



# This New 2012 Old Home

Matt Freeman

IT'S POSSIBLE TO GET YOUR DREAM STONE FARMHOUSE,  
YET STILL ENJOY EVERY 21<sup>ST</sup>-CENTURY COMFORT.

IF ANY TYPE OF ARCHITECTURE TYPIFIES CHESTER County and the Brandywine Valley, it has to be the iconic stone farmhouse, often found presiding over a more recently developed neighborhood that sets off its Colonial-era grace and grandeur all the more.

The popularity of this style is no great mystery—these houses seem to have a timeless quality, an eye-pleasing general just-right-ness. Of course for some of them, the timelessness comes in part from actually having stood for centuries.

But for other, newer examples of this style such as Diana and Gary Shank's Berwyn home, the Colonial-era farmhouse is an expression of what has become an ongoing tradition that is very much alive.

## NEW HOME BUT IN AN OLD NEIGHBORHOOD

A few years ago, Diana Shank says, she and her husband decided they needed more room for themselves and their four children. They looked at houses both old and new and especially

admired the historic homes. But they didn't find any that were right for the family and their pets. They loved one in particular that "needed so much work, it was ridiculous," Shank says.

Then a lot became available in their own neighborhood. "That's when the wheels started turning," Shank says. "It was just total coincidence that this happened."

The Shanks wondered why they couldn't build a house like the historic homes they loved right in their neighborhood, where they were comfortable and had many friends. They searched for architects who specialized in historic residential styles, and one name they came up with was Joseph Mackin, co-founder and president of Period Architecture Ltd. in West Chester.

## MIXING THE OLD WITH THE NEW

Mackin was prepared to help the Shanks not only because of his training and experience but also thanks to a long tradition, centered in the Philadelphia area, of using Colonial architectural styles





for inspiration. Most authorities agree the Philadelphia Centennial of 1876 helped to reawaken an interest in this area's past and the styles of building prevalent then.

The Sesquicentennial in 1926 had a similar effect, and noted individual architects in the area—such as R. Brognard Okie—carried the tradition forward into the mid-20th century. The intent was not to slavishly reproduce particular buildings as much as to incorporate the general eye-pleasing grace and charm of the originals into buildings that also took advantage of modern technologies.

Shank says the couple had a general idea of what size house they wanted, how many bedrooms and such, but left most of the details—both interior and exterior—to Mackin. The architect began by ensuring that the house would embody Old World charm, literally from the ground up by excavating the site so you look down on the house from the road—the house seems nestled into its grounds, not pasted down on them. The planners also took care to preserve the mature trees that seem to embrace and frame the house.

“We preserved as much of the site as we could,” Mackin says. “That’s part of making sure the home feels connected to the property. It has to feel as though it’s literally grown out of the ground.”

#### BEST OF THE OLD

Growth is an apt metaphor for a type of home that typically involves additions over the years as styles and the owners’ needs change. For Mackin, the Shanks’ home—which the firm dubbed the “New Old House”—began with a four-bay main section all in stone. Other sections extend







outward from the right of the facade, with stone on the ground floor and woodwork siding above to reflect what a later owner would consider in vogue.

The interior was designed to serve two primary purposes, Mackin and Shank say: formal entertaining on the one hand, and informal family life on the other. Formal areas include a center hall, parlor with a coffered ceiling and hidden wet bar, dining room, and butler's pantry. For daily life there's the kitchen, breakfast room and family room as well as a family entry and mudroom.

Some of the more notable of the abundant period touches are the wood trusses for the cathedral family room as well as beams and floorboards all salvaged from a barn built in central Pennsylvania in the 1790s and recently demolished by a tornado. Many of the windows have splayed or curved jambs, both for visual interest and to let in more light. Formal areas include wide expanses of paneling and cabinetry, with woodwork and hardware all appropriate to their historical setting.

The freedom to interpret history allows houses like the Shanks' to have a variety of personal touches. An antique bell sits atop one section in a cupola, and the bell motif is echoed in window cutouts and a light fixture on the door. One newel post includes a "mortgage button," a white disc engraved with the owners' initial (outlined above) traditionally used to show the mortgage had been paid.





### PLEASURES OF THE NEW

Besides the traditional features, “new” old houses have modern conveniences and improvements their predecessors can’t. The house has a central vacuum system, elevator, geo-thermal heat and air conditioning—at 7,500 square feet, the house doubles the size of their old one, Shank says, but is no more expensive to heat and cool. There’s a hidden in-wall speaker system the owners control with a cell phone.

The home won Period Architecture a Gold Award for outstanding excellence for 2014 from the Pennsylvania Council of the Society of American Registered Architects’ prestigious 11th Annual Design Awards competition. Mackin says the firm would not have achieved the success it did without the help of hardware from the Coldren Company Inc. of North East, Maryland, lighting from Heritage Metalworks in Downingtown, and finished cabinetry from McGinnis Millwork in Parkesburg.

Most of all, the Shanks got the home they were hoping for. They enjoy living there. And unlike many historic homes, “the house flows beautifully,” Shank says. They have a covered outdoor porch with a fireplace and pool, a space they use “until it’s freezing out.”

Shank is grateful to Mackin: “He really nailed it,” she says. The New Old House does seem to embody the Colonial Revival ideal: contemporarily casual comfort, up-to-the-minute technology, and timeless elegance and charm. ♦

PHOTOS: ANGEL EYE PHOTOGRAPHY

