

HOW ENCHANTING
The most recent renovation to this Mackinac Island home included gutting everything except for the staircase, the living room, shown here, and one original bedroom.



P A S T

P R E S E N T

TEXT
BY KHRISTI
ZIMMETH

SENSITIVE
RENOVATIONS
TO AN 1870S
MACKINAC
ISLAND
COTTAGE
MAKE IT
BETTER
THAN EVER

PHOTOGRAPHY
BY JUSTIN
MACONOCHE





A HISTORIC MARKER

near the 1870s-era house on Mackinac Island known as “The Lilacs” tells the story: “Inspired by the City Beautiful Movement and the 1880s trend to create summer homes for wealthy urbanites eager to escape industrial cities, the Annex was among the first planned summer communities in Michigan,” it explains.

Developed by Chicago businessman and fur trader Gurdon Hubbard and still known as Hubbard’s Annex, “the neighborhood is an important part of Mackinac Island history,” explains homeowner Melissa Gembis, who with her husband, Jeff, now owns the 19th-century house that Hubbard built for himself on the southern bluff of the iconic island.

The island had become the country’s second national park in 1875 and Hubbard, who had lost his fortune in the Chicago fire of 1871, decided to develop a resort hotel and 132-lot cottage community on his 80 acres of Mackinac land. The hotel was never built, but Hubbard’s cottage

SUMMER GETAWAY
Above: A historic marker near the Gembis’ home tells the story of the charming summer-cottage community.

Right: The original home didn’t have a kitchen; families would gather at the community eating house. Today there’s plenty of space for family and friends to cook and dine together.







*“THERE’S A LOT OF HISTORY HERE.
WE’RE TRYING TO BE GOOD STEWARDS
FOR THE PROPERTY AND FOR THE
GENERATIONS TO COME.”*

— MELISSA GEMBIS



community still thrives today. His Queen Anne-style house was bought by Gembis' great-grandparents in 1928, and both she and her 85-year-old mother have fond memories of growing up spending summers on the island and in the house.

Not surprisingly, a number of changes have been made throughout the home's long history. Gembis' father renovated the house in 1993, shoring up the foundation, adding space, and reconfiguring some rooms for better livability and flow. Among the first-floor changes: turning the one-time kitchen into a guest room, carving a new kitchen out of small former bedrooms and a first-floor bath, converting a screened-in porch into a four-season space, and adding a

LOFT LIVING

Both pages: A horse stable and upstairs loft apartment were built on the property in 2017. The apartment ensures there's plenty of room for guests.





PARTY READY

Opposite page: The home desperately needed a dining room — a fact that prompted the 2019 renovation. “We would have 20 people over and there was no place to eat,” homeowner Melissa Gembis recalls.

Now, an inviting layout with plenty of natural light welcomes.

laundry room. Upstairs, he removed a bathroom to create a new primary bedroom and turned another bedroom into two baths.

By the time Gembis and her husband, Jeff, took ownership in 2014, the interior needed another face-lift, she acknowledges, as well as “more space to accommodate three generations.” It also desperately needed a dining room — a fact that prompted another renovation in 2019. “We would have 20 people over and there was no place to eat,” Gembis says.

At the time it was built, the home didn’t have a kitchen. Families would gather at the community eating house, the homeowner explains. A kitchen had been added along the way, but there was never a dining area, a fact that became increasingly problematic as the family grew. The recent renovation added a dining area/breakfast

room as an extension of the kitchen. Once the current owners decided to add an eating area, plans snowballed. “We figured since we were doing the downstairs, we might as well go upstairs, too,” Gembis explains.

The family enlisted the help of designers Kevin Serba and John Rattray, of Serba Interiors, whom they had worked with on their home in Birmingham and an earlier horse stable and upstairs loft apartment built on the Mackinac property in 2017. The designers, who work often on historic structures, were “thrilled” to be asked, Rattray says.

The designers’ goal was to update the house while being “true to the architecture and age of the structure,” Rattray explains. That meant “gutting everything except for the staircase, the living room, and one original bedroom,” Gembis adds.

