

Maine Home

September 2010

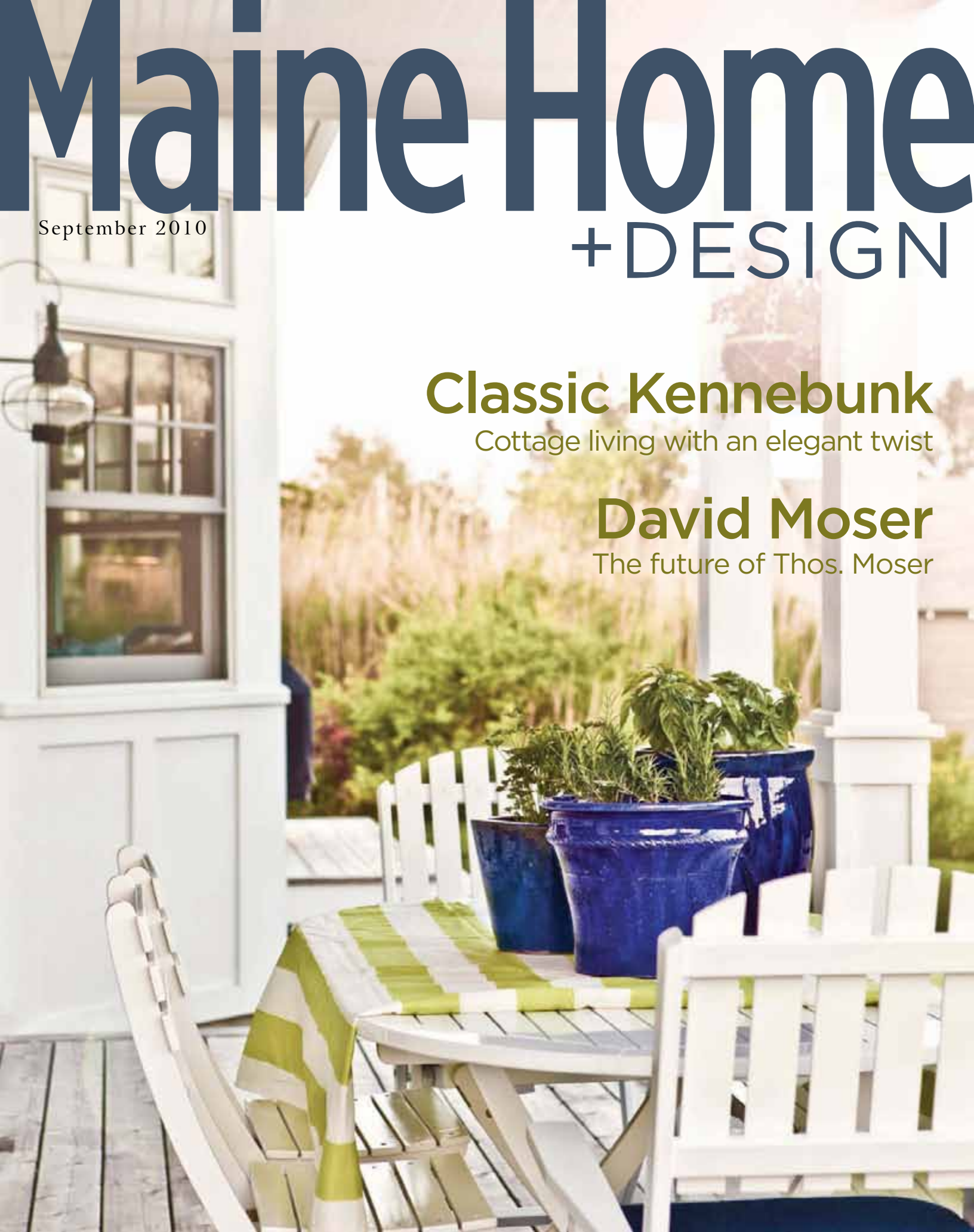
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Heritage on the Hill

A monument
to one family's
lineage on
Bailey Island

INN PLACE

by Rebecca Falzano
Photography François Gagné

There's only one way to get to Bailey Island. Wind through a sequence of roads that reach like fingers into the ocean at no more than thirty miles per hour. Drive over the Cribstone Bridge and imagine the days when the ferry was the only way across. And just when you think the view can't top itself, round another bend.

The drive out to Bailey Island thrusts you into the ocean, the same waters on which 17 generations of the Johnson family and its many offshoots have made their livelihood, planting roots that have grown into a cluster of families with different last names—the Blacks, Linscotts, and Sheas, to name a few.

On a rooftop perched above Garrison Cove, Chris Johnson mixes resin, racing the rain showers to finish by the weekend when the first set of renters will arrive. The home he built with his brother, interior designer Brett Johnson, and sister, Cathy Silva, is named after their grandfather, Captain Lawrence E. Johnson, and was built for the purpose of lodging guests, most of who rent it by the week or for special events. Yet it was also built for the family as a tribute to their long-lasting legacy on Bailey Island—the realization of a generations-long dream.

