

OLD-HOUSE

PERIOD-INSPIRED HOME DESIGN

INTERIORS

oldhouseinteriors.com

english country

ANTIQUES & WARMTH
IN A MODEST '30s TUDOR

TV CAMOUFLAGE
hide your flat screen

bark houses

THE ART OF TWIG AND TIMBER

KITCHEN COUNTERS

BEST OF
OLD & NEW

OCTOBER 2009

\$4.95



Display Unit (November 9, 2009)

old-world traditions

METALCRAFT GUTTERS
GARDEN STONEMWORK

LIFE AT *The Flags*

A careful restoration revives a cabin in the Catskills that belonged to the wife of General Custer.

BY BRIAN D. COLEMAN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY EDWARD ADDEO



LEFT: The living room is warm and inviting, with antique oriental rugs, Thebes stools, kilim pillows, and comfortable club chairs flanking the fireplace. The window seat is covered in Clarence House's "Rayures" fabric in the Cogolin/Ruby colorway.
BELOW: Green paint and cedar shingles embody the Catskills vernacular; bark siding covers the first level near the entry.



BRAVE AND FEARLESS HERO, a soldier who sacrificed his life at the Battle of Little Big Horn—that's the long-held image of General George Custer. The truth since has been revealed: Custer was a big loser. Last in his class at West Point, court-martialed and nearly kicked out of the Army for leaving his post to visit his wife, Custer was killed in 1876 after he ignored strategic advice from his staff. He left his wife, Libby, penniless. To support herself, she wrote books about her husband and his career, a fictionalized account of the hero he'd never been. Her books became bestsellers, furthering his mythology and not incidentally allowing her to build a house, in 1899, at Onteora, the artists' colony that her friend Candace Wheeler had established in New York's Catskill Mountains. She called the house "The Flags." (She often waved flags at events held in honor of



The house had been abandoned

for nearly a decade, allowed to deteriorate to the point where it was condemned.

her deceased husband; “flags” is also a name for the wild mountain irises in the region.)

With a wide front parlor and porch to take in sweeping views, the “camp” was furnished simply. Walls and ceilings were clad in beadboard

panels. Golden birch logs, bark on, were used in the staircase. Mementos of Custer were scattered throughout the house: His canteen and copper mess kit held a place of honor on the mantel, and a pair of horns from a bull he’d shot headed the archway



LEFT: The warm tones of the aged fir beadboard in the parlor nicely complement the tones of the terra-cotta, Arts & Crafts “Rossetti” wallpaper in the dining room. The ca. 1900 floor lamp and stenciled parchment shade came from a local antiques shop. **ABOVE:** Interior designer Iliana Moore has restored several of Onetora’s historic cottages.

into the dining room. Mrs. Custer died at age 91, in the middle of the Great Depression, having sold her house shortly before her death. It was to have only one other owner before the current owners purchased the house in 2000.

THE HOUSE had been abandoned for nearly a decade, allowed to deteriorate to the point where it was condemned. Floors were rotted and unsafe; mildewed plaster from ceilings showered rooms with falling debris; the porch was falling off; woodwork was covered with threatening black mold. The grounds were so tangled with weeds and a rusting Volkswagen, it was difficult to reach the front door. Still, it was a diamond in the rough with wide window seats and rustic charm. Fir woodwork had never been painted; Custer’s canteen and mess kit were still there.

The owners contacted Iliana Moore, a designer who has helped restore several of the Onetora cottages.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Branches of golden birch, bark intact, form the railings of the back-hall stairs. The dining room features a rustic beadboard and twig hutch original to the house, filled with sparkling luster transferware. A guest bedroom features an Arts & Crafts slatted chair; its seat is recovered with Lee Jofa’s “Malika Crewel”; it sits on Woodard & Greenstein’s “Wainscott” carpet. General Custer memorabilia displayed on a twig table includes bull horns from a shoot, and a 1904 Onetora Fair Poster advertising flags, an event promoted by Custer’s widow, Libby.





The kitchen is open and airy, with a long bank of windows and French doors leading to the side porch; the trestle table was custom made by a local artisan. The center island has a practical food-prep sink.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The complementary colors of autumn are vivid in wild apples from the orchard. Vintage transferware (filled with eggs from the local market) rests on a 19th-century oriental carpet draped across the kitchen table. Enjoying the dappled afternoon sun on the front porch overlooking the Catskills is Millie, designer Iliana Moore's cocker spaniel.

Victorian Amazons: ONTEORA'S WOMEN

The enclave of Onteora, New York, was founded as an artists' retreat by Candace Wheeler, and it attracted women important to the culture of the Victorian era. Some of its best-known residents:

- **Candace Wheeler (1827-1923)** The "Mother of Interior Design," Wheeler wrote books on decorating that set a standard for a generation; a collaborator of Louis Comfort Tiffany, she was a tireless promoter of women in the arts.
- **Mary Mapes Dodge (1831-1905)** A children's author, she founded *St. Nicholas* magazine and wrote the all-time classic *Hans Brinker, or The Silver Skates*.
- **Jeannette Thurber (1850-1946)** She was founder of the National Conservatory of Music of America and the American Opera Company, the country's first music and opera schools.
- **Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer (1851-1934)** Well-known author and literary critic whose work on architect H.H. Richardson is still considered the standard reference; she also was known for her books on landscaping.
- **Mary Knight Wood (1859-1944)** An important composer and musician who wrote more than 50 songs, including the popular "Ashes of Roses," played at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.
- **Maude Adams (1872-1953)** The most successful and famous American actress of her day, she was best known for her role as Peter Pan on Broadway in 1905.

Slowly, Libby Custer's beloved home re-emerged.

Restoration at The Flags was substantial, beginning with the foundation, insulation, and systems. The exterior was redone as it had been built, with a lower course of bark-on split logs, and clear-sealed wood shingles above. Trim was painted the classic cottage green ("Chrome Green" from Benjamin Moore). Rotted windows were replaced with duplicates, and a late-addition kitchen wing was removed. Cleaned up, the interior trim got a new coat of shellac.

The kitchen was renovated from the ground up. New pine cabinets are finished in milk paint. A local artisan made the trestle table that seats 12; it's draped with a vintage oriental carpet. The owners' collections of transferware and early American pressed-glass

candlesticks are showcased here.

The dining room glows with warmth and intimacy under J.R. Burrows' "Rossetti" wallpaper in terra cotta on a yellow-ochre ground. An Adirondack twig hutch original to the house was restored and set back along the room's west wall. It is filled with 19th-century Etruscan-vase-patterned transferware with red and copper luster rims that sparkle in the filtered light of late afternoon.

The main parlor now has oriental rugs, club chairs, and a nap-worthy sofa. Thebes stools, a neo-Grec Victorian favorite, provide extra seating; kilim-covered pillows and lightweight, early 20th-century pyrographic tables finish the room.

UPSTAIRS, FIVE BEDROOMS are clean and comfortable for children and

guests, furnished with local antiques that include Arts & Crafts-era slatted oak chairs, a wicker footstool, tramp-art picture frames, and pyrographic boxes and mirrors.

The generous lot has become

a garden of native plants, tended by the wife, an avid gardener. The house is not so different now from when it was built, an understated place of rustic simplicity, a true retreat. ✦

FOR RESOURCES, PLEASE SEE P. 81

