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New Hampshire, Maine & Massachusetts



This page: A glassed-in porch offers stunning ocean views. | Facing page, clockwise from left: From shipbuilders to sea captains, historic Newburyport, Massachusetts, has been the home of many with the ocean in their blood. For Jeff and Michelle Nelson, who also share a passion for the sea, it is the perfect place for their first home. The couple uses the rooftop captain's walk, with its sweeping panorama of the Atlantic, as a deck. The patio is ideal for cookouts.

A FIRST HOME PROVES TO BE A “SHORE THING”



Jeff Nelson lives his life by the rhythm of the sea. Serving as a Hampton Beach, New Hampshire, lifeguard for 24 years, and now a lieutenant in the New Hampshire Beach Patrol, he knows its every mood. His wife, Michelle, grew up in upstate New York as a “lