

# The House That Spoke



Builder **Colin Whyte** Skillfully Rejuvenates an Island Landmark for a New Generation

Profile by **Nina E. Ferry**

Photography by **Lisa Romerein**

The recently renovated West Chop residence (above) was dismantled, strengthened, redesigned and rebuilt to stand tall for generations to come, all the while preserving most of the home's personality as a 19th century masterpiece (inset).

A stronghold since 1971, Martha's Vineyard Construction became incorporated in 1981 and has since completed a wide range of projects from detailed and dainty to dream houses of epic proportions. The company prides itself on impeccable craftsmanship and a personalized client experience. "Our niche is quality. We're very fortunate that so many people arrive and want to build something inspired, something very special. This Island is well detailed. I never dreamed it

would be like this when I arrived," says Colin.

Colin Whyte, President of Martha's Vineyard Construction, left his happy childhood home near Biscayne Bay, Florida to start a wonderful and varied journey that would one day lead him to sailboat summers, Martha's Vineyard mansions and a company built from fortitude and perseverance. "I had enough support and stability at home that I could just go. I didn't know that when I left home at age 16, I'd never be back again."

*continued on the next spread*



A well appointed pantry (left), with wet-bar, leads to the formal dining room from the kitchen. The living room (above), always a traditional gathering place for generations, has been updated with many improvements to the fireplace surround, mantle and built-in shelves. The soft colors of the furnishings and walls, reinforce the “summer beach” theme. The home’s full length front porch (below) overlooks Vineyard Sound and is the perfect spot for relaxing and entertaining.

Choosing to go to an all boys’ boarding school in Tennessee, McCallie School taught hard lessons of discipline and survival. It was there that Colin made life-long friends and began to desire the mysteries that life and experience had to offer.

In hope of avoiding a sojourn in Vietnam, Colin took off on his motorcycle, partnered with friends, and threw himself into education and small-time enterprises. Self-taught, he learned how to run a successful business from varied jaunts including:

house moving, dictionary selling, surfboard renting, interning in the US Senate, and—finally, construction clean up. Graduating from Brown University with a liberal arts degree led him to a winter at law school, and a stint in art back at Brown Graduate School. “Applying to schools, I was really just a kid trying to stay out of Vietnam; little did I know, it was the motorcycle that would



save me. A serious accident taught me the power of the machine. My back was handed a lesson and Martha’s Vineyard became my new home.”

Originally arriving with “no car, no money, and no home,” Colin survived on odd jobs and bartending. Serving characters like Thornton Wilder and Chandler Moore influenced young Colin. “Life is a whole lot of small successes punctuated by a host of failures, giving you a

gauge to go by. There are always times, in any career, when you feel like throwing in the towel. Perseverance is key,” says Colin.

With his two roommates from a camp on Lake Tashmoo, Colin started Martha’s Vineyard Construction with Ross Gannon and Terry Mulcahey. Having a thirst for challenge, and already

*continued on next spread*



At the center of the residence, the graceful main staircase (left) balances the old with the new, sporting one of the carefully chosen wallpaper patterns. Original doors (above) from the home's previous life have been beautifully restored and pay homage to the character of what once was. The attractive, well-proportioned car-barn (below) features an upstairs working office.

dabbling in the industry, they were just trying to feed themselves when they tossed around ideas for a construction company. Before long, each went their separate ways—Ross drawn to boat building and Terry to the wider world off-island. Colin—last man standing—nurtured Martha's Vineyard Construction.

Having built uncounted scores of homes on the Vineyard, Martha's Vineyard Construction retains repeat customers as they grow with demand and technology. "It's been a non-stop progression with the level of detail required, the size of the projects and the difficulty involved in renovating. The majority of high caliber lots have a pre-existing structure on them—we've found a way to work with