Millie and Jeff Johnson, the parents of the three siblings, inherited the property from Jeff's parents, who lived in the original house and had a lobster-trap shop on the sight of the

The Johnson family can be traced back 17 generations on Bailey Island. It was here that brothers Brett and Chris Johnson, with sister Cathy, built the Captain Lawrence E. Johnson House last year. The house, named after their late grandfather, is a true family labor of love, and is now available for lodging.



new one. Grandfather Larry always dreamt of building a house higher up on the property—for the view, of course—and after he died, his son Jeff, a self-taught ocean captain, decided to pursue that dream with the construction of a Cape. Jeff's health soon deteriorated, though, and the house sat unfinished for several years. "It became this big white elephant," says Brett. "The house went on the market and stayed there, and my brother and sister and I started talking about buying it." The Johnsons worked with attorneys for more than a year to form the trust to which Millie and Jeff would donate the house. Chris and Brett went to work—Brett on a business plan and Chris on the redesign of the house to make it suitable for lodging—the idea being that the rental income generated would go to the trust and help their parents in their later years. "It was the right thing to do," says Brett. Save the house as a monument to their history and lineage, and turn it over to visitors who would stay there and form their own memories.

The Johnson family didn't have to look far to find the right renovation team: Chris's woodworking and boatbuilding skills made him the ideal contractor, and as the principal designer of Maine Street Design Co., Brett was perfectly suited to design the interiors. Cousins Byron and Blair Shea of Shea's Plastering Company were brought in to do the plastering. The youngest members of the family helped with things like sweeping the floors. Even Brett and Chris's ill father contributed. "He had bought these old cast-iron radiators with the paint chipping off them, and he cleaned them up and spray painted them," recalls Brett. "It was kind of ironic because he was on oxygen, and typically any paint fumes or smoke bothered him. But that spray paint didn't bother him one little bit. He was in the moment."

Indeed, the house is many things to the family: a family affair, a labor of love, and a monument to their heritage. What the home is not is the typical architecturally driven project. In fact, ask Brett about whether an architect was involved and he'll laugh, preferring instead to credit good old-fashioned "Yankee ingenuity." The original shingled (or rather, mostly shingled) Cape was—with the exception of a study that had been their father's workshop—totally unfinished. "No electricity, no plumbing, no septic system...Really, no nothing," says Brett. And what had been finished sat for so long that it all had to be gutted. The entire second floor, except for the master bedroom, was ripped off, and all the new dormers had to be built. Thirty



Each bedroom (left) has a view—from one, you can sit in bed and see out to Pond Island; from another, the harbor beckons from a cozy windowseat (top). Brett kept the summer-cottage feel intact with a mix of neutral fabrics and pops of cheerful color. Custom sewing was done by Alice Mobley for Maine Street Design Co.

INN PLACE



The cherry kitchen cabinetry (left and left, bottom) was salvaged from the Portland Public Market demo kitchen and painted all white. Chris crafted the cherry countertops with walnut trim. On the wall hangs an honorary culinary degree that was given to Brett and Chris's grandmother, Eileen, who started nearby Rock Ovens restaurant many years ago. "All the Bowdoin professors used to come down and eat there, and they loved Nana's food so much that they gave her an honorary doctorate of culinary arts," says Brett.

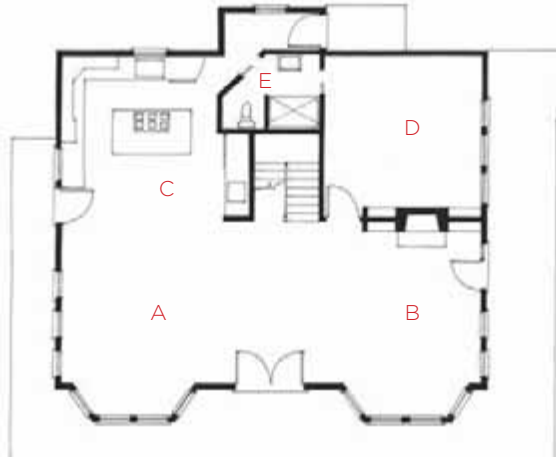
The generous farm table in the dining room (below) can accommodate up to 12 people. Manufactured oak floors from Atlantic Hardwoods run throughout the house.



INN PLACE



This room (above) used to be Lawrence Johnson's lobster-trap shop. Now, it functions as a study where built-in shelves house books culled from various family members, including a great aunt who was a poet.



- A Dining Room
- B Living Room
- C Kitchen
- D Sitting Room
- E Bathrooms
- F Bedrooms




new windows were installed. The undertaking was both rewarding and maddening, especially since it hinged on the cooperation of two brothers.

