

Early American By Design



Rare furnishings and cheerful colors create a pleasing atmosphere in the keeping room in the circa 1810 portion of the Lettick house. Four Chelmsford, Massachusetts, William & Mary banister-back chairs from the early 1700s surround a Connecticut Shoreline, circa 1710, hutch table with chip-carved shoe feet. To the left of the table is a rare and imposing New York City, circa 1660-1680, Carver armchair. On the wall above the chair is a circa 1660 lantern clock, signed by Thomas Wheeler of London. A circa 1730 chimney cupboard with original spoon rack in its upper portion stands to the right of the hutch table. The cupboard, in original red paint, is early Queen Anne, with a vertical crease-molded long door and tombstone-shaped upper portion with original doors.



LOVING BOTH EARLY AMERICANA AND THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE HAS HELPED GAIL LETTICK BECOME A HIGHLY RESPECTED DEALER AND COLLECTOR, AND TO DO BOTH IN HER EARLY CONNECTICUT HOME.

By Gregory LeFever & Photographed by Mark Kimball Mouton

Gail Lettick tells a story about a time just after she purchased her stately New England farmhouse – part of which dates back to 1775 – and was systematically redoing rooms to reflect the home's heritage. She wasn't yet ready to work on the living room, but was compelled to rush off to the paint store anyway.

"The fireplace in the living room was a bright canary yellow and I couldn't bear it. I had to get some gray paint right away and paint over the fireplace. I just couldn't bear the yellow. It made me crazy."

Her tale of the garish yellow fireplace becomes more humorous the more you know about Gail.

The Connecticut native is well schooled in the fine arts and the aesthetic influences responsible for early American decorative styles. This and her wide-ranging knowledge of American and European domestic furnishings from the 1600s on, have helped her achieve acclaim as a dealer and collector of early Americana.



Iron cooking implements adorn the circa 1810 hearth in the keeping room, sharing it with candle molds, a chestnut warmer, and two early washboards. Two yarn winders flank the hearth, a 17th Century American one on the left side featuring a large wheel made of five separate pieces pinned together, and a 19th Century winder on the right side, with a carved decorative heart.



Left: Gail uses many rugs throughout her home for visual continuity, usually Caucasian rugs from the 1800s, including this table rug in the keeping room.

Below: This circa 1700-1720 desk-on-frame, standing next to the doorway leading into the living room, features turned legs and stretcher base.

Bottom: A rare three-panel screen from the 19th Century depicts a triumphant march led by George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette. Standing between the keeping room and the living room, the screen was made of block-printed paper by Zuber & Cie in Paris for the American market. On the reverse side is a beautifully tooled polychrome leather design. In front of the screen is a four-gallon, 18th Century Bellarmine jug.



“I’d say that form, originality, and surface are always in the forefront of my mind. I’m a very visual person,” she explains. “For me, the quality of pieces from the 17th and 18th centuries is of paramount importance.”

The decorative efforts in her Woodbury, Connecticut, home are all the more impressive in light of its earlier condition. At one time, the former owners had offered local designers the chance to decorate various rooms individually, resulting in a mishmash of clashing colors, metallic flowers, gold-foil ceilings, and similar eccentricities throughout. Other parts of the home suffered from neglect. “In the area where the master bath is now, all that was there was a shag rug and three dead mice,” Gail remembers.

She began restoring the house in late 2004. “Basically, I started in the kitchen and worked my way from one room to the next,” she says. “I slept on a mattress that I moved from one room to another as the work continued through the house. It was a big project and it was a lot of work. But I could see in my mind’s eye what each room potentially could be, and I just couldn’t wait to finish it –



Top: Woodwork in the two-room master bedroom suite is painted Wethersfield green, serving as a backdrop for the Queen Anne reproduction bed hangings. The fabric is hand-embroidered in India and purchased from Chelsea Editions. To the left of Gail's circa 1770 Philadelphia bedstead is a country court cupboard, or "poor man's chest," de-accessioned from Historic Deerfield. Next to the bed is an 18th Century Queen Anne mirror with heart cutout in the crest. At the foot of the bed is an early 1700s English stool with turned legs and exceptional checkerboard needlework seat.



