

PACKET MAGAZINE APRIL 2009

# P M

FINE LIVING IN GREATER PRINCETON

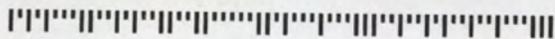
## IRON PASSAGE

a blacksmith's handiwork at wendy benchley's home and beyond

**SWEET SATISFACTION**  
of dessert wines

**PORTAL TO THE PAST**  
in a princeton farmhouse

**THE EDIBLE LANDSCAPE**



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# Spirits Live Here

THE PRE-REVOLUTIONARY HOME OF  
BRUCE AND MARCIA WILLSIE IS A PORTAL TO THE PAST

by megan sullivan | photos by frank wojciechowski

**B**ruce Willsie only had two hours to spare before catching a flight back home to Redmond, Wash., but he couldn't leave without visiting an 18th-century farmhouse for sale on Mercer Road in Princeton. Once he set eyes on the white Colonial with black shutters, tucked away within a canopy of towering trees and flanked by the Stony Brook, he felt an immediate connection. What started out as a routine business trip in 1999 led to the purchase of a home with a palpable spirit and rich past.

"I do have a love of history and that was certainly part of my wanting to buy the house, but it was really more than that," says Mr. Willsie, president of a Washington-based political data processing company. "The siting of the house, on what we feel is a beautiful piece of property, it was so perfect, so peaceful. The house seemed to have a good spirit and it just spoke to me."

The house is part of the Princeton Battlefield-Stony Brook Settlement Historic District. Its past inhabitants include a prominent "fast-living"

Quaker, a well-loved Princeton physician, a bon vivant Civil War colonel and industrious local farmer John Updike.

Mr. Willsie and his wife, Marcia, who teaches hands-on cooking classes, restored the house for tenancy before mov-

“There’s something almost spiritual about living in a place that other people have lived in for hundreds of years —

**it gives it a soul.**”

— Bruce Willsie

ing in a couple of years ago. Princeton architect T. Jeffery Clarke, along with John Garretson of Garretson Custom Builders and painting contractor Ed Canzano, completed the 16-month restoration and rehabilitation project, which won a preservation award from the Historical Society of Princeton in 2001.

When restoring historical homes,

Mr. Clarke says he makes sure everything from paint colors and light fixtures to floor treatments are as consistent as possible with the time period. For instance, the light fixtures in the main hall of the Willsies' home are antique reproductions from the company Ball and Ball. "They are pretty faithful of candle sconces and fixtures of the 18th century," says Mr. Clarke, whose previous projects include the restoration of Tusculum (the home of John Witherspoon) and the Bonner Foundation House. In keeping with the period décor, many of the home's 12-pane windows are adorned with cream-colored, pineapple print damask curtains.

On entering the pre-Revolutionary block, one immediately transports back in time, a feeling magnified by the handsome, period-appropriate antiques that fill it. "In my mind, it makes all the difference in the world — in terms of the attractiveness of house," says Mr. Willsie, a Princeton University alumnus. "It kind of brings the rooms alive and harmonizes with the spirit of the architecture."

In the 18th century, it was common >>>

to add a grander addition to an original, older house. The classic three-bay, mid-18th century side hall was likely an expansion made by wealthy Quaker Ezekiel Smith, who purchased the house and property in 1730. The formal parlor has a well-built Georgian corner cupboard that recesses into the wall, which the Willsies have accented with silver tea sets and monogrammed mid-18th century dinner platters. The mantel of the angled fireplace is lined with Colonial port glasses and sits back-to-back with a second fireplace in the adjoining library.

This cozy nook has the comforting and pleasant smell of old, weathered books. The shelves are filled with Mr. Willsie's collection of common law, a genre he became interested in while attending law school. The dated spines of books on trials, statutes and criminal decisions reveal the passage of hundreds of years.

The Greek Revival wing with fireplace was probably constructed shortly after physician John Woodhull moved in during the early 1840s. Painted an inviting yellow hue, the formal room with Charles Steadman-style trim also holds many attention-grabbing antiques. Among them is a print of a pen-and-ink drawing by C.P. Zaner, the founder of the American School of Penmanship in Ohio. In the piece, an eagle thrashes its wings as it bursts forth from a bush. A banner across the bottom that reads "Progress" speaks to the industrialization of America at the end of the 19th century.

Dr. Woodhull's patients, many from Pennsylvania and New York, would come by horse and carriage for his consult. "When they were doing the restoration work on the house, they found medicinal bottles underneath the floorboards," Mr. Willsie says. Although a well-known and skilled physician, he apparently suffered from alcoholism. It's been said that Dr. Woodhull named the matching upstairs bedrooms "New York" and "Philadelphia." This way, his employees could explain his occasional absence after a drinking binge by telling patients he was in one of the two cities, hiding his true condition.



*A 350-year-old vestry chest from a church in England and an 18th century painting, likely by William Clay Poole Jr., decorate the dining room.*

One reaches these bedrooms by climbing a spiral staircase, where one of Ms. Willsie's favorite portraits hangs. She admires the painting of Ebenezer

Hazard (1744-1817) from the top landing, explaining that he has a reassuring and comforting quality about him. "He looks like he takes care of things," she



Remnants of an 18th century cooking fireplace are exposed in the Willsie's kitchen

says. An early graduate of Princeton University, Mr. Hazard was third post-master general of the United States and founder of the earliest fire insurance company in the country. He's also known for his work in preserving documents of the Revolutionary War.

The center section of the home, which the Willsies believe original owner John Houghton probably built, has classic English post-and-beam framing. "I'm more comfortable in smaller spaces," Ms. Willsie says. "I like the Colonial architecture for that reason, the ceilings are lower, you feel a little more closed in." Now a dining room with a long, cherry wood trestle table, it has become the perfect spot for students of Ms. Willsie's cooking school, Ezekiel's Table, to share a self-prepared meal. Double-doors lead to a backyard patio, where she's also hosted Provencal style picnics.

Although the room's 18th century cooking fireplace was covered over in

the 1950s to create a smaller, more modern appearance, the exterior has been exposed in the Willsie's new kitchen. "It's nice that people can see there was construction of the house, almost like having a museum window so to speak," says Mr. Clarke of the remnants of the beehive oven, which had been insulated with brick noggin. Beehive ovens held large fires and were constructed outdoors, keeping the smoke outside while giving inside access to the oven. "There are very few of them around still," he says.

The sloped-ceiling kitchen has amenities an 18th century cook never would have fathomed — like a BlueStar stove that has 22,000 BTUs of cooking power — but the beehive oven exterior successfully weds historic with modern.

A long food preparation table is pushed alongside the structure, where Ms. Willsie's students have made everything from butternut squash

ravioli to pheasant with chartreuse. In the backyard, she grows her own herbs, such as basil, lemon verbena and rose-scented geranium, which she puts in Laird and Company AppleJack whiskey to make syrup reductions.

A graduate of Seattle Culinary Academy, Ms. Willsie named the school after Ezekiel Smith, a frequent entertainer. "Most of my time is spent in the kitchen," says Ms. Willsie, who enjoys looking out the back windows each morning to spy herons, foxes and woodchucks.

"There's something almost spiritual about living in a place that other people have lived in for hundreds of years — it gives it a soul," Mr. Willsie says. "I think there's been a lot of happiness in the house, that's what I felt when I first saw it and wandered through." 

*Classes at Ezekiel's Table will be temporarily suspended during a remodeling project, but look for schedule updates at [ezekielstable.com](http://ezekielstable.com)*