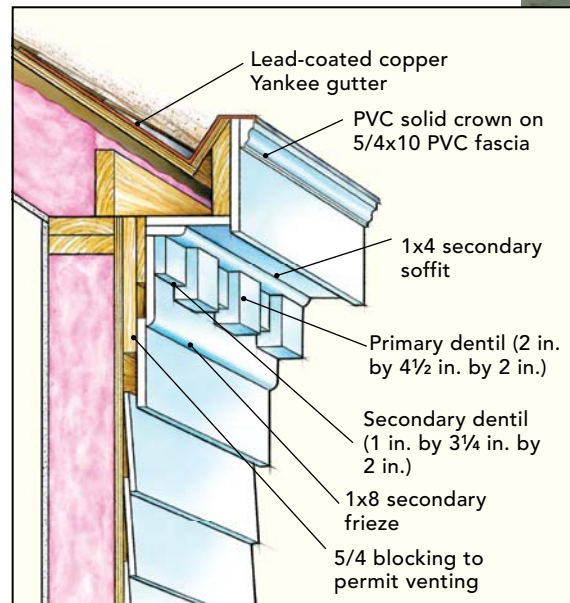
On this project, the site constraints called for a long, narrow house and garage perpendicular to the harbor. Basing the house on the 22-ft.-wide Crook model, I developed a plan that used two of his houses like bookends connected by a "bridge" section in the middle. The powder room, guest bedrooms and their bathrooms, staircases, and laundry went in the rear book-end, which opened the entire first floor in the front section. The design allowed expansive harbor views from the living and dining room, the kitchen, and the three-season porch. The garage became a barnlike detached structure that allowed us to create an outdoor room between the two buildings.

A farmhouse facade that is sure to last

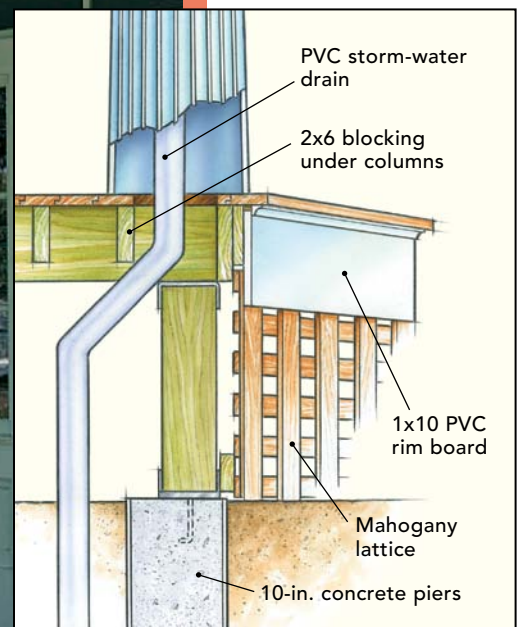
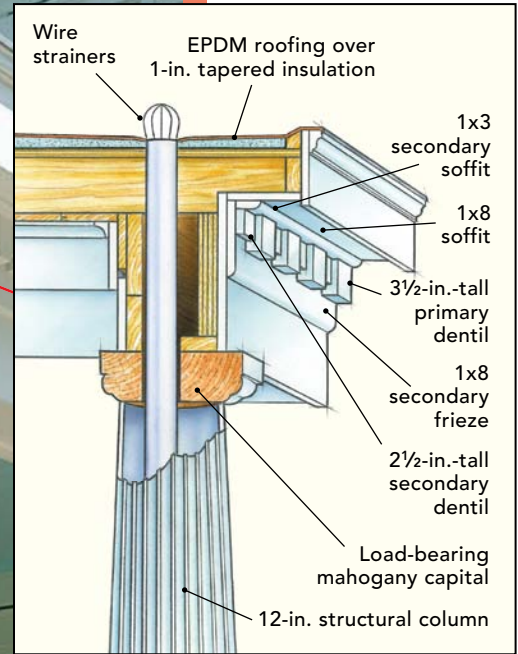
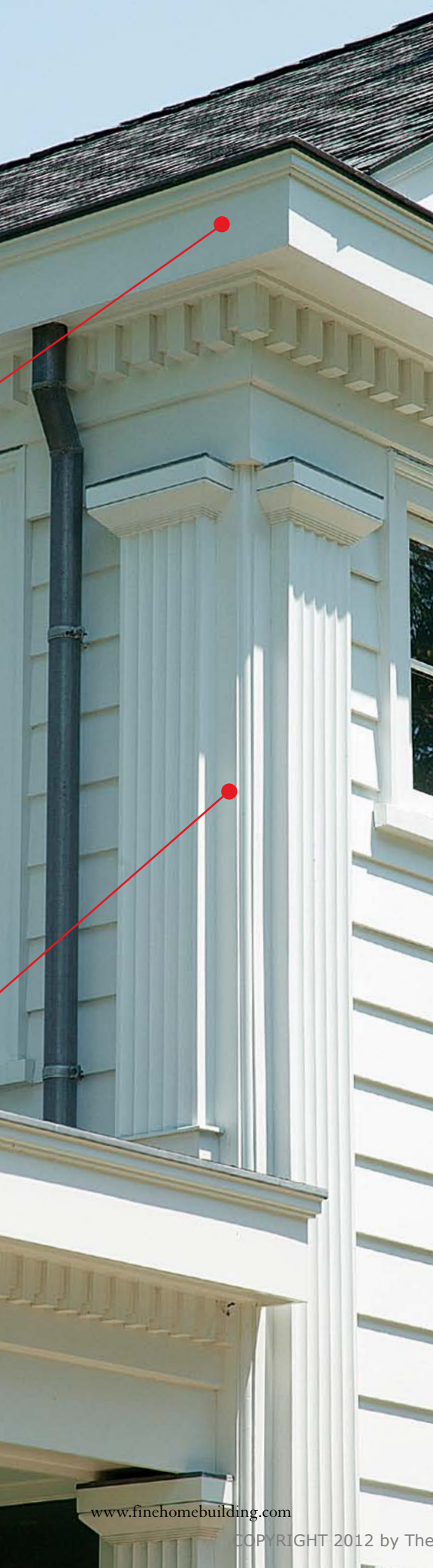
All around Shelter Island and the eastern end of Long Island stand simple farmhouses that are utilitarian in size, layout, and detail. Almost all have a covered porch, and on many, the porch extends across the entire front of the house. The fronts of the houses have symmetrically placed 2-over-2 double-hung windows on the first floor, and

