

Valentes' Adventure

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY WINFIELD ROSS

AFTER A DECADE OF LONGING, DOUG AND KAREN VALENTE PURCHASED THEIR 18TH-CENTURY HOME AND BEGAN FINE-TUNING IT TO REFLECT THE RICH HISTORY OF THE SOUTH JERSEY REGION.



The downstairs room of the original two-room section of the house shows how well the building has been preserved—the paneling, flooring, and overhead beams are all original, as is the fireplace, which, at nearly 10 feet wide, might be the largest in Greenwich. The mantel is lined with reproduction pewter and old and new redware, the latter from Shooner American Redware and Wisconsin Pottery. The staircase leads to the upstairs loft, which was the other room in the original part of the house.



Three centuries after Samuel Bacon purchased land in southern New Jersey that earned the name Bacon's Adventure, the work the Valentés have put into transforming a Bacon family house and grounds on the original tract easily qualifies as Valentés' Adventure.

Although Doug and Karen Valente have spent the past seven years

hacking down overgrowth, replacing clapboards, waterproofing the basement, bringing the décor back to period authenticity, and doing the countless other projects endemic to colonial homes, their c. 1730 house remains remarkably intact.

Located in Greenwich, New Jersey, both the town and the Valentés' house owe their extraordinary historical preservation to a prolonged pe-

riod of economic decline. The town, industrially vibrant during the pre-Revolutionary period, was bypassed as commerce eventually shifted closer to Philadelphia. Greenwich today has only about 800 residents who are justifiably proud of the original colonial and Victorian houses still lining the town's few streets.

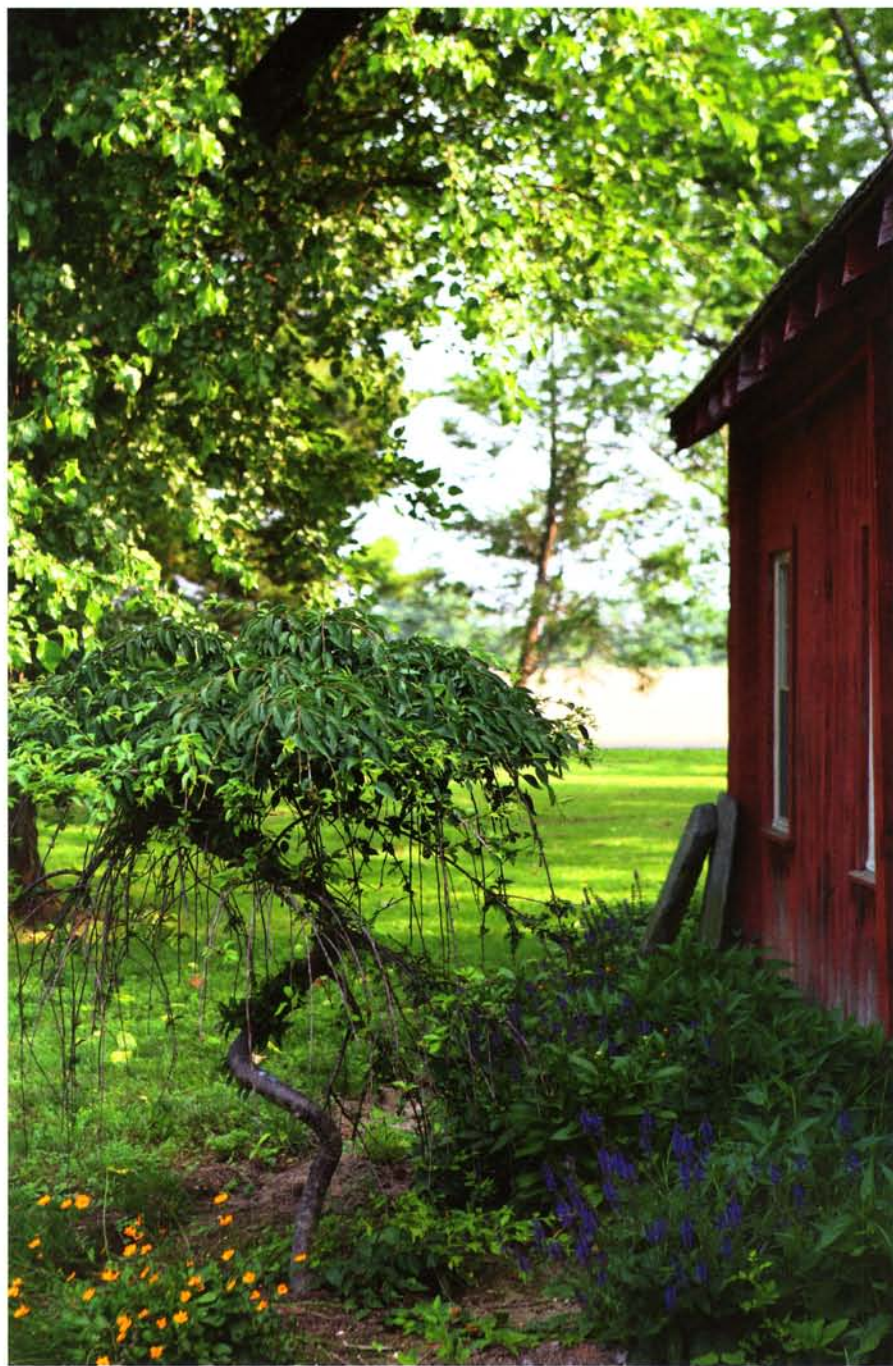
Likewise, the Valente home remained a farm for much of its existence, with its long line of owners lacking the wherewithal to modernize the structure at the expense of its colonial hallmarks. Today, the Valentés' home sits historically intact amid fields and woodlands, a proud example of the area's heritage.