“Chris and I have always had a brotherly, adversarial, competitive relationship,” admits Brett. The two butted heads during the project, engaging in late-night text message arguments over things like dormers. “We said the kinds of things to each other that you can only say to your brother,” he laughs. But ultimately the two worked through it all. “The best thing about working with Chris is that after everything is said and done, all things are possible.” Brett is referring to the unconventional finishes his brother built—finishes that other contractors said couldn’t be done. Similarly, Chris appreciates his brother’s impeccable sense of design, even though he’s been known to joke about it. “Brett’s kind of sick,” Chris says. “He can stand at the bottom of the stairs and throw a pillow up and it’ll land in the right place.”

The goal for both the interior design and construction was to make the house look like it had been there forever. “From the lines of the dormers to the treatments, we wanted it to look like it had absolutely evolved over time,” says Brett. The very spirit of the home contributes to this feeling. Most of the antiques came from a local fire-department auction. The books on the shelves were culled from collections of family



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The patriarch of the family, Lawrence Johnson, was a stonemason, and his son Jeff (who was not) built the fireplace in the living room (below, left) in his honor. The over mantel was a gift from Brett’s colleague M.L. Norton; it first lived in a cottage in Cape Elizabeth.

The coffee table in the living room was Brett and Chris’s grandfather’s work bench (below). “We had to pull some nails and screws out of it, but it works perfectly as a coffee table,” says Brett.



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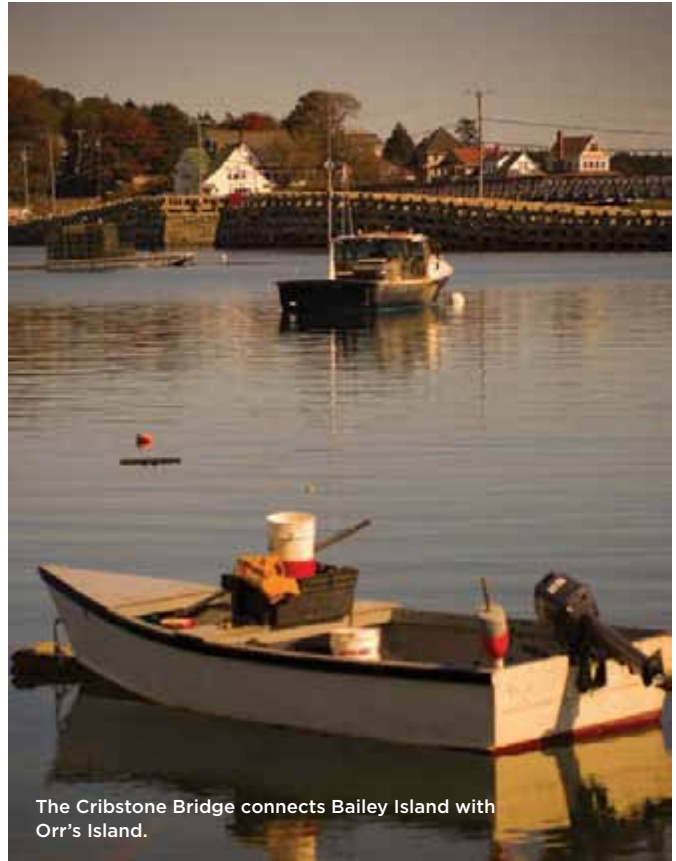


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INN PLACE



The Cribstone Bridge connects Bailey Island with Orr's Island.

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members, including a great aunt who was a poet, English professor, and Columbia University graduate. The art collection is composed of pieces that have been in the family for generations. It's a design philosophy that isn't so much a philosophy as it is a family history. "It happens as if by magic. Because it's honest and real," says Brett.

Perhaps the most honest and real part of the project was having everyone in the family come together—despite the occasional tensions—to build this house. "The three of us kids—as my dad used to say—are as different as night and day. But there's nobody closer than brothers and sisters," says Brett.

This past winter, Brett, Chris, and Cathy's father passed away, just as the house was finished. It was poignant for the Johnsons. "The house has served its mission," says Brett. "It was a healing process that helped my father realize his dream. It may not have been finished exactly how he may have envisioned it when he started building it. I think it exceeded that."

At the memorial service, Brett confided to the pastor that he thought the house was his father's greatest folly, but also his greatest achievement. Later, at the closing of the service, the pastor had her own interpretation of Brett's thoughts: "You said this house was his greatest folly and his greatest achievement. But the truth is, you three kids are his greatest achievement."

The next generation of Johnsons range in from age 7 to 20, and Uncle Brett likes to remind them: All this will be yours someday. And from there, the Johnson lineage on Bailey Island will continue. **MH+D**

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For more information, see Resources on page 100.