

Maine Homes

by *Down East*

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P. 36



Living History



Sixteen designers reimagine La Rochelle — a masterpiece of Bar Harbor’s gilded age

PHOTOGRAPHS BY IRVIN SERRANO

A

t the dawn of the 20th century, Mount Desert Island was a playground for the world’s most prestigious families. The Pulitzers, Rockefellers, and Vanderbilts maintained opulent estates there, socializing against a breathtaking landscape that, in 1929, would be christened Acadia National Park. Among those rubbing elbows with the boldface names was George

Sullivan Bowdoin, a treasurer at J.P. Morgan & Co. and great-grandson of Alexander Hamilton, who built a 13,000-square-foot Georgian Revival mansion, known as La Rochelle, on West Street in 1902.

With a dozen bedrooms, nine bathrooms, a staff of more than 20, and nearly three verdant acres kissing the shores of Frenchman Bay, the home — the town’s first built of brick — was considered extravagant even for turn-of-the-century Bar Harbor. It was also charmed: the 1947 fire that destroyed more than 200 houses in the area stopped just a few feet from La Rochelle’s front door.

While many of Bar Harbor’s surviving grand homes were eventually demolished, La Rochelle endured, thanks in large part

to the Colkets — members of the family that owned Campbell Soup Company, who bought the estate in the 1940s and lived there until 1972. Since then, it has served as the headquarters for Maine Seacoast Mission, which provides food, medical services, youth programming, and other services to the needy. But it’s never been widely accessible to the public — until now.

Last spring, the Bar Harbor Historical Society purchased La Rochelle for its new home and plans to open there next summer. “Visitors to Bar Harbor have always asked if there are houses they can tour, like they can in a place like Newport [Rhode Island], but there have not been any,” says Kim Swan, owner of Swan Hospitality Group and a historical society board member. “Now they’ll be able to see this showpiece house for the first time.”

And they don’t have to wait until next year. Over the summer, Swan invited 16 of Maine’s top designers to transform nine of La Rochelle’s rooms and its sunken garden for her third Bar Harbor Designer Showhouse, which is open through October 13 and raises funds to benefit the historical society. The result is an elaborate remake of a storied estate that imagines what it might look like if the aristocrats of Bar Harbor’s gilded age had decorated it today. On the pages ahead, *Maine Homes by Down East* offers a sneak peek.



LIVING ROOM

Brett Johnson, Maine Street Design

Tomato-soup red was the springboard for Portland designer Brett Johnson's sweeping living room. Rich corals on pillows and a Gustavian-inspired secretary he designed nod to former La Rochelle residents the Colkets, who are descendants of John T. Dorrance, inventor of condensed soup and a former president of the Campbell Soup Company. On the mantel, meantime, a pair of brass candelabras with shades decouped with images of the iconic soup can labels is a full-on Warholian embrace. Complementary blues on the walls, carved fireplace surround, wingback and mid-century armchairs, Afghan and abstract rugs, and velvet-tufted ottoman augment the fiery hues and harken to the sea framed in the room's French doors. Nautical-inspired pieces, including a painting of MV *Bluenose*, which ferried passengers from Bar Harbor to Nova Scotia in the 1950s, an 1861 map of the Maine coast, a rope sculpture by Southwest Harbor's Susan Beallor-Snyder that evokes the female form, and a porthole-like mirror that, Johnson says, invites games of I spy, further root the room in its seaside setting.

INTERIOR DESIGNER:
Maine Street Design; mainestreetdesign.com

DELIVERIES:
Bisson Moving & Storage; movebisson.com

FLORAL PILLOWS:
Mainely Alice; 207-590-0255

FRAMING:
Casco Bay Frames; cascobayframes.com

PAINT:
Benjamin Moore & Paradis True Value;
paradistruevalue.com

PAINTING CONTRACTOR:
The Perfect Stroke; 207-423-9918

RUGS:
Mougalian Rugs; mougalianrugs.com

SOFA, WINGBACK CHAIR, & SOLID & ZIG-ZAG
PILLOW UPHOLSTERER:
Cottage Threads; cottage threadsmaine.com

WINGBACK CHAIR SLIPCOVERS &
FLORAL PILLOW FABRIC:
Trend Fabric & Vervain Fabric; fabriccut.com