BECOMING GREEN-WITCH

Greenwich has a history as rich as South Jersey farmland. Long the territory of migrating Lenni Lenape Indians, the Delaware Bay area's first European explorers were Swedes in the 1640s and the Dutch in the 1650s. Permanent settlement of the area began in 1675 when Englishman John Fenwick bought an enormous tract of New Jersey countryside and founded the town of Salem near the Delaware River, 40 miles south of where Philadelphia would be founded seven years later.

Fenwick in his will designated a second town to be built about 20 miles southeast of Salem, along the Cohansey River. Quakers in the 1680s moved from Salem to start the new town, as did Calvinists from New England, the latter naming it Greenwich after their former home in Connecticut. With the arrival of Presbyterians and Baptists, the young town gained a reputation for religious tolerance. Prosperity soon followed when the New Jersey colonial legislature named Greenwich as port-of-entry—one of the first in the American colonies—for ships headed up the Delaware River.

Samuel Bacon, a Quaker seaman from northern New Jersey, purchased 260 acres from the Fenwick holdings in 1682 and a year later negotiated another 400 acres from local Indians. Members of Bacon's family and his descendants built



Karen's art studio is located behind the house in a once-open structure built c. 1940 to hold wagons and tractors. Herbs and flowers grace the foundation. Two headstones lean against the corner, the only remnants of the Bacon family plot that existed somewhere near the house.



homes on the tract, including the house the Valentés now occupy.

"They had two names for his holdings," Doug explained. "One was Bacon's Neck—as in a neck, or peninsula, of land—and the other was Bacon's Adventure. Maybe they called it that because the area was remote wilderness and it probably was a bit of an adventure on Samuel's part."

Shipbuilding, farming, oyster and sturgeon fishing lured more colonists to Greenwich, many of whom had a reputation for loyalty to England even as storm clouds of revolution rose on the horizon. In late 1774, a brig belonging to the East India Tea Company sailed up the Cohansey and secretly unloaded a cargo of tea into a local Tory's cellar until it could be smuggled into Philadelphia.

Well aware of the hidden tea—and of the notorious "tea party" in Boston a year earlier—about forty young Whigs from the Greenwich area disguised themselves as Indians and hauled the several tea chests into



The original section of the Valentés' house is the shorter part to the right. The taller section is an addition dating from about 1812. The house color is "Firebrick" from Sherwin Williams.

TOP The yard behind the house shows some of the extensive gardening and landscaping the Valentés have done, with beds for herbs, flowers, and vegetables. Doug built the bird feeder (far left) several years ago to resemble the house.



In this view of the original downstairs room in the older section, the early-1800s Pennsylvania hutch table in the foreground has its original red paint. The c. 1800 sawbuck table against the wall is a favorite piece with its original green paint in a shade indigenous to South Jersey. The red step-back cupboard is a reproduction, as are the Windsors, from various makers.

Market Square, where they set the entire shipment ablaze. Greenwich thus joined Boston, Charleston, Annapolis, and Princeton as one of the five “tea party” sites in colonial America.

In keeping with patriotic fervor, residents also chose to change the pronunciation of their town name from the traditional English “greennitch” to the more phonetic “greenwich,” which they regarded as more American. It still rolls off the tongues of residents such as the Valentés.

EBB OF INDUSTRY

As with many surviving 18th-Century American houses, the original construction date of the Valentés’ home is uncertain. “There’s a discrepancy because, when we bought it, local lore was that it was built in 1730,” Doug explained. “Recently there was a study done of heavy-timber-frame homes in the county by Joan Berkey, the historical preservation consultant, and she

thought it was built around 1775.”

Berkey based her conclusion on the presence of water mill-sawn timbers in the earlier section of the house. “Through my research, I was able to determine that there was a change from using hand-hewn and/or pit-sawn timbers to water mill-sawn timbers right around the time of the Revolution,” she explained. “Every timber in the framing the Valentés left exposed has the characteristic, even, up-and-down saw marks that a water mill saw makes, so I believe that section dates to c. 1775 or later.”

“There were people here with outhouses until the 1960s.”

“So we’re not sure when the original part was built,” Doug said, “anywhere from 1730 to 1775, but we know it was William Bacon’s home and, as best I can tell, he was a great-

grandson of Samuel Bacon.”

William Bacon’s original home had but a single room on the ground floor with a loft above. In about 1812 he or a descendant added a taller two-storey section, providing the basic floor plan that exists to this day.

“This home was in the Bacon family until 1905, so they had a pretty long run with it,” Doug said, noting that he and Karen are the home’s sixth owners since the Bacon family relinquished it.

In a sense, the Valentés’ home mirrors the destiny of Greenwich itself. Just 50 miles due north, Philadelphia had grown during the late 1700s into the region’s major commercial and industrial center, supporting a network of new roads that reduced reliance on rivers for transportation. Off the proverbial beaten path, Greenwich grew increasingly remote while its industries died or moved elsewhere, leaving farming as the main means of subsistence.

"There was a long period of decline, and a lot of the original houses became occupied by tenant farmers and others who were not affluent, so these homes didn't get updated," Doug said, noting, "There were people here with outhouses until the 1960s." Meanwhile, a growing appreciation for things early American—bolstered by the Colonial Revival movement and the nation's Bicentennial—favored relatively untouched colonial towns such as Greenwich, where 200-year-old homes still overlooked the very streets where the town's young men had once burned British tea.

LURE OF GREENWICH

Since the early 20th Century, Greenwich's historically preserved homes and streets have attracted people from big cities such as Philadelphia and smaller ones such as Vineland, New Jersey, about 20 miles northeast.

"Karen and I grew up in Vineland, which was totally different than here," Doug said, bordering on understatement. Vineland today has more than 60,000 people compared to Greenwich's 800.

"My mom was always into antiques and old homes," he recalled. "And even when I was quite young, she would take me to Greenwich and show me the old homes. We'd go on house tours and into the little shops and whatnot. I just fell in love with Greenwich. And, as I got older and went away to college, I'd think about Greenwich, and when I'd come home to visit, I liked to take my dates there."

Strangers growing up, Doug and Karen met at a local gym when Doug got pinned in a bench press and needed help extricating himself. They dated for about three years and

The Valentés left this section of wall exposed in the downstairs room of the early section of the house to reveal the nogging—brickwork used sometimes in colonial homes to strengthen walls. The candlestick and redware plate are reproductions. As a gift for Doug, Karen asked Donna Weaver to craft the wax portrait of General "Mad" Anthony Wayne (1745-96), who played an important role in the Revolutionary battle at Monmouth, New Jersey.



The large original mantel in the living room displays intricate punch-and-gouge woodworking that would have been expensive for the 1812 period during which it was installed. (A smaller example is on the mantel in the adjacent reading room.) Karen painted the portraits above of a sea captain and his wife, her favorites. She also collects antique ship models like the one at right. The ladder-back chair is an antique. The c. 1800 blanket chest was made in nearby Bridgeton. It holds a redware bowl by the Shooners and antique and reproduction horse pull toys. The woodwork is "Pearwood" from the Shaker Workshops line of paints.





discovered their grandfathers had been friends and that Karen's mother used to baby-sit for Doug's mother.

Although Karen hadn't shared Doug's exposure to old houses, she grew to appreciate them, and by the time they married in 1989, "I was pretty into it," she said.

"She picked up on it right away and grew to love old houses too," Doug concurred. "I always said that if we ever got an opportunity to move to Greenwich, we should."

That opportunity finally came in 1996 when one of Doug's friends introduced him to a person who was selling an 1860 house. He and Karen looked at it, thinking Doug's parents would be interested in it. They declined, and Doug and Karen jumped at the chance. The house had been restored to a degree, but Doug and Karen "made it right for the time period."

"It was a bit of a culture shock," Karen confessed, noting that the narrow structure offered much less space than the new saltbox they built after marrying. But she adjusted, converting the third floor into a studio for her painting.

A lean-to added to the rear of the house about 40 years ago provides space for eating. The table and Windsor chairs are reproductions. Karen painted the cow on the wall. The 1924 loose hay barn can be seen through the window.

The rafters and beams in the barn are original. The structure is Doug's domain, where he keeps a workshop for house maintenance. He might soon be sharing the space with a horse and donkey.





Pixie, the Valentés' 7-year-old Norwich terrier and uncontested ruler of the house, gazes from atop the staircase leading from the reading room in the 1812 section of the house to the downstairs room in the earlier section.

"But from the time we first moved to Greenwich, our sights were really on this house and property," Doug said of the William Bacon house, a desire that grew stronger when they met the owners and saw the property firsthand.

During the nine years the Valentés lived in the 1860 house, they tried three times to buy the William Bacon home, but the owners weren't interested in selling. Karen recalls thinking, "I have a feeling we're going to live here someday," and when she became friends with the

owner told her, "If you ever want to sell your house, call us first."

Eventually, in 2005, the call came.

FOCUSING ON VINTAGE

By the time the Valentés took possession of it, William Bacon's property had been a farm of one sort or another for about 230 years. Some previous owners had cared for the house and some had been neglectful. One had performed various restoration chores and another had modernized the kitchen and put in a cooling system, but nobody had ruined it.

"There are so many things original to this house—floors, moldings, chair rails, windows, hardware—but that's not unique in this town," Doug said.

For example, one anecdote concerns the home's front door, a nicely paneled piece prominent on the 1812 section. A man named Carl Lodge dropped in on the Valentés one day after they'd acquired the house, explaining that he'd been a hired hand on the farm and had inherited it in the 1950s from the farmer who'd hired him.

"Carl said that one day somebody drove up to the house and offered him \$2,000 for the front door," Doug recalled. "Carl didn't sell the door—even though \$2,000 back then was a fortune. I asked him why he didn't sell it, and he said he didn't because he didn't know what he'd put in its place. I'm glad he didn't."

The Valentés definitely had work to do. "When we bought it, we knew what it needed to look like, so we put all of our efforts into that," Doug said. They focused on taking the house back to the 1730s, repainting interior walls with period-appropriate colors and sprucing up the exterior.

They also replaced and restored parts of the house from the basement and foundation, upgraded wiring and plumbing, and fixed things up to the roof. Outdoors they reclaimed or rebuilt period-style brick pathways and established garden beds for herbs, flowers, and vegetables.

"When I just list it off like that, it sounds like we didn't do that much," Doug said laughing, "but, trust me, it was a lot of hard work."

Living in a house that's nearly historically pristine and having labored to get floors, woodwork, walls, and ceilings to reflect the early 1700s, the Valentés turned their attention to its furnishings.

"We were always into antiques,

but we went on a mission to find local antiques from that period,” Doug said. Either on their own or with help from some of South Jersey’s foremost antiques dealers, they’ve been able to acquire several 18th- and early-19th-Century pieces from the region, including a couple of tables with an original shade of green paint considered indigenous to South Jersey.

What they couldn’t find in antiques they filled in with similar-style reproductions. “We wanted to fit the look of the period but have furniture you can actually use,” Karen said. “We still lie on the couch and watch TV, but now we hide the TV.”

Karen, academically trained as

an artist, contributed the people and animal portraits that hang on the walls. “I had stopped painting for ten years,” she said. “When we got into the first old house, Doug encouraged me to make something appropriate for the walls. Then it became a job.”

The property also held two tombstones—dug up long ago—that were purportedly part of the original Bacon family graveyard.

TRACES OF THE PAST

The Valentés’ restoration work has produced unexpected finds, including some that are fairly unusual even for such an early house. While replacing

the exterior clapboard, workmen discovered a concealment shoe. The tradition of hiding a shoe during construction dates to Europe in the 1400s as a method of protecting the house from evil. Most shoes found in American homes date from about

1830 to 1850, but this worn example is earlier, tucked into a wall between the c. 1730 and 1812 portions of the house.

They also found nogging within the walls, an architectural technique marking the home’s early construction date. Nogging is brickwork that fills the space between a wall’s studs or other framing pieces. The Valentés have kept open a section of wall in the earlier part of the house to reveal the inte-

A reading room at the rear of the 1812 section looks out over the backyard. The splay-leg table beneath the window is a rare late-1700s South Jersey piece in an indigenous shade of original green paint. The window glass throughout the house is antique. Karen painted the still life and the portrait, while Doug made the hanging wall box. The woodwork is “Salmon” from the Seraph line of paints. The gold settee is from Circa Home Living, the wing chair a commercial reproduction.





A carpenter friend gave the Valentés the small stuffed dog on this dresser. He had discovered it in an old house he was demolishing in nearby Springtown, which was a stop on the Underground Railroad. The dog, possibly the toy of a runaway slave, is stuffed with straw, hand-sewn, and was in a hiding place beneath a staircase. Karen painted the child's portrait.

rior bricks.

"It was also supposed to help keep out snakes and rats," Doug explained. His statement prompted a laugh from Karen, who added, "It doesn't work."

The property also held two tombstones—dug up long ago—that were purportedly part of the original Bacon family graveyard. They now rest against a wall of Karen's art studio behind the house. Doug has seen documentation that other tombstones are buried "in the gutter of the water house" on the property. But those documents fail to clearly indicate the graveyard's original location or even where the water house was. "We've found no trace of any of it," he said.

Of much more recent vintage but still noteworthy is a large barn set a short distance behind the house. Built in 1924, it is an authentic loose hay barn—nearly entirely intact while most of its peers have disappeared from the landscape. A farmer would bring loose hay from the fields to the barn's main floor and then lift it to the loft with a crane-and-pulley mechanism powered by a harnessed horse. He stacked hay to the loft's rafters then pitch-forked it down via a chute when he needed it to feed the animals in the stalls on the main floor.

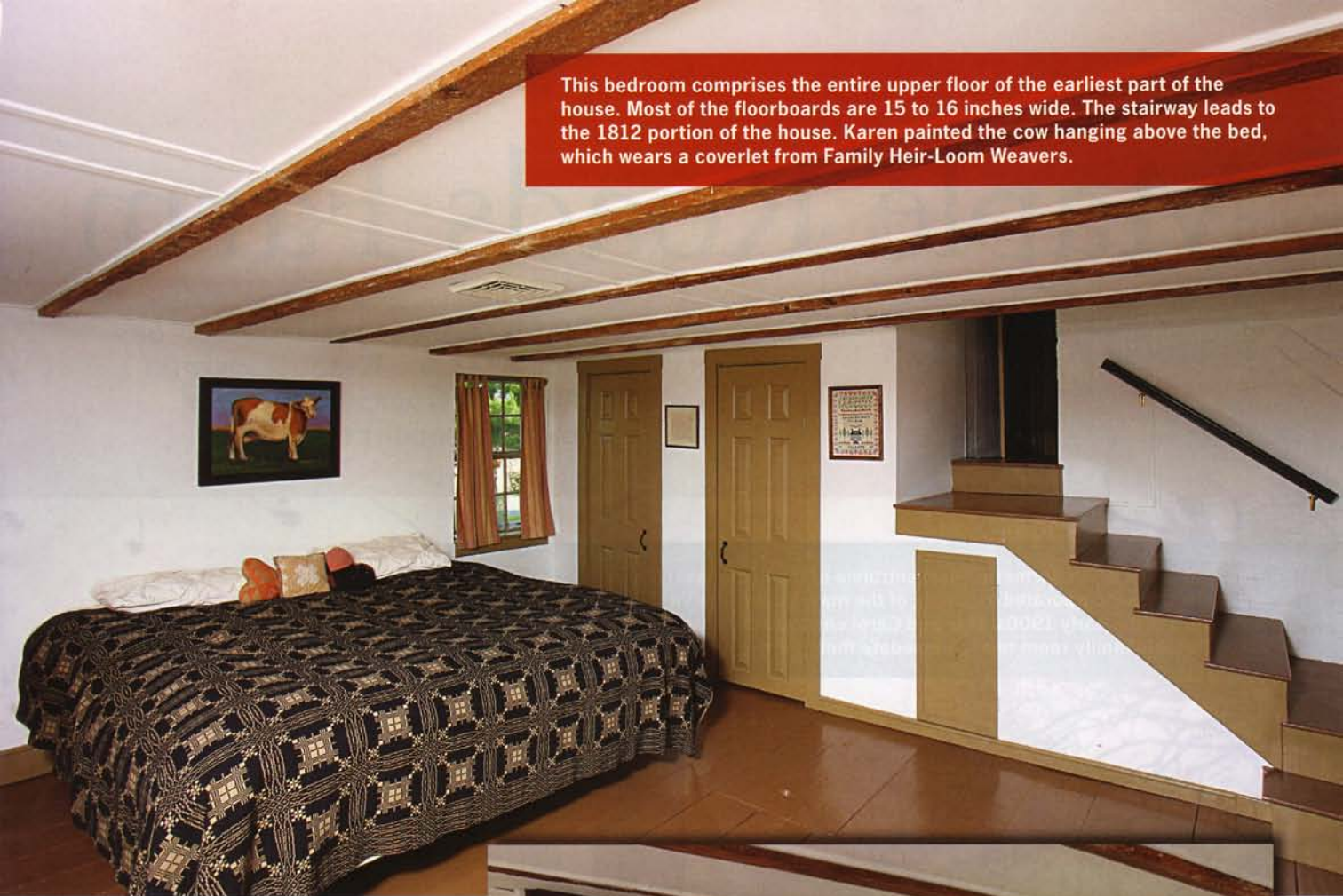
"When you think of bringing the hay in from the fields and getting it up to the loft, it was quite a job," Doug said. "It had to take just days and days and days."

Another small outbuilding, sheathed in boards with weathered red paint, had been an open-sided struc-



The stairway in the home's oldest section retains its original beaded paneling and a door with single-board panels. It closes with its original wooden latch attached with hand-forged nails. The stairs lead from the upstairs bedroom to the attic.

This bedroom comprises the entire upper floor of the earliest part of the house. Most of the floorboards are 15 to 16 inches wide. The stairway leads to the 1812 portion of the house. Karen painted the cow hanging above the bed, which wears a coverlet from Family Heir-loom Weavers.



ture built about 1940 to house tractors and wagons. Two owners prior to the Valentés enclosed it and converted it into an art studio—the same purpose it serves for Karen today.

Being fully aware of how rare and historically precious their home is, the Valentés have taken steps to protect it from intrusive development. Thirty acres came with their original purchase, and five years ago they bought another 52 acres to surround the property.

“Our 82 acres now resemble a large piece of the original property,” Doug said. “We’re insulated here, and next door to us is another 3,600 acres of state game land, so it’s wide open with plenty of wildlife. We searched a long time to have something like this.”★

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The bedroom has a working fireplace with paneling above. The small chest and two document boxes on top all date from the 1800s.