Left: This Massachusetts panel chest with ball feet is circa 1700 and was at one time painted with a bird decoration, among a small group of chests called Bird Chests. On top of it are English, Italian, and Dutch 17th and 18th Century ceramics. The rare English mirror hanging above the chest with its stumpwork frame is circa 1660-1680 and depicts the English King Charles II (1630-1685) and his wife Catherine of Braganza. Stumpwork is a form of raised embroidery, here complemented with beadwork, coilwork, mica, and pearls.



Here are two views of Gail's living room, which occupies the ground floor of the 1775 portion of the house. Former owners replaced the rear wall of the room with the series of windowed doors to let in sunlight, a modification that also has met with Gail's approval. In the top photo, the red wing chair is from Massachusetts, circa 1800. Gail and her late husband found it discarded on a Manhattan street, dragged it home, and had it reupholstered. The blue wing chair is Connecticut, also circa 1800. In the center of the room is a circa 1690-1710 Connecticut Shoreline splay-legged tavern table with oval top. The camelback sofa is a reproduction Gail had specially made. The large Queen Anne "chimney glass" mirror above the mantel is English, circa 1740. In the photo below, the candle stand next to the red wing chair is early 18th Century with an octagonal, scrubbed maple top and original red stain.





Far left: A Dutch brass candlestick stands alongside the reproduction Bellarmine jug holding fragrance sticks atop a circa 1700 x-based candle stand, an original-surface New York piece.

Left: This little vignette features a candlestick from the 1700s, along with a small pewter porringer and a tin tinderbox complete with flints and a striker.

Below: An embroidered pocketbook dated 1771 rests alongside a brass candlestick from the 1700s.



Left: These two photos highlight the original built-in corner cupboard in the living room, which is in the earliest section of the home. The cupboard displays several pieces of Gail's Delft collection, including chargers and drug jars. Alongside the jars are a few dated 17th Century English Cartouche plates. Situated near the corner cupboard are a 17th Century table with turned legs and a Heart & Crown banister-back armchair from Connecticut.



Gail's kitchen is spacious and filled with light. Located in the section of the house added in the late 1970s, the area features a hearth surrounded by a raised panel wall. The wall, which is original to the addition, is beautifully hand planed and pegged, reminiscent of panel walls of much earlier periods. The top photo shows the food preparation area with its Travertine marble farm sink. On the adjacent counter are a couple of French egg baskets and an early 19th Century heart-shaped trivet, which was one of Gail's first antiques purchased in the early 1970s.

The photo below shows an unusual circa 1730 Connecticut corner chair in original red paint. With its Queen Anne leg in front and William & Mary legs at the rear, the chair reflects the period's transition in styles. The desk beside the fireplace is a Connecticut Queen Anne desk on frame, with button feet, in early blue paint. Near it is an 18th Century New York slat back chair, while the trestle table is a Hudson River Valley piece, circa 1710. The portraits above the fireplace are from New York and depict a Dutch officer dressed in his Revolutionary War uniform, and his wife.



because I wanted to have those rooms in reality, not just in my mind."

"I Just Love It All"

Raised in New Haven, Gail is proud of her roots. "Being a Connecticut girl, I developed a love for New England furniture and especially original paint and worn surfaces. I love to look at an object and enjoy the wear that results from centuries of use. I love early iron. I love early treenware. Unfortunately, I just love it all," she says. "I'm an addict – an antiques addict."

Gail studied fine arts and art history at Temple University in Philadelphia. She married Birney Lettick, a commercial artist who went on to become one of the era's foremost illustrators. He was known for the portraits he painted for magazine covers – his final work was a portrait of President Ronald Reagan for a 1986 cover of Time magazine – as well as creating many of the best-known movie posters of the period. His







Previous Page: A pencil-post tester bed from about 1760 is among the several 18th Century furnishings in the upstairs bedroom in the 1810 section of the home. The bed's hangings are original Italian Fortuny fabric. A late 18th Century six-board chest is next to the bed, while a circa 1770 Pennsylvania dower chest sits next to the window. The six-leg table at the foot of the bed is an English piece dating from the late 1600s. Items displayed include the 1830 taffeta jacket hanging on the door, a French circa 1840 milliner's hat form, and a pair of 17th Century Low Lands pewter candlesticks.

Above left: Among the items on the 17th Century English six-legged table are an English needlework domed box from the 1700s.

Above right: On the lid of the room's six-board chest, Gail has arranged an assortment of Delft and Chinese export porcelain.

work appeared in the National Portrait Gallery, the Brooklyn Museum, and major New York galleries before his death in 1986 from cancer.

