



A historic St. Paul house with a poetic pedigree acquires a 21st century face lift

Restored to Youth & Beauty

BY CAMILLE LEFEVRE ♦ PHOTOS BY BRIAN DROEGE

h, just a simple kitchen remodel." With those last words, many house renovations have escalated from modest update to full-blown project. Most architects and builders agree: Rarely does the work—or the urge to fix "just one more

thing"—end with installation of the perfect backsplash or delivery of a long-desired appliance. Especially when the house has a historic pedigree.

Take, for instance, the High Federal-style home that sits on a gracious lot overlooking the Mississippi in St. Paul's Desnoyer Park neighborhood. The rectangular brick house with flawless, formal symmetry was built from 1928 to 1934 for Erica Thorp, the granddaughter of the great American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In the 1990s, Chris and Jane Simmons often walked past the majestic house—sometimes toting their infant daughter—musing on what a wonderful home it would be for their family.

Over time, they learned that many of the house's interior details were copied from Longfellow's *Craige Manor* in Cambridge, Massachusetts. (The "laughing Allegra" made famous by Longfellow's poem, "The Children's Hour," was Erica's mother.) Erica and her husband, E.M. DeBerry, a University of Minnesota psychiatrist, only lived in the house for two years. The house's longest residents were the Peyton family—John Peyton ran the Federal Reserve.

When the Simmons' finally acquired the home 2004, now with four children in tow, their first priority was updating the heating system, and replacing 64 windows and 13 exterior doors. Otherwise the house was in decent shape, they thought, aside from the kitchen. Last updated in the late 1970s, it had been expanded to encompass the butler's pantry. So size wasn't an issue. The 3-inch-by-3-inch green tile from floor to ceiling, green laminate countertops, green



walls and decades-old appliances were the problem.

"We love the historic nature of our city house and didn't want a modern suburban kitchen," explains Chris Simmons. "Still, we needed the kitchen to accommodate our family while fitting the 1920s detailing of the rest of the house." The couple had help at the ready: Chris's brother, Charlie Simmons, an architect and the principal of Charlie & Co. Design, in Minneapolis.

Once the kitchen remodel started, however, the project quickly moved from room to room, with an addition here and refurbishment there. "By the time we finished, we'd touched almost every inch in the first floor of the house," says Charlie. "Every time we opened a wall or peeked into a floor, someone would call out, 'Charlie, you'll never believe what we found!'"

In the kitchen, for example, builder John Kraemer & Sons, Inc., in Edina, found 11-foot-high ceilings after removing old light fixtures. "We poked our heads up into the holes opened up by the fixtures and discovered a false ceiling," Charlie says. "Why did they do that? Nobody knows." The original, full-height ceilings now complement other details that fit the period of the house, including frame-and-panel cabinetry, and historically accurate hinges and pulls. Even the glass in the cabinet doors, imported from Poland and made using the ancient mouth-blown cylinder technique, has the subtle waves and imperfections



PREVIOUS SPREAD The kitchen shows off its new look: 11-foot ceilings, carerra marble counters and backsplash, and a Francois and Co. Scagliola stone hood above the six-burner stove. Architect Charlie Simmons designed the refrigerator cabinet after a 1790 Federal-style armoire he'd seen at a furniture auction. John Kraemer & Sons' cabinetmakers executed the broken-arch top, acorn finial, and hand-carved fruit basket onlay. OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP The kitchen opens to the back staircase, a desk nook, and a new mudroom to the right. BELOW The home's covered walkway divides the rear yard's swimming pool and patio areas. THIS PAGE The formal front foyer and its centerpiece, the first residential freestanding steel staircase built in the state, were refurbished during the remodel.





that would have been typical in a home built at the turn of the eighteenth century.

“The trickiest challenge was modernizing the kitchen to accommodate the large family while retaining the home’s historic authenticity,” adds Sandy LaMendola, the principal of Twist Interior Design, in Minneapolis. Perimeter walls and ceiling heights allowed for lots of cabinetry, painted white to give the room a fresh, open feel. Rich walnut refrigerator cabinetry is the exception, along with the walnut island—“big enough to land a helicopter on,” LaMendola jokes—which fits four stools tucked underneath.

Charlie captured space from an adjacent powder room for a built-in banquette that seats the family for informal dining. “To make life easier for the family,” LaMendola says, she specified faux leather seats impervious to stains and beautiful linen fabrics vinylized for easy cleaning and durability.

While the kitchen was gutted, and new pipes and electrical were rerouted out of old walls, everyone decided it made sense to renovate the master bathroom above the kitchen as well. Next up? Why not the kids’ bathrooms, one of which still has an original nickel-plated, art deco shower door. Meanwhile, plasterwork was repaired on the first and second floors, and the wood floors were sanded and refinished.

The two-story foyer’s grand staircase was also cleaned and refurbished. “The stair was the first freestanding, all-steel staircase used in a residential application in Minnesota when the house was built,” says John R. Kraemer,



PREVIOUS PAGE, TOP Glowing cypress surrounds the library’s curved wall of windows. Two hidden doors—one opening to the kitchen hallway, the other to a new wine room—give the room its air of mystery. BELOW Refinished floors in the living room enhance the floor-to-ceiling cherry paneling and cornice detailing. OPPOSITE PAGE Fresh white and gray paint and the period-appropriate ceiling medallion give the dining room an air of dignified authenticity.



director of sales and marketing at John Kraemer & Sons. “Now it looks like new.” Adds his brother and project manager Jeff Kraemer, “It was so rewarding to keep the integrity and historic value of the home while we were remodeling.”

The fully paneled formal dining room was freshened with a period-appropriate ceiling medallion, trim work, and new lighting. LaMendola selected a soft and subdued color palette of grays, browns and greens for walls and ceilings throughout the house that would “make the spaces handsome and grand,” she says.

In the library, floor-to-ceiling cypress paneling surrounds a curved wall of divided light windows. In this room, somehow simultaneously imposing and cozy, the panels also disguise two doors. One of them provides access to kitchen via the original servants’ hall; the other once hid a small, Prohibition-era bar. Charlie combined the hidden bar with a coat closet to create a new wine room with hand-hammered copper sinks and hand-carved period details.

In his practice, Simmons tends to focus more on contemporary architecture. “But as a history buff,” he says, “I immensely enjoyed researching this house, its history and craftsmanship, and how to replicate some of its original details.” The original builders and architect, he reflects, worked from drawings of Craige Manor and colonial plantations in the Deep South. In restoring the home for his brother’s family, he once again turned to that time period and its architecture for inspiration. “It was a rare opportunity to work on a home with historical ties to St. Paul, and to one of the great American poets and authors,” he says. “A real slice of American history.”

For their part, the Simmons family is reveling in their new spaces. “We love the new kitchen and the wine room,” says Jane. “And I love the new mud room, where everyone has their own cubby.” **MH**

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