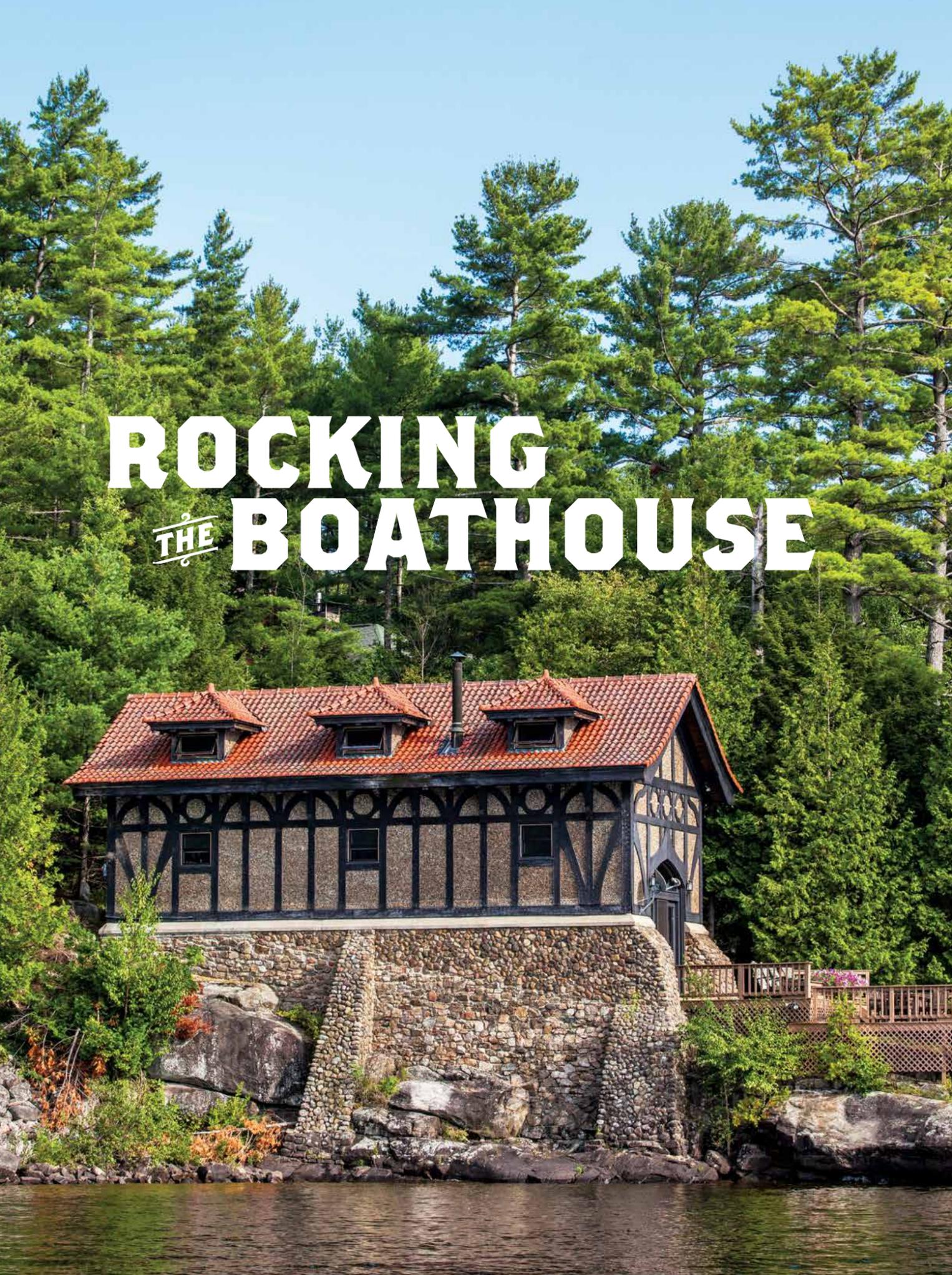


ROCKING THE BOATHOUSE



HOW A SCHROON LAKE CASTOFF BECAME A DREAM HOME

BY ELIZABETH FOLWELL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA
UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

WHEN GENE LEGOGRANDE was 13 he met his dream house. Across Schroon Lake from the cabin where he was staying with his family was a derelict boathouse that looked as if it had been made by Thor's own trolls, with huge interlocking timber circles above walls encrusted with thousands of pebbles. He couldn't resist exploring the place.

"[My brother and I] went through one of the broken panels in the front door," Leogrande, now 65, recalls. "The old boats were still in here, also lots of bats. I always visualized what a great house it would be."

The years were not kind to the relics of the Millbrook Club. The property—originally 260 acres—had belonged to an attorney and appellate court judge named John K. Porter, who made his mark for prosecuting Charles Guiteau, the man who shot President Garfield. Porter built an extravagant lakeside home with a tower, and his son William inher-

ited the property in the 1890s and erected the 65-foot-long boathouse soon after the turn of the 20th century. Their relatives transformed the estate into a tourist haven, operating the Swallow's Nest tearoom and housekeeping cabins in the 1930s, an enterprise billed as "Healthful, Restful, Beautiful." Awful would have been the word half a century later; the colony was in shambles, the handsome stone walls leading to crumbling structures in a forest determined to take over.

"In 1983 I was at work and saw in *The New York Times* that there was an estate area for



Although it's a house for boats, the structure is not suspended over the water. It was built on the shore, and a long concrete ramp was necessary to haul large boats inside for winter. Above: Gene Leogrande during renovations.



HISTORICAL AND CONSTRUCTION PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF GENE LEGOGRANDE (2)



Furniture and fittings have local ties: the dining-room table had been a door in a Chestertown law office. The bench was a church pew in Vermont and chandeliers came from an auction in Stony Creek. Pottery on the table was made by the late Bill Knoble, of Red Truck Clayworks, in Chestertown.