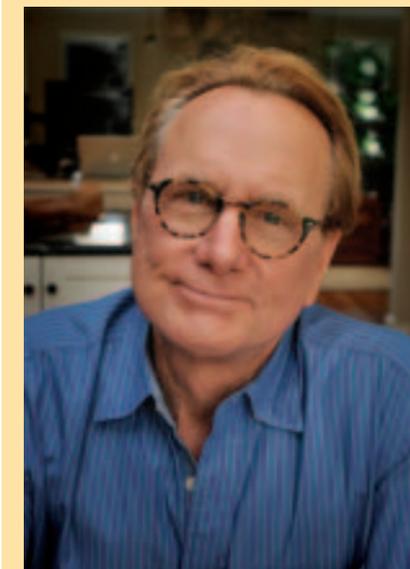


them, while honoring our client's vision." Maintaining the historical image presented by the Colonial architecture so often found on the Vineyard, Martha's Vineyard Construction uses the latest software

to communicate with all members of renovation teams.

Each job site has a technology trailer, one or two site supervisors and a whole lot of electronic equipment. *GoToMeeting* is a program often used instead of a traditional boardroom to facilitate communication between the job site and all those off-site. "Our project supervisor hosts the meeting by computer. On our current three-year project there are usually 10 to 12 people

*continued on next spread*  
SPRING 2014



Builder  
**Colin Whyte**  
In His Own Words

"Our success over the years is the direct result of the talent and dedication of our employees and the creative vision of the owners and architects with whom we have worked. Helping to bring these elements together has been my job, one that has been filled with as many joys and challenges as any person could want."



Colin Whyte on his fateful motorcycle, Lake Tashmoo, 1969.



Window seating (opposite) not only allows for a splash of soft fabric color, but a place to pause, relax, curl-up with a good book, or just imagine. The spacious dine-in kitchen (above and below left), the heart of any family's life, is light and airy. The soft "sea and sky" colors are punctuated by the vibrant colored barstools at the kitchen island, providing a perfect place to gather, entertain or dine-in. A lower level entryway (below right) features ample storage and utility space for family and guests.



on the call from all over; looking at photos, plans, surveys, action item lists, etc. Of course, on smaller projects there are fewer people on the meeting," says Colin. Wanting to offer a positive client experience, this technology allows homeowners and global consultants to partake in the building process as it happens.

One home of particular interest has a subtle palatial presence. Taking 21 months to complete, this 11-bedroom residence is nestled between the West Chop Light and the head of the Chop. Asserting its presence since 1896, it has passed through three families, rearing generations of sun-kissed and

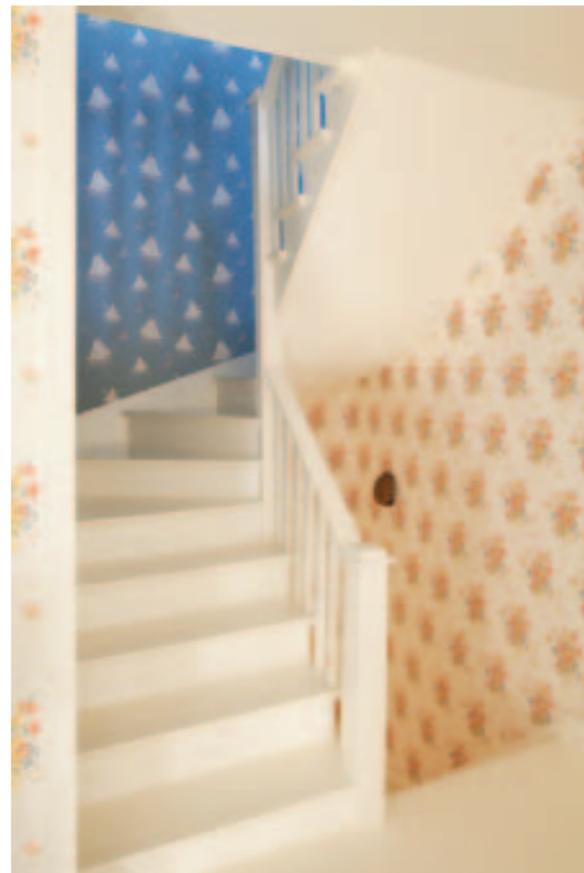
salt-brushed babes—future sailors and summer parties. The home was featured in a documentary film titled *House of Bones*. A granddaughter of the previous owners, LA based filmmaker Victoria Campbell, documented the history of her family and this house, ensuring its essence and story would live on.

