

Surrounded By Stories

BILL AND SUZANNE MCKENNA HAVE ACQUIRED A REMARKABLE SELECTION OF EARLY PAINTED FURNISHINGS, AND HAVE EXPANDED THEIR HOME TO PROVIDE A FITTING HISTORICAL SETTING FOR THEM.

By Gregory LeFever & Photographed by Jill Peterson





Previous page: The McKennas' great room features vibrant and historically accurate blue-green woodwork. Its wide-plank flooring, lowered ceilings, and soft lighting add to the mid-1700s feel that runs throughout their New Jersey home, though it actually dates from 1900.

Top: The c. 1740 walnut hanging cupboard has never been painted and has permanently absorbed the aroma of hearth smoke. It features all wooden pegs with no nails, and large butterfly hinges.

Above: A c. 1790 fragment mirror with lollipop handle hangs above a redware pitcher from the 1820s, which sits on an antique Bible.

As Bill McKenna walks from room to room in his New Jersey home, his antiques tell him stories. They tell of men with limited tools and skills who nevertheless made humble, yet charming, furnishings for their homes. They tell of cupboards with paint worn down to bare wood from thousands of openings and closings of their doors, and of furniture with holes never repaired perhaps out of respect for the industrious mice that gnawed them. They tell of cupboards hung over tables so close that candle flames deeply singed the bottom shelf, and so close to cooking hearths that the distinctive smell of centuries-old smoke still greets Bill when he opens the cupboard door.

“These are the traits that reveal the original uses of these pieces, of how people lived with and loved them through the many years,” he says. “And it’s what attracted me to these particular pieces. They speak to me.”

Bill and Suzanne McKenna have assembled a remarkable collection of antiques. Most date from the 1750s through the 1860s, most are from Pennsylvania and the Mid-Atlantic region and others from New England. Their focus for years has been on original-surface and first-generation painted pieces. From small pantry boxes to imposing cupboards, their pieces offer an extraordinary palette of early paint colors.

Today Bill continues his career as a self-employed optician, and Suzanne is a retired school administrator. He’s been tracking down antiques nearly all of his life, and Suzanne is content to give him the



Left: The early 1800s hanging shelf features profiles of ducks' heads on its end pieces and likely is from Maryland or Virginia. The bottom shelf has been deeply singed from hanging too close to a candle. Beneath it is a table designed for sorting vegetables, very worn from use but still retaining its weathered mustard paint. An assortment of early cooking utensils hang on the wall adjacent to the hearth.

Following page: A round New England hutch table from about 1810 is the centerpiece of the great room. Still wearing its original red paint and scrub top, the table is flanked by three c. 1790 Windsors, including at left a sack-back Windsor with original red over green paint, a continuous-arm Windsor in original red, and at right another sack-back Windsor with original black over red paint. The ensemble sits on an unusual 1870 Persian Serapi carpet found in Connecticut. Hanging above the table is a rare two-tier chandelier from 1820 Pennsylvania, with wire arms twisted at their ends to hold candles, but lacking any drip trays. The large pewter hutch is from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, c. 1790, with its original blue paint and red interior. The child's high chair has old mustard paint and appears to be Swedish from around 1810.



lead role in how their home has evolved over the 41 years they've lived there. And just as several of the McKennas' antiques have stories to tell, their house in Haddon Township also has its story – one with many chapters.

Labor of Love

Bill and Suzanne had been married three years when they purchased the house. He had grown up about 10 blocks away and her parents lived only a block away. It was a modest house when they bought it, typical of the area's homes from around 1900. "It had old knob-and-tube wiring, antiquated plumbing, and no insulation," Bill recalls. "I gutted it down to the studs."

Bill has since added five major additions to the home, nearly tripling its square-footage. "My neighbors probably think I'm certifiably crazy," he laughs. "They've seen me build additions, tear down walls I'd put up and then redo them completely. It's been an evolution, that's for sure."

"In the process, we've made the house more befitting of the types of antiques we're drawn to. I've lowered every ceiling, replaced every door, every floor, every wall, every window," he says.



Above: A mid-1800s clock sits on a New England fall-front desk, circa 1790.

Below: The Windsor writing chair is unusual because of its tall birdcage back. It has its original black paint and is from Connecticut. The writing surface at one time was covered with fabric or leather, as indicated by several small tack holes around the edge of the writing pad.





Bill stenciled the dining room walls with Moses Eaton patterns, muting them against the yellow textured-plaster walls. The massive corner cupboard is an early-1800s piece from the Mid-Atlantic region. The drop-leaf harvest table is surrounded by six matching step-down Windsor side chairs from Pennsylvania, about 1830, rare because of their first-generation Spanish brown paint and gold decoration. On the walls are a circa 1825 banjo clock, a federal-period mirror in original gold paint, a green painted early pipe rack and triple-tier Pennsylvania spoon rack in original red paint. Below the spoon rack is a New England turned-leg tavern table in original red, with an adjustable candle-holder sitting on it.

