



## THE BALLAD OF THE BLUES HOUSE

In Middleton, Rhode Island, this remarkable villa appears little changed despite a storied past that has featured esteemed owners, a music festival, and its 50 years as a rooming house. It has been re-stored for the future.

**ABOVE** Renowned architect Richard Upjohn designed Restmere as a summer residence for Alexander Van Rensselaer, in 1857. The bracketed villa is largely Italianate in massing and design, with a hint of Victorian Stick Style. **INSET** Decades ago, an architectural history of Newport suggested the house had been demolished; it was not. **OPPOSITE** Owners John Grosvenor and Cheryl Hackett pause on the porch with their beagle, Belle.



# restoring RESTMERE

**A historic music festival designed by**

**BY CHERYL HACKETT**

provided clues as this Italianate villa, Richard Upjohn, was brought back from the brink.

**PHOTOS BY GRIDLEY + GRAVES**

*Last summer, Grammy winner Taj Mahal sat on our porch, strummed his guitar and sang a moving rendition of "Catfish Blues." A film crew captured his performance, marking the 60th anniversary of when Skip James, Elizabeth Cotten, Sleepy John Estes, and others lived at Restmere during the Newport Folk Festival. Between takes, Newport Festivals Foundation Executive Director Jay Sweet whispered, "Can you believe this house is still standing?"*



Alexander Van Rensselaer House, Miantonomi Avenue.  
1857-1858. Demolished after 1952.  
Stanboje photograph. C.C.

ARCHIVAL





**LEFT** French light fixtures once relegated to a bedroom were restored. Antique furnishings were purchased in Newport. The room has been the stage for gracious dinner parties for over 150 years.

**BELOW** (from left) Adolph Audrain, Restmere's second owner, used an antique French door and sidelights to form a vestibule. Double entry doors have upper sashes with wrought-iron screens that open from inside to ventilate the hall. • A French stained-glass window depicts a knight's helmet, torches, and flowers; it provides a color kaleidoscope during daylight hours. The filigree ornaments on the stair stringers date to 1857.





## ELEGANCE IN THE FRONT HALL

Imported French doors separate entry from dining room. They're flanked by a full suite of classical woodwork and trim. The converted gasolier was added after a gas pipe was found behind the former dropped ceiling.

## BACK PARLOR

After current owners decorated the study with antiques possibly by Albert Stickley, an old newspaper article surfaced, which described how Audrain had furnished Restmere with French antiques ... except this room, where he chose American Mission furniture.



Now as in the past, Arts & Crafts furnishings are a counterpoint to the salvaged French limestone mantel and bronze griffin chandelier.

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Y HUSBAND, John Grosvenor, and I asked ourselves that same question eight years ago, when we bought this ramshackle property and launched its restoration. Among the artifacts left by previous owners was a 1964 album cover with a photo of our porch. Seeking clues in Antoinette Downing's *The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island*, we saw a photo of Restmere with a curious caption: "Alexander Van Rensselaer House, 1857-1858. Demolished after 1952."

Scholars continue to document Newport County's Gilded Age inventory, yet Restmere's history remained elusive. This was troublesome: While one goal was to make the historic house compatible with modern needs, we intended to write a National Register of Historic Places nomination and qualify for Historic Tax Credits. We needed facts, we needed anecdotes. Thus we became detectives, sleuthing at the Newport Historical Society, the Naval War College, and the New York Public Library. We found that Restmere's walls don't talk, they sing.

We were ecstatic that noted architect Richard Upjohn's symmetrical layout was unaltered. Double entry doors open to a foyer boasting a 12-foot ceiling. This central hall connects living room, dining room, study, and kitchen. A grand staircase leads to six bedrooms with en-suite baths. Sadly, chronic neglect had ravaged the integrity. A leaking roof, crumbling plaster, worn millwork and parquet floors, malfunctioning windows, a code-defying electrical system, barely-on-life-support oil burners,



**TOP RIGHT** Three antique fixtures from a Boston factory provide ambient light; the cabinets, subway tiles, leaded glass, and a fireplace recall the past. **LEFT** An Eastlake-style hutch fits in a recess. **RIGHT** The owners collect American art pottery: blue and green pots by Van Briggle, Hampshire, and Grueby are on view in the study.