*continued on next spread*



A child's room (above) features "dressers" built-in to the eaves, eliminating standing furniture and creating a spacious scale to the room. The grand window seat provides comfort and plenty of storage below. A back stairway to the third floor (left) sports a covering of wallpaper both traditional and whimsical.

Each room in the house sports a carefully chosen wallpaper pattern, and wall covering that emulates the surrounding tones of woodlands, summer sky, sand, and vibrant blue-greens from the ocean. More built-ins sustain the dressing area (above) of the master bedroom, while the third floor play areas (below right), with the classic white beadboard paneling complete the beach cottage feel.



Recently renovated by owners Sarah Botts and Gerard Griffin, the residence has been dismantled, strengthened and re-built to stand tall for generations to come. With four children between the ages of six and fourteen, the couple needed a functional summer home. Preserving the home's quirky personality as a 19th century piece, a summer residence, and an architect's dream, the house was meticulously decorated—each room emitting an aura, and when you listen carefully, wallpaper that whispers tales from long ago.

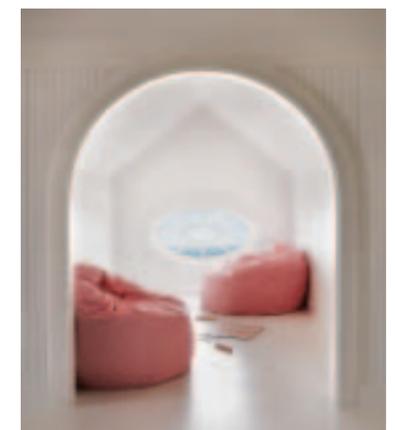
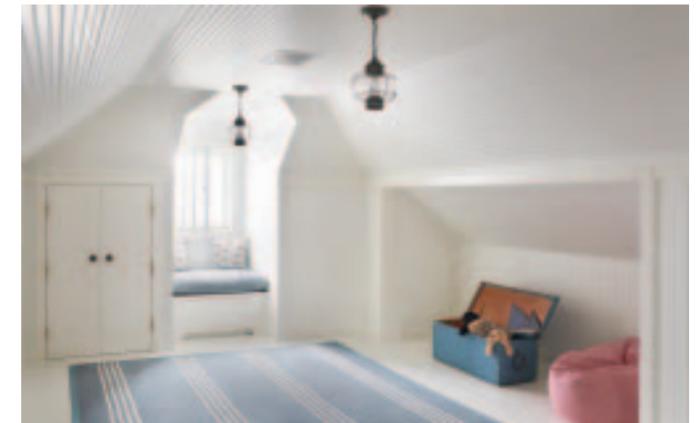
Amanda Baring, Sarah's sister was the interior designer for the grand residence. With twenty years of experience and a special connection to the Island, the design process was a collaborative effort. "It was great teamwork all around," says Amanda, "our brief was to retain the character and quirkiness of the original house which was a mish mash of wallpapers and paint colors. We were very respectful of the house's history and position within the community. It was more a process of renewal than a rebuild." With the house providing much of the inspiration, the palette emulates the surrounding woodlands, tones from the summer sky, and vibrant blue-greens from Vineyard Sound. Fabrics were sourced in London and shipped to Boston where Eliot Wright Workrooms would make and install the soft furnishings.

For Martha's Vineyard Construction, the Botts-Griffin house presented some challenges due to its sheer size, age, and the construction timeline. Working with Architect Oscar Shamamian

of Ferguson and Shamamian Architects, out of New York, facilitated the process since the two companies have worked together in the past. "Schedule was a big constraint. The owners hoped to miss only one summer, so to accomplish that and build a house of that scale requires much management of process. We had an office set up in the garage and two site supervisors for the duration," says Colin. Having to lift the large home off of its foundation before renovations began did not phase Colin, as he reflected on some of those early life lessons. "Anything built before the 1990s will mosy likely have a compromised foundation—why put that much work into what's essentially a new house and have it sitting on a crumbling mass? Since I worked for a house moving company at age 18, I didn't see it as a challenge."