A PATTERN FOR DURABLE EXTERIOR DETAILS

Greek eaves. The eave is composed of primary and secondary soffits and friezes to give an additional level of detail and to ease the dentil assembly. The secondary soffit and frieze were sized in place and then assembled indoors before being installed. The smaller, secondary dentils were varied in width so that a larger dentil would land on each corner perfectly.



Custom corners. Ten-in. pilasters were specified for the corners so that their capitals would be of a similar proportion to the 12-in. column capitals supporting the porch roof. The pilasters were located so that their capitals would return fully on the corner boards.



Innovative use of stock columns. Fluted structural fiberglass Tuscan columns with mahogany Doric capitals support the porch roof. PVC down pipes are hidden in the columns to drain storm water off the main roof and porch roof. This approach to water management maintains a clean, crisp exterior elevation.

SPECS

Bedrooms: 6 **Bathrooms:** 5½ **Size:** 2755 sq. ft. (house); 695 sq. ft. (garage) **Cost:** \$349 per sq. ft.
Completed: 2010 **Location:** Shelter Island, N.Y. **Architect:** Ian McDonald **Builder:** Brett Poleshuk

smaller 2-over-2 double-hung windows on the second.

Crook's house shared many of these same attributes, but had been adorned with elements common to the Greek-revival style: dentiled friezes, door-size 2-over-2 double-hung units made to look like French casement windows, fluted columns, an entry door wrapped in fluted trim, and corner boards made to look like fluted pilasters.

Unlike the carpenters of the past, we were able to source materials that are less likely to rot. Most of the exterior trim—frieze boards, fascia, crown, dentils, water tables, pilasters, and corner boards—are made of cellular PVC. The columns are made of structural fiberglass, and the siding is made of fiber cement. I chose Marvin windows with wood frames and metal-clad sashes for this house. The clad sashes better protect the operational components of the windows, and only the flat work, jambs, and casings required painting.