The couple began collecting antiques early in their relationship. "The first time we walked into an antiques shop I got the disease, and it's only gotten worse," Gail recalls. "In those days we combed flea markets and antique shows. Throughout those beginning years, I found some wonderful objects. And for me, that lead to studying the pieces, learning the history behind them, and the history of domesticity. You keep looking and studying and become knowledgeable until you know quite a lot about the pieces, their construction, and their origins."

"I continued as a collector until my husband died," she says. "I decided the thing I loved most in the world was antiquity, thus I became a dealer specializing in early objects of American domesticity."

Gail set up an antiques shop in a portion of what had been the couple's home, an 1856 Georgian townhouse in Manhattan. In 1988, New York Magazine called her Pantry & Hearth shop "a real find." Because of her emphasis on selling domestic items in original condition, the magazine noted, "Any kitchen graced with her homey early American yellowware or spongeware, her wood-handled choppers or her pewter jugs, is blessed."



Left: The intricately carved trinket box is 17th Century Italian, with a needlework fragment from the same period. Next to the box is a woman's wedding cap from the early 18th Century.

Below: Sitting on the bedroom's circa 1770 Pennsylvania chest are a French milliner's hat form and wig form from the same period, supporting a lace head dressing. In front of the hat form are two needlework bags with drawstrings, one 18th Century French and the other circa 1830 Connecticut. The mirror on the wall is a small 18th Century courting mirror.