Through revamping this old home and establishing a summer residence, Sarah and Gerard continued family traditions by offering their children barefoot summers, sailing adventures and the quaint Island life. First meeting on the Vineyard, this place has history for them. Living in London for the majority of the year, the family purchased the West Chop house and lived in it for two summers before deciding how to renovate the house with care. "Amanda and I were able to think quite leisurely and deeply about how to preserve the feeling of the house at the same time as dealing with all the structural problems that needed to be

*continued on next spread*



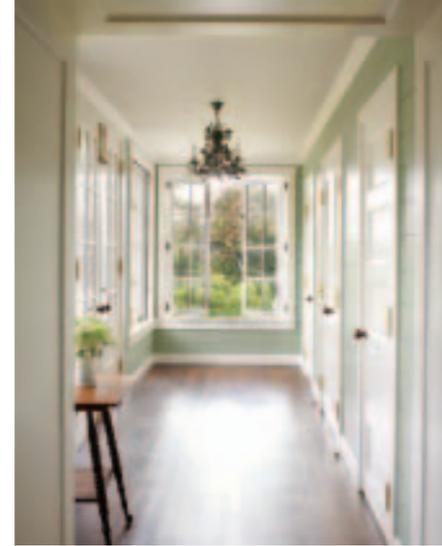


The screen porch off the formal diningroom with its fireplace, vaulted roof beams, ceiling fans and wicker furniture has the feel of a summer beach cottage. The house overlooks the Vineyard Sound with The West Chop beach steps away. The new owners had the utility lines placed underground allowing for an unobstructed view to the water.



addressed, and the needs of our family," said Sarah. Finding the right builder was quintessential to the often-overwhelming process of renovation. Even from overseas, working with Martha's Vineyard Construction was fluid and enjoyable. "They were really wonderful. A big part of our life in the summer is sailing; we have a "Bella" built by Gannon and Benjamin and I think quite a few of the contractors have doubled as boat builders, depending on how well the season is going. You can really feel that in the house—it feels solid and "ship-shape." The level of workmanship and detail is tremendous. Colin and his team were very sensitive about not being able to directly supervise everything that was going on, and knew how strongly we felt about doing everything the right way. They were in constant communication with us and the architect," said Sarah.

With 12-13 full time employees, large jobs like the Botts-Griffin residence may have 30 subcontractors at any one time. "Several of our employees have reached the 20 year mark. It's extremely important to have such a solid skill level on the team," says Colin. Much to his enjoyment, his



This back of the house entry way (above) is light and airy, the painted panel boards and flooring exemplifies the beach cottage design theme that continues throughout.

daughter Alison Thompson became involved a few years ago when she returned to the Island. Running *Foam Insulation Technology, Inc.*, with her husband Joe, she is also the vice president and controller of Martha's Vineyard Construction. Following in her father's entrepreneurial footsteps, Alison and Joe also have their own insulation business in Vermont and are keen to be on board. Colin is proud of all three of his children and happy to see Alison's continued interest in the company he built.

Nearly fifty years ago, a motorcycle lead Colin to the right place. "It's great, I love the problem solving and variety. I did the Law School bit, which I enjoyed, but I'm so glad I've not been sitting in an office for decades. My job is varied each day." After decades of long days and longer weeks, this entrepreneur continues to be excited by each project's unique make-up. "It's not necessarily a deep relationship, but there is a level of trust, confidence, and appreciation that accrues to the client-relationship. Letters of thanks last longer than the money; it's the best thing I could ask for—to know we made someone's life more enjoyable by implementing their vision," says Colin "What we do is very high quality; we like challenges. Over the years, I've had great relationships with our clients—some we've worked with for decades and on multiple projects. It's really rewarding to deal with people on that level and I look forward to it every day," says Colin. **vs**

For more info contact:  
**Martha's Vineyard Construction**  
web: [marthasvineyardconstruction.com](http://marthasvineyardconstruction.com)  
508.693.2300  
e-mail: [info@marthasvineyardconstruction.com](mailto:info@marthasvineyardconstruction.com)