On Shelter Island, we are required to design for a 120-mph three-second wind gust. We must either install window sashes with hurricane-rated glass or provide ½-in. plywood panels that can be screwed to the framing beneath the exterior window casings in the event of

a storm. For cost reasons, most homeowners opt for the plywood panels. With their wood frames and casings, the window units we used are much easier to repair after they have been screwed through than windows with aluminum-clad casings.

Appropriately detailing a contemporary interior

The homeowners had lived previously in a formal colonial house with a separate entry, living and dining room, library, and kitchen, and now wanted an open floor plan. The less formal approach to the layout was also more in tune with the rural character of the area.

Instead of the formal rooms, I designed a living room that has four areas: an entry, a seating area, a reading nook, and a dining area. The kitchen, which is located in the “bridge,” is set apart from the other living spaces by a large cased opening. This gives it a modern open feel while maintaining the traditional notion of separation. The cased opening and a wall containing several windows looking onto a pond created some significant storage challenges.

To resolve this, I designed an island that houses the sink, the dishwasher, and a recycling bin on one side and that functions as a table on the other. I placed

the island 4 ft. from the range to allow movement to and from the back of the house. The south wall is sectionalized into functions. The area closest to the living room holds wine glasses and a small bar sink. The range, microwave, and cooking gear are in the middle section. Close to the rear door and refrigerator is a pantry section with floor-to-ceiling storage.

The architect/builder relationship

On any project, collaboration is key. I found contractor Brett Poleshuk, with whom I had not previously worked, to be just as interested in the idiosyncrasies of the house as I. His willingness to explore unfamiliar details by reviewing pattern books, surfing online, or examining local houses enabled him to propose creative ways to achieve the sought-after aesthetic.

Since the house's completion in 2010, I repeatedly get asked two questions: “Was this a difficult renovation?” and “When was the original house constructed?” I can think of no better accolade for our efforts. □

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The Crook collection

The four Greek-revival homes built by Gabriel Crook still stand on Shelter Island, including the one that served, in many ways, as the pattern for this new home (photo near right).



A PLAN FOR A CONTEMPORARY INTERIOR



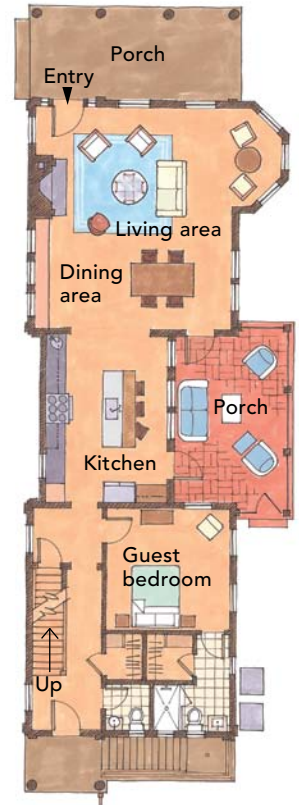
An open kitchen creates a modern feel. A commanding island with a 2-in.-thick statuary top and a 2¼-in.-thick white-oak top runs parallel to a wall of upper and lower cabinets with honed absolute-black granite countertops. The kitchen opens onto a screened porch to the north and into the living and dining room to the west.

An ornamental entry with multipurpose details. A paneled door closely mirroring that in the Crook house opens onto the main living space. Above a Rumford fireplace, a mantel from Decorators Supply of Chicago features egg-and-dart trim details and fits the character of the space, while a built-in bookcase also serves as a buffet when entertaining guests and as a chase to hide unsightly HVAC supply and return grilles.



The typical 1840s farmhouse, such as the Crook house, had a small footprint: roughly 22 ft. wide by 26 ft. deep with numerous small rooms. By comparison, this design has a living room equivalent to the entire Crook first floor, including the bay window.

The new floor plan puts two Crook-style houses to use and bridges the gap between them with a kitchen on the first floor and an office on the second floor.



First floor North ▼



Second floor

0 2 4 8 ft.