From left to right: Schroon Lake stones set in cement cover the exterior walls, a style called pebble dash that was popular for outbuildings in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Clay roof tiles are rarely found in Adirondack buildings. These came from Germany and were marketed for use in the Alps, where they could withstand snow and ice. Below: The deck is built over the original concrete ramp.

sale in Schroon Lake on the east side,” says Leogrande, a commercial contractor and real-estate developer in Long Island. “In the ad it said ‘old stone boathouse.’ I called the fellow up and said, ‘I’ll be there tomorrow.’ That’s when I made the deal to buy the place.”

When he arrived to inspect his impetuous purchase, “everybody wanted to know when I was going to knock the house down,” Leogrande continues. The seller, logger Keith Van Buskirk, “asked how could I raze this building and get it all out of here. I told him, ‘You don’t know what you just sold me.’”

A team of local framers, carpenters, stone masons, electricians and plumbers set to work, with Leogrande swinging a hammer and even dangling precariously 40 feet above the lake, tied in to a roofer on the other side as both men replaced scores of red clay tiles. Taking on the building’s makeover turned into a scavenger hunt: Hundreds of roof tiles were missing, and it wasn’t just one style that was needed but nine, including end caps and dormer pieces. Leogrande located a truckload in New Orleans and found some stashed in the nearby woods. One crucial tile, though, had to be handmade, and Chestertown potter Bill Knoble was able to create it—after eight months of trial and error.

Each part of the project—from rebuilding castle-scale buttresses to recreating the raised-diamond-panel doors—made the crew more curious and engaged. “We all traded ideas and brainstormed,” says Leogrande, and it got to the point where “everybody brought their wives and girlfriends to see what we were up to.”

No architect was involved in reshaping the cavernous boathouse, a process that took more than two years. Leogrande crafted the 1,700-square-foot living quarters from plans in his head, and that was before he had three sons. “The idea was not to have any wall partitions, so you can see the lake from anywhere in the house. Just knee walls divide rooms upstairs,” he says.

There are four levels that are staggered in the 35-foot-tall building, with three bedrooms and a half-bath on the top floor, reached by a spiral staircase and connected by a catwalk. (“You couldn’t build that now,” *(Continued on page 88)*



Visit our unique Gift Store We have local artists, pottery, jewelry, paintings, Adk-style furniture, mantels, countertops and much more.

Fully insured arborist landscape • tree care

Turn your trees into usable lumber!

Capital Sawmill can take down your trees and turn them into usable lumber at your location. We cut timbers and unique custom lumber to your specifications.

ORGANIC LOGSISTEM
ASH MAPLE CHERRY WALNUT OAK
CAPITAL SAWMILL
(518) 479-0729
FLANKING FIREPLACE MANTELS POSTS & BEAMS
OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

www.capitalsawmill.com
518-479-0729
4119 US Route 20
Nassau, NY 12123

Be Green. Save Green. Invest in a new geothermal heating & cooling system today

Geothermal HEATING & COOLING
Earth Heat
by **City SUBURBAN**
HEATING • AIR CONDITIONING

- Energy savings up to 70%
- Eco-friendly
- Quiet & reliable
- Positive cash flow
- Added resale value
- 30% renewable energy tax credit

315.853.3899
www.CitySuburban.com

Water-Furnace Smarter from the Ground Up

BPI ACCREDITED CONTRACTOR

TRADING ADK POST

Eat, Shop and Laugh with us!

1601 Tupper Road (Route 30)
518-624-ADKS www.adktradingpost.com

HALL DESIGN GROUP
Buildings. Interiors.
www.halldesigngroup.com
Essex, NY 518-963-7620

shawtlewishalperin.com
Lake Clear, New York Studio/518-637-5015

EARTH ROOTS SUSTAINABLE LANDSCAPES
earthrootslandscaping.com
Lake Placid, NY 518.946.7759

ROCKING THE BOATHOUSE

Continued from page 47

Leogrande says of the staircase. “It doesn’t meet code.”) The second level, soaring to the rafters, is a kitchen, utility/laundry space and bathroom, with storage, wiring and plumbing beneath the floor that can be accessed from the lower level. A few steps down is the dining area, where the tiger-oak table—a door salvaged from a Chester-town law office—dominates the space. The 25-by-20-foot living room, with the dramatic original double doors facing the lake, takes full advantage of the cathedral ceiling.

Up close the place looks polka-dotted, and Leogrande says it’s not inconceivable that there are 25,000 rocks on the exterior. Though it’s generally described as a stone boathouse, only the foundation is typical stonework of rubble and cobbles. Exterior walls are a surface called pebble dash, with uniform round rocks set into concrete. The story goes that local folks were given baskets and brass rings and hired to gather rocks from the lake at Golf Course Point; if the pebble passed through the ring it could be used. Inside the thick plaster walls are clay flue tiles that help keep the building warm in winter and cool in summer.

The architectural style is nominally Tudor Revival, but it is idiosyncratic, whimsical, less formal, with the vaguely Japanese roofline and decorative timbers under the eaves that seem Scandinavian. The carpenters were Norwegian, the stone masons Italians from Troy, New York. They clearly brought their own traditions and sensibilities to the project, and there is no record of an architect or supervising engineer for the complicated structure.

Leogrande; his mom, Joan; his wife, Julia; and sons Hudson, Jake and Brant all love the place and know the stories that are as much a part of it as the mortar and stones that hold it together. “You only get a chance once in a lifetime to do a project like this. It was so much fun, so rewarding,” Leogrande says. “Cabinetmaker Dick Konis paid me the highest compliment, that I had actually improved on what Porter started.” 🌿