It's apparent that when it comes to home remodeling, Bill knows what he's doing - displaying a range of skills not normally associated with an optician. Even in high school he won a woodworking award for a desk he'd built, and that award helped him land a job in the cabinetry shop at the RCA Victor Company in nearby Camden, New Jersey, where his woodworking talents were put to full use. During a 26-year stint in the U.S. Naval Reserve he gained additional plumbing and electrical skills.

Reviewing the many projects he's accomplished in their home, Bill adds with a chuckle: "This house has been a real labor of love. Sometime more labor than love, but always with love."

Historically Compatible

Bill is a stickler when it comes to accurately depicting the home's historical atmosphere, going to great lengths to make sure the rooms themselves are historically compatible with the sizeable number of antiques the couple has collected.

The McKennas emphasize soft lighting, mostly relying on sconces, candelabras, and wax candles to provide light. Ceilings are lowered to seven-and-one-half feet, the norm for the period, and the wide-plank flooring is compatible with the home's late-1700s ambience. On several walls, Bill has created a stucco-like effect with wallboard joint compound and then painted them off-white to capture the look of early plaster.

In the kitchen, most of the standard appliances are in plain view. "I'm not a purist in the sense of trying to conceal our appliances the way some people do," he says. "We have modern amenities and some of them are disguised, but not to the point of being inconvenient."

Two rooms of historic interest are the great room and dining room, both for their daring - yet historically accurate - use of color. Woodwork throughout the great room is bold blue-green. "The cliché is that the paints of this period were muted colors, but this color is accurate and very beautiful," he says.



A circa 1800 Pennsylvania step-back cupboard in red paint with its original rat-tail hinges stands against a stenciled dining room wall. Visible through the doorway is an 1820s spoon-and-plate rack.

The dining room walls display well-executed stenciling on deep yellow walls. "I used a Moses Eaton pattern book," he explains, referring to the prominent late-1700s New England stenciling artist, "and the stenciling came out exactly as I intended it to. A lot of the original stenciling in early homes was very bright and bold because the homes were so dark. To me, when you put antiques with worn paint into a room with super-bright stenciling, it just doesn't blend well. So I prefer muted stenciling, and this works against the yellow background."

"Paint chips just don't tell the story," he explains about the color-selection process. "When you have mood lighting or natural light coming in the windows, it's hard to get a true picture of how the room will look. You have to keep trying. I've often said that if this house ever warrants historical investigation and somebody analyzes the paints, they'll find places on some of the chair rails with five or six layers of paint, and those are nearly brand-new chair rails where normally there should be only a primer and one coat of paint."

Drawn to the Unique

Bill was a boy with a paper route in the early 1960s when the nation celebrated its Civil War Centennial and, like many boys back then, got swept up in the romanticism of that conflict. "I began buying a few Civil War relics with my paper-route money, and that got me started going to flea markets and

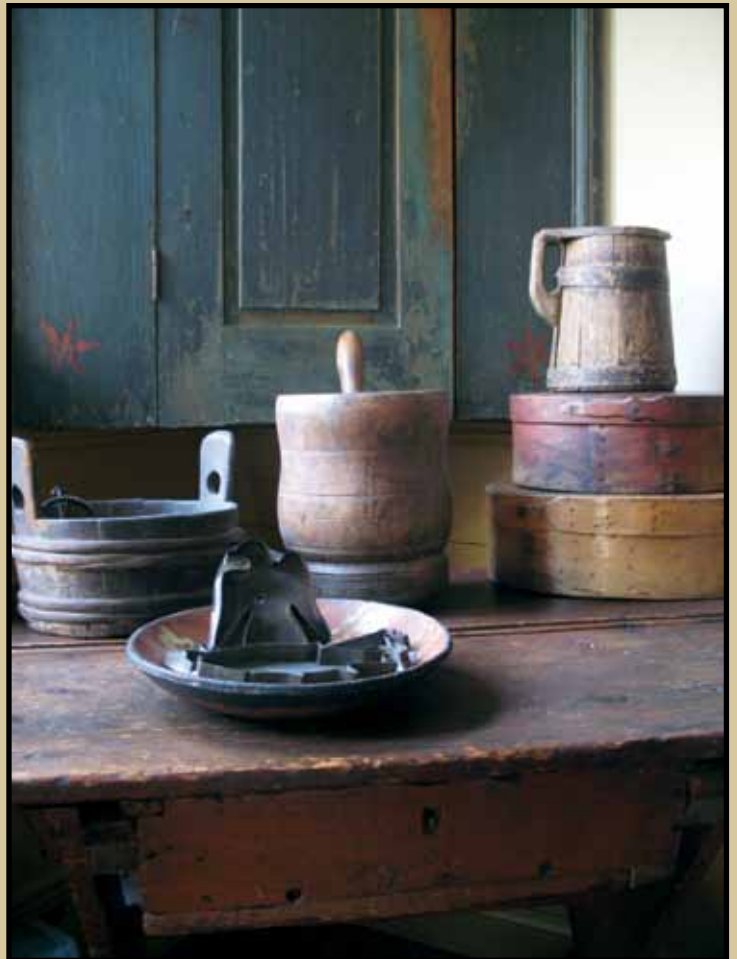


Above: One of the McKennas' favorite pieces, this circa 1800 corner cupboard has its original reddish-salmon paint, considerably worn by years of prying open the door with fingernails along the lower window styles. Hanging to the right of the cupboard is an early knife-cleaning box.



