



Above: "Wait before making changes," Barbara counsels. Her addition is invisible from the front. Above Right: The 1645 house, a library today. Far Right: A spacious new room was framed with old barn timbers. Right: A guest bedroom dates to ca. 1700.



FIRST PERIOD
CAPE ANN
THE THOMAS
RIGGS HOUSE

owner: Barbara Lambert

location: 27 Vine Street, Gloucester, Massachusetts

date of house: 1645, with 1700 and 1995 additions. Minor alterations in 1753 and 1910.

ongoing project: To learn more about the beautifully detailed sailboats scratched into the wood paneling in several rooms.

of interest: William Sumner Appleton, a pioneering preservationist, told the Riggs family not to remove original plaster. Hence, a section is displayed in the library.

table, and the couch is drawn close to a ca. 1910 fieldstone fireplace. Track lights on the ceiling beams shine down onto Barbara's reading materials, but new additions and technology don't matter here. The room feels ancient.

"This is the log house Riggs bought in 1661," Barbara Lambert explains. "He and his wife, Mary Millett, brought up seven children in this 16' x 16' room. Besides being the town clerk, he served as a selectman for 20 years, was a schoolmaster, a surveyor, and he was a representative to the Great Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In fact," Barbara's eyes sparkle, "he and several others protested the tax policies of Governor Andros." An archivist and historian, Barbara relishes the notion that her home has connections to a colorful bit of history. (Sir Edmund Andros was so hated by colonists that they threw him into a Boston jail in 1689.)

But Barbara didn't set out to own the oldest extant house in Gloucester, Massachusetts, a seaport about thirty miles north and east of Boston. Originally from Ohio, she was working in Boston, first at the Mu-

seum of Fine Arts, then as curator of the Shirley-Eustis House.

"I was living in the kitchen wing of a Federal house in Charlestown, with an enclosed garden, and gas lamps...it was charming, and I loved it. The "buy-me" catalogues always came to my door, and I always threw them out. This house caught my eye, but I had no intention of moving, although the realtor handling the sale kept calling me up. The house included 6½ acres and developers were licking their chops. The zoning here was ½ acre; they wanted to raze this house and put up tons of new ones," Barbara shakes her head.

"Still, I wasn't about to buy, until England's Landmarks Trust got involved. They wanted the house, and intended to take off the dormers and install heated towel bars in the bathrooms.

"Well, that was it. I suddenly heard myself saying, 'Wait a minute—I saw it first!'"

And so Barbara Lambert saved the 1645 Riggs House from destruction by developers and desecration by towel bars. She bought it from the last, childless member of the Riggs family, who had made amaz-

ingly few changes over the years.

Nonetheless, she did want the comforts they had never installed: modern heat, air-conditioning, electricity, plumbing, and a working kitchen. She designed an addition that brings natural light and utilities into the old house without undue disturbance. When an ominous bulge in a ceiling turned out to be the result of powder post beetles, she opted not to replace it. "We jacked the ceiling up so it was level, vacuumed the plaster, and poured a high-grade epoxy over the lath. It sealed those bugs, and I still have the lovely old plaster. And I didn't put cement liners into chimneys built of old, soft brick—I used clay.

"Hiring carpenters is the hardest part. They all love nail guns," she shudders. "One was good, but slow as molasses. Another was incredibly arrogant. A third, said he knew what he was doing, but he couldn't shingle the log house roof properly."

There was the carpenter who never showed up at crucial times, leaving plumbers stabled on the job. One brought in a crew she believes were involved with drugs. Some carried off her tools and materials. But Barbara has coping mechanisms. "If you're not sure a carpenter has the skills and appreciation needed for old houses, present him with a problem and ask how he'd handle it. If you don't agree with his approach, see whether he's flexible and willing to consider other ways.

"Scribing is really important, since in this house nothing is flat, or at right angles. Fit and peg in the old style, instead of relying on nail guns and glue. Don't use polyurethane as a clear finish; linseed oil is more compatible. In fact," she pauses for emphasis, "use materials as close to the originals as possible, and do what is reversible whenever possible."

Barbara is now happy and comfortable in her old house. She runs it as a bed and breakfast inn and yes, she has found a good, sensitive carpenter. Who is he? "No one gives out his name, and he has an unlisted phone number," she says. "Among the people who hire him, he's our secret." 🐾