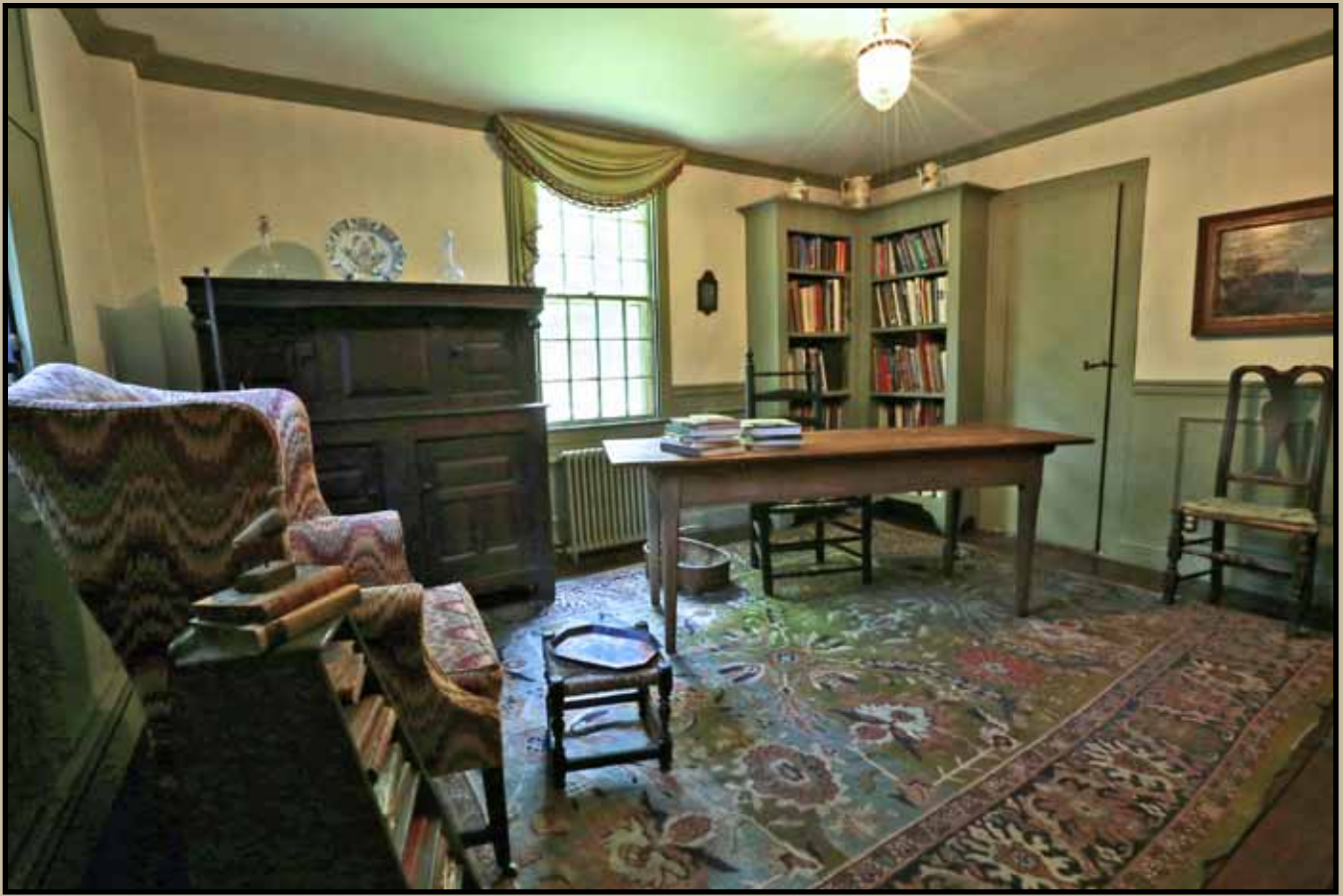


Returning to Connecticut

Gail stayed in the Manhattan townhouse a few more years, but a trip to Woodbury in 2003 got her thinking. The town was founded in 1673 and is resplendent with 18th Century houses. With a population of only about 10,000, it manages to support nearly two-dozen antiques shops.

"I knew this was where I wanted to live," Gail says. In 2004, she purchased the early farmhouse on nearly 15 gently rolling acres with a pond and woodland. The oldest part of the house is a relatively small section built around 1775, back when the property was a 120-acre farm. A larger and more prominent addition – actually forming the main part of the house – was built between 1810 and 1820. A final section, which now is the kitchen, was added in the late 1970s.

"When I first bought the house, it was a mess. I'm sorry, but purple walls with silver-foil flowers just isn't early American enough for me," she laughs. "No room in the house had any relationship to any other room. It was a crazy house, but that's the décor I'd inherited."



This peaceful second-floor sitting room is adjacent to the master bedroom, forming a suite. The table in front of the built-in bookcase is an early 1800s Pennsylvania worktable, while a large Pennsylvania court cupboard from the late 1600s stands nearby. This rare cupboard is made of native walnut, oak, and cherry. A colorful Saraband Persian rug from the mid 1800s adds to the room's décor.



Above: The hatbox from the 1800s is one of Gail's longest-held acquisitions because she purchased it in 1971 with her late husband, artist Birney Lettick. A small China export ceramic cachepot sits next to the hatbox. Hanging behind it is a framed fragment of English needlework from the 1600s.

Gail tells another story that speaks to the refurbishing effort. “When I moved in, there was a narrow corridor that went from my bedroom to a smaller room. I asked my contractor if the corridor was a load-bearing wall and, if not, could we take it down? It wasn’t a problem, so we knocked down the wall,” she continues. “Apparently, families of squirrels or mice had lived within that wall forever and had filled the space to the top with open nuts. Billions of those nuts poured down all over everything, including us. I thought for sure all of those falling nuts were going to kill us.” With the wall down, Gail created a comfortable two-room suite with the master bedroom and adjoining reading room.

Achieving Continuity

Gail’s knowledge of the fine and decorative arts is evident throughout her home. Like the composition of a classical painting where the



Top and top right: The home's entry hall leads into the keeping room. On the left is a Connecticut Queen Anne dressing table, circa 1740. A commanding presence in the hall is the rare circa 1700 Hudson Valley bench table with its large scrub top.

In front of the bench table is a small primitive bench with an Italian Santos figure from the 1700s, decorated in gesso and paint and featuring glass eyes. Above the bench table is a rare corner pantry shelf with a dovetailed joint and original blue paint. More Delft pieces are displayed on the shelf.

At right: The candle box holding clay pipes is late 18th Century. Below the candle box are a master salt and two vessels of Westerwald pottery, a distinctive salt-glazed pottery originating in Germany in the late 1500s, along with a 1600s pewter candlestick. At the far right is an imposing English great chair from the 1600s. On it is an Italian circa 1600 doll's dress of velvet with silver embroidery. Next to the chair is an x-base American kettle stand.



artist guides the viewer's eye by means of color, light, and shadow, her home has a continuity that promotes comfortable room-to-room roaming.

"For me, all rooms of a house need to be integrated," she explains. "When you walk from one room to another, there should be some balance and flow. I'm definitely not saying everything should be the same color, but there should be a transition that's pleasing to the eye. Complementary paint colors, textile colors, and patterns can all do this."