**balance IN THE KITCHEN** The kitchen is in its original location. "We minimized views of appliances and maximized our use of architectural salvage. We cut a hearth into an existing chimney. We tucked the refrigerator inside a niche and used leaded glass as a transom and in the window. We chose quartz countertops as a low-maintenance nod to Carrara marble."





**RIGHT** Richard Grosvenor captured Newport's coastline in the painting above a faux-bamboo headboard. **BELOW** The clawfoot tub came from a third-floor bathroom. Marble tiles in a herringbone pattern set off antique French tiles. **ABOVE** The ribcage shower was once a pile of metal.



and a rotting kitchen competed in triage.

My husband's career as a preservation architect spans 40 years. He was our maestro conducting the tradespeople while we lived here during construction, a two-year project. John also designed stone walls, lawns, rose gardens, paths, and an outdoor fireplace. We brightened spaces with period fixtures and hidden lighting. Coal fireplaces were converted to propane.

Finally, to evoke the Newport Cottage aesthetic, we sought out antique furniture, Persian rugs, and other decorative objects at local auctions and antiques venues. The old-world craftsmanship complements our collection of oil and watercolor paintings by John and his father the artist Richard Grosvenor.

**NOW, A LOOK BACK 170 YEARS.** The famous 19th-century architect Richard Morris Hunt returned to the United States after studying at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, in Paris. The first American to attend the prestigious school, he went on to design such Newport landmarks as the Breakers and Marble House. In 1857, Hunt visited his friend Alexander Van Rensselaer to see progress on Restmere, a 10,000 square-foot, wood-framed mansion. Hunt and Richard Upjohn, Restmere's architect, bonded



**RIGHT** Ornamental columns support arches. A historic photo revealed that the railings had been a balustrade on the porch roof and were relocated in the early-20th century. **ABOVE** Gravel paths meander in the gardens.

and later that year co-founded the American Institute of Architects. Theirs wasn't the only alliance formed at Restmere. Hunt married Van Rensselaer's sister-in-law, Catherine Howland, in 1861. Now part of the family, Hunt added the striped floor of red oak and black walnut, in the foyer, and designed a semi-detached kitchen and chef's quarters (now an auxiliary dwelling unit.)

In 1904, Van Rensselaer's widow sold Restmere to Adolphe Audrain, an antiques dealer with shops in Paris, New York, and Newport. Coincidentally, in 2014, John had transformed Audrain's Bellevue Avenue building into the Audrain Automobile Museum. We recognized that Restmere's French crystal-and-bronze chandeliers, limestone mantel, stained-glass windows, and ribcage shower had been Audrain's upgrades.

From 1930 to 1960, Admiral Edward Kalbfus owned the estate. The four-star admiral was a president of the Naval War College. When Kalbfus died, the estate's caretaker assumed ownership and promptly sold Restmere to a developer who had ambitious demolition and subdivision plans. Here's where that 1960s album cover comes into play: the house was rented to musicians during the Newport Folk Festival. Then, in a twist, a woman named Lucille Myers rescued Restmere from the wrecking ball, in 1965, and for the next 50 years the mansion served as a rooming house.

Under our ownership, Restmere was listed on the National Register. Our efforts earned the Doris Duke Preservation Award and the Rhody Historic Preservation Award. During the Covid years, we turned underutilized basement rooms into an art studio, a gallery, and a pub.



**LEFT** Grammy winner Taj Mahal visits Restmere on the 60th anniversary of the Newport Folk Festival. **ABOVE** The iconic porch is depicted on the album cover.

## A Special History

In the 1960s, as Restmere's destiny hung in the balance, Newport Folk Festival co-founder George Wein rented the empty mansion to house many of the Festival's musicians. For four glorious days, in 1964, Blues legends jammed in every room. One of Restmere's greatest stanzas was written when Taj Mahal shared memories of "the Blues House" with us. When he recalled Skip James singing on the porch, we felt glad that we'd saved a stage for future happenings.