Above right: Two unusual pieces share space in the kitchen. The corner cupboard is circa 1820 in original blue but with red stars painted on the corners, possibly using a quilt pattern. The circa 1800 Pennsylvania storage cupboard next to it has a mouse hole in the door and a series of mouse holes up through several shelves to the top shelf and is one of the McKennas' favorite pieces.

Right: An array of pantry boxes, small early staved tub with handles, redware plate with cookie cutters, and a mortar and pestle adorn a scrub-top sawbuck table in original bittersweet paint.





yard sales and antiques shows, looking specifically for Civil War memorabilia.”

Years later, while he was dating Suzanne, the couple made their first major antique purchase. “It was a grandfather’s clock. It was English, of 1800 to 1810 vintage, and it was spectacular. It was \$350 and it was all we could afford at the time. Actually, we couldn’t afford it – we put a deposit on it. I was on active duty with the Naval Reserve at the time and I’d send her \$50 at a time to pay it off.”

During the early years of their marriage, they bought press-back chairs and oak items and eventually began looking for antiques from progressively earlier eras. “My main interest became the earlier, the more country, the more primitive pieces.”

Bill clearly appreciates not only history’s giant waves such as the Civil War, but also the smaller histories of families living on farms and in villages and how they “made-do” to furnish their homes.

“I’m drawn to the odd, one-of-a-kind pieces that you rarely see,” he explains. “I’m much more attracted to that type of piece than to a Williamsburg type of piece. The more crude items are indicative of what woodworkers could do with limited resources and limited skill. They didn’t have a wood shop like I have. But with their dovetails and similar techniques, they were doing things with hand tools that I can’t even think of doing with power tools. They were really quite ingenious.”

The McKennas also have acquired a number of pieces remarkable for their still-surviving painted surfaces. Especially noteworthy are several

Top: The mid-1800s pine jelly cupboard still retains its original blue-gray paint. It is from northern Vermont but may be Canadian in origin. Stacks of pantry boxes in a variety of sizes and original paint colors sit on top of the cupboard, along with a small butter churn.

Right: A hanging 10-drawer apothecary displays its original bittersweet paint in this vignette of early kitchen containers.





Top left: A primitive c. 1880 doll rests on a late-1700s child's chair in original red paint. The chair's original rush seat was replaced with a single board attached with rose-head nails.

Top right: This 1865 primitive English painting of a King Charles Spaniel is labeled "Chance, a favourite water dog" on its back side.

late-1700s Windsor chairs in their original blacks, reds, and greens. "I try to find them in original surface whenever I can, and that's tough to do," Bill admits. "Windsors were always meant to be painted, but it's hard to find them with first-generation paint."

Listening to the Stories

As with all of the very best antique collectors, Bill thinks intensely about his pieces, putting them in the context of the lives of previous owners. He carefully studies the construction of pieces, the natural aging of wood and paint, and the evidence of how people have treated or mistreated the pieces. For example, the McKennas have a large c. 1800 storage cupboard in their kitchen. "What first attracted me to it was a mouse hole at the bottom of the door," he says. "A determined mouse chewed through that door, and inside are four shelves, and every single shelf from the bottom to the top has a mouse hole in it. That means a mouse or a family of mice chewed all the way from the bottom of the cupboard to the top shelf to get to the sugar or whatever was stored there. Over the years, nobody chose to repair any of those holes. It's really quite spectacular."

Then there's a rare corner cupboard that reveals what more than 200 years of daily use has done to its original salmon-colored paint. "The doors didn't originally have any door pulls on them, so just look at the way the paint is worn in the areas they used for opening the doors," he explains. "How many times a day did someone dig her fingernails into the wood to open that door? That kind of thing is just fantastic."

Of an early Pennsylvania hanging cupboard in the McKennas' great room, Bill says, "It must have hung close to a cook fireplace for generations. The piece was never meant to be painted, which is why the wood absorbed the smoke. Now when you open the door, there's unmistakably the very strong smell of wood smoke, and that tells much about the cupboard's original use and how people lived with it over the years."

With a keen eye, Bill studies the intricate styles of some of his early country pieces, even to the point of detecting when the builder's wood supply was scarce. That's the case with a mid-1800s jelly cupboard in original blue-gray paint from northern Vermont. "The construction is quite good, with mortise-and-tenon joinery in the doors and cabinet," he notes, "but the wood the cabinetmaker used had to be from the bottom of his woodpile. There are knots and other crudeness to the wood, and you'd think he'd have used a better selection of material. But that's part of the originality of the piece and why we love it."

That sentiment seems to sum up Bill's perspective on his and Suzanne's antiques, as well as their home. Whether it's how an antique was created or how it was treated, whether it's how the McKennas searched and acquired the antiques, or whether it's the ongoing evolution of their home to accommodate their collection, it's all a labor of love.

The original c. 1900 portion of the McKenna home is to the right, with a front porch. In all, the couple has built five additions onto the home in 41 years, nearly tripling its floor space.