As an example, she talks about how she tied together her keeping room and the adjacent living room. "The keeping room has kind of a pumpkin color. It leads into the living room, which is a blue. There's a corner cupboard just inside the living room, which is also blue, but I painted its interior a red color that ties in with the keeping room and used red fabric for the swags and jabots," she says. "It's a subtle way to make a connection between two adjoining rooms."



Left and above: At left is a rare, circa 1660-1680, chest from the historically renowned Savell shop in Braintree, Massachusetts. This chest and a handful like it are noteworthy as having one of the most sophisticated joinery designs in New England for that period. Sitting on top of the chest is an Italian jewelry box from the 1600s adorned with a Bargello needlework pattern. Hanging above the chest are two remarkable English dioramas, circa 1700, and a framed piece of English beadwork from the same period. The beadwork piece likely was the front of a small pillow,

later mounted and framed. The photo at right shows detail of one of the English dioramas, this one called "Rebecca at the Well." Its scenery is cut paper, the clothing is fabric, and the faces, hands and feet are hand painted. Both dioramas have their original frames and glass.

Gail's deep appreciation of the arts and domestic history also has colored her choice of furnishings. She collects both small and large pieces from the 1600s, 1700s, and early 1800s, paying particular attention to the condition, rarity, and importance of each piece – many of her antiques are museum worthy – while favoring both original paint and untouched surfaces. Some 17th and 18th Century accessories have European origins such as Delft and needlework, which she feels are appropriate objects to mix with Pilgrim Century antiques, just as they were used in America by early settlers.

"Half of me is the New England girl, but the other half is an Italophile, and I rent a place every winter in Florence, Italy," Gail says. "I've been going there for forty years, immersing myself in the arts and loving Renaissance history. I find myself very influenced by Renaissance furniture."

"It's all connected. Renaissance furniture is the paradigm for 17th and 18th Century American furniture, by way of England, because the English basically emulated all of the turnings and designs from both the Italian and Flemish Renaissance," she explains. "So being exposed to those forms, and loving Italy and loving Americana, it all just melded together."

Combining Home and Shop

Gail is both a respected dealer and collector of Americana, having built a reputation for quality pieces since the days she first opened Pantry & Hearth in the 1980s in Manhattan. "My house has been my shop, going back to New York – it's what I do, and I enjoy it," she says. "Even here in Woodbury, almost everything in my house is for sale. So I'm accustomed



A guest bedroom occupies another first-floor portion of the 1810 addition to the house. A large, early 1700s ball-foot chest stands by the doorway, resplendent in its original graining. The impressive still-life painting above the mantel and the fireboard panel on the hearth both are from the hand of Gail's late husband, Birney Lettick, a highly regarded painter and illustrator. The cupboard near the mantel holds several pieces of English soft-paste china called "King's Rose" and "Queen's Rose." The photo at left shows the unusual carved eagle headboard on the 1840s bed. The bed is covered with an 18th Century Alpujarra bed rug from Spain, while

an 1820s American quilt lies folded at the foot of the bed. The cupboard behind the bed has its original red paint. On top of it is a full-bodied "Ethan Allen" weathervane.

to having people visiting my shop, opening drawers, looking in, and turning over my furniture."

Though Gail is willing to part with many of her remarkable antiques, there are some that will remain with her for sentimental reasons related to her late husband – such as a hat-box she bought one day with him in the early 1970s, and a circa 1800 wing chair she and Birney found, discarded and wine stained, on a Manhattan curbside and then dragged home through the streets to reupholster.

Although Gail offers most pieces for sale from her extensive collection, some objects are harder to part with than others. She loves the rarity of some objects, such as an intricately carved late 17th Century chest from the Savell Shop in Braintree, Massachusetts. Written about in antiques journals, it displays some of the most sophisticated joinery in 17th Century New England.

She also has one of the few surviving historical, block-printed wallpaper screens from the “Scenic America Series” created by the 19th Century French company, Zuber & Cie. This motif features the Marquis de Lafayette and George Washington in a procession celebrating a victory in New Jersey against the British, with the inhabitants of New York City cheering on the opposite shore of the Hudson River. Then there’s an 18th Century country court cupboard de-accessioned from Historic Deerfield, and a circa 1700 Hudson Valley bench-hutch table unusual for its large size and excellent original condition.

Gail also has in her collection some smaller treasures from the 17th Century seldom seen outside of museums, such as two remarkable English dioramas, both with their original frames and glass. These are three-dimensional scenes constructed of cut paper, fabric, pearls, shells, and with watercolor painted faces, hands, and feet. Then there is a 1660 English mirror with stumpwork embroidery frame with images of King Charles II (1630-1685) and his wife Catherine of Braganza. Rare 17th and 18th Century Delft and China Trade ceramics add blue and white highlights to several rooms.

“I’m very discriminating,” Gail says of her furnishings. “For me, objects must be pieces of art, both beautiful and sculptural. I take functionality as a given, but form and rarity are the most important elements in selecting pieces for the collection.”

Sharing the Experience

Acquiring early furnishings such as Gail collects has never been easy, regardless of one’s financial resources, but it’s now more challenging than ever. “Much of this early Americana



has been hoarded,” she says. “It’s in private collections and unless someone dies or gets divorced, the pieces stay in collections. Even then, it is often the case that people put to auction only their items of lesser quality, because everybody’s always trading up. When the great pieces are auctioned, the competition is fierce.”

“In my case, I, like others who gained knowledge over time, just kept upgrading,” she explains. “To find new acquisitions, I research many auctions. I go to shows. I buy privately. I go to estate sales. Pickers bring me things. It really runs the gamut. There’s no one way of acquiring things.”

Gail admits she loves every aspect of her relationship with early American antiques. “The hunt and the find are so exhilarating. Being surrounded by extraordinarily beautiful objects is my greatest pleasure, while selling pieces to avid collectors and sharing our mutual passion is always a turn on.”

She’s quick to add, “There’s nothing more enjoyable than the camaraderie of other knowledgeable and fervent collectors coming to the shop in my house, inspecting, and talking about antiques!”



Previous page: The prominent, two-story section of the Lettick house is actually the 1810 addition to the much smaller 1775 original house, which is mostly between the tree and the large addition. The addition built in the late 1970s is seen to the left of the tree.

Left: Gail constructed this landscape vignette using the water pump located near an original horse and cow barn, embellishing it with the granite blocks and a wooden bucket.

Above: A section of the Lettick house grounds, looking toward the rear of the house and its back porch. The land and trees extend to a pond and woodlands.



These photos are views of Gail's gardens at the rear of the house. The screened-in back porch is visible, as is the row of windowed doors that form the rear wall of the home's kitchen. The grounds are rolling hills sloping toward a pond and woodlands farther back on the nearly 15 acres.

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Bringing the Past to a Modern Bathroom

Gail Lettick's philosophy is that all the rooms of the home should flow, one into the other. It's important, she says, to create continuity with compatible and complementary colors, textures, and patterns in living rooms, keeping rooms, bedrooms, and even kitchens.

One room the owners of early homes often overlook is the bathroom, she says.

"So many times the bathrooms in an old house have nothing to do with the rest of the house," she explains. "They're just sort of generic, and that doesn't fit into my style of having a flow from one room to another."

Here are some tried-and-true ideas Gail would like to share.

"I like to take modern fixtures – faucets, sinks, and glass-enclosed showers – and combine them with period textures. For instance, in my master bath, the ceiling and floor are both old tongue-and-groove barnwood."

Gail also is a fan of vessel sinks – porcelain, marble, or metal bowls or similar shapes that sit on top of a cabinet. "They're the newest style, which keeps with my theme of mixing the old with the new, but having the new look like it belongs with the old."

Vessel sinks in either a bathroom or kitchen offer the chance to use a piece of early furniture – a dower chest, grain bin, or four-drawer chest, as examples – anything that has enough problems to make the piece inexpensive but still suitable for a base. "One of my bathrooms has a vessel sink sitting on an 18th century Pennsylvania dower chest with three drawers," Gail says. "At one time it was a beautiful piece, but when I found it, the top and one of the drawers were damaged, and it was priced accordingly. I knew I was going to have to put holes in it for the plumbing, so I didn't feel so bad because it was already ruined for normal use. Yet it works very well in the bathroom."

As for contemporary bathroom fixtures that work well with period furniture, Gail says there are excellent sources online. "If you have to depend on what's local, you're never going to see the whole spectrum of what's out there. If you spend enough time online, you can find just about anything."

And maybe best of all, Gail says the new emphasis on bathroom décor has broadened the styles of fixtures while lowering the prices. "I recently put a bathroom into my barn and I was amazed at how much cheaper bathroom fixtures are today, compared to when I restored this house eleven years ago."