VINTAGE VIBES

Above: The sitting area features comfy arm chairs and, apropos-for-the-island, antique horse cut-outs.

BATHING BEAUTY

An updated bathroom oozes charm, thanks to its historically accurate design — from the clawfoot tub to the old-style tile.





SLEEPING QUARTERS

These bedroom vignettes showcase the homeowners' love of antiques and their designers' astute ability to procure a mix of wonderful elements. With a big nod to the past, the spaces are imbued with antiques, both rich and muted colors, delightful shiplap treatment, and other decades-old accents.





The three-year renovation included a large addition off the back of the cottage that allowed for the larger kitchen, along with a new dining area, a mudroom entry, and a first-floor owner's suite that opens to a new screened porch. Upstairs, the extra space allowed bedrooms and bathrooms to be reworked and renovated. "We added a full bath, a half bath, and two bedrooms. The two side-by-side bathrooms that my dad added in 1993 were gutted during our renovation and made into one bathroom," Gembis says.

"In the end, quite a bit of space was added to the overall structure, but each new space maintains the scale and proportion typical of the time period of the original home," Rattray adds.

"The main priority was to be true to the architecture and age of the structure when selecting materials and furnishings," Rattray continues. "It was crucial that our selections reflected the age and history of the home. It was also important that we capture the charm and energy that's unique to Mackinac Island. Colorful fabrics, artwork, and accessories help bring that energy to the cottage. Many of the furnishings



ISLAND VIBES
Above: An exterior perspective shows both the main home and the stables/loft apartment. Their teal color reflects hues found in the nearby Straits of Mackinac.

Opposite page: A pretty blue chest and complementary artwork adorn the foyer.

are antiques, helping to add an additional layer of history and patina to each space."

The recent renovation started in 2019 but the pandemic shutdown, weather, and other logistics added delays and complications. In the end it was all worth it, Gembis says, noting that the result is a historic home that's better than ever, with "a lot of good spaces to gather and hang out." She says they can now sleep 14 in the renovated house and horse barn, and the family — which includes Gembis' three children and her 85-year-old mom — continue to gather on the island, as they've done for almost a century. Gembis and her husband have their eyes on the future, she says, and upholding the tradition her great-grandparents started.

"There's a lot of history here," she says. "We're trying to be good stewards for the property and for the generations to come." ♦

BUYER'S GUIDE

INTERIOR DESIGN

Serba Interiors, Birmingham
serbainteriors.com

BARN APARTMENT

Armchair (Green

Checkered) – Redford

House Furniture

Bedframe – Redford

House Furniture

Chairs, Dining – Antique,

The Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Flooring – Oak

Lamp, Bedside – Antique,

The Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Light Fixture – Visual

Comfort

Oven/Microwave –

KitchenAid

Rugs (Green) – Capel Rugs

Table, Bedside – Antique,

The Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Table, Dining – Antique,

The Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Wall Paint – Benjamin

Moore, Cloud White

BATHROOM

Flooring – Virginia Tile

Tile, Walls – Virginia Tile

BEDROOM, GERANIUM

Bed Frame – Redford

House Furniture

Chair – Antique, The

Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Curtains – Brunswick

& Fils, Kravet | Lee

Jofa | Brunswick

& Fils, Michigan Design

Center, Troy

Lamp, Bedside – Antique,

The Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Flooring – Maple

Rug – STARK Carpet, Troy

Table, Bedside – Antique,

The Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Wall Paint – Benjamin

Moore, Cloud White

BEDROOM, GUEST

Armchair – Antique, The

Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Artwork (Field) – Antique,

The Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Bedframe – Redford

House Furniture

Chest – Antique, The

Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Flooring – Maple

Rug – STARK Carpet, Troy

Table, Bedside – Antique,

The Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Wall Paint – Benjamin

Moore, Cloud White

BEDROOM, MASTER

Bedframe – Redford

House Furniture

Cabinetry – Custom, Eric

Vogler Construction,

West Bloomfield

Chair, Accent – Highland

House Furniture

Drapery – Colefax

and Fowler, Tenant

& Associates, Michigan

Design Center, Troy

Flooring – Maple

Lamp, Bedside – Antique,

The Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Lamp, Floor – Visual

Comfort

Pillow (Flowers) – Colefax

and Fowler, Tenant

& Associates, Michigan

Design Center, Troy

Rug – STARK Carpet, Troy

Seat, Accent – Highland

House Furniture

Table, Accent – Antique,

The Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Table, Bedside – Antique,

The Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Wall Paint – Benjamin

Moore, Cloud White

DINING ROOM

Artwork – Antique, The

Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Bench – Custom, Eric

Vogler Construction,

West Bloomfield

Cabinetry – Custom, Eric

Vogler Construction,

West Bloomfield

Chairs, Dining –

Englishman's Fine

Furnishings

Chandelier – Ironware

International

Curtains – Colefax and

Fowler, Tenant &

Associates, Michigan

Design Center, Troy

Flooring – Virginia Tile

Light, Hanging – Ironware

International

Table, Dining – Antique,

The Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Table, Display – Antique,

The Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Rug – Bellbridge Carpets

Scounce – Ironware

International

Sink – Shaws

Wall Paint – Benjamin

Moore, Cloud White

ENTRYWAY

Artwork (Bottom) – Serba

Interiors, Birmingham

Artwork (Top) – Serba

Interiors, Birmingham

Chair, Accent – Antique,

The Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Chest – Antique, The

Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Flooring – Maple

Lamp – Antique, The

Parson's Nose

Antiques, Oak Park

Wall Paint – Benjamin

Moore, Cloud White

KITCHEN

Backsplash (Green) –

ANN SACKS, Michigan

Design Center, Troy

Cabinetry – Custom, Eric

Vogler Construction,

West Bloomfield

Ceiling Treatment –

Beadboard

Chandelier (Black) –

Currey & Company

Countertops – Carrara

Marble, Wolverine

Stone Co., Warren

Flooring – Virginia Tile

Lighting, Hanging

Fixtures – Visual Comfort

Oven – Wolf

Rug – STARK Carpet, Troy

Wall Paint – Benjamin

Moore, Cloud White

LIVING ROOM

Artwork (Berries) – Serba

Interiors, Birmingham

Artwork (Left) – Serba

Interiors, Birmingham

Artwork (Middle) – Serba

Interiors, Birmingham

Artwork (Right) – Serba

Interiors, Birmingham

Chair, Accent – Highland

House Furniture

Lamp, Floor (Left) – Visual

Comfort

Lamp, Floor (Right) –

Visual Comfort

Pillow, Accent

(Checkered) –

Brunswick &

Fils, Kravet | Lee Jofa

| Brunswick & Fils,

Michigan Design

Center, Troy

Pillow, Accent (Green) –

Brunswick &

Fils, Kravet | Lee Jofa

| Brunswick & Fils,

Michigan Design

Center, Troy

Pillows, Throw (Flowers) –

Brunswick &

Fils, Kravet | Lee Jofa

| Brunswick & Fils,

Michigan Design

Center, Troy

Rug – STARK Carpet, Troy

Sofa – Hickory Chair

Furniture

Table, Coffee – Custom,

Lamia Metalcraft &

Design

Table, End (Left) –

Antique, The Parson's

Nose Antiques, Oak Park

Table, End (Right) –

Antique, The Parson's

Nose Antiques, Oak Park

Wall Paint – Benjamin

Moore, Cloud White

SITTING AREA

Armchairs – TCS Designs

Artwork (Frame) –

Antique, The Parson's

Nose Antiques, Oak Park

Artwork (Horse Cutouts) –

Antique, The Parson's

Nose Antiques, Oak Park

Bar Stools – TCS Designs

Flooring – Virginia Tiles

Lamp, Floor – Visual

Comfort

Wall Paint – Benjamin

Moore, Cloud White

EXTERIOR

Building Materials – Wood

Siding

Landscaping – Barnwell

Landscape and Garden,

Mackinac Island

ADDITIONAL PROJECT

CONTRIBUTORS

Architect – Richard

Clements Architect,

PLLC, Osgooc

Landscaping – Barnwell

Landscape and Garden,

Mackinac Island

Contributor – Jack

Barnwell, PLA,

Landscape Architect,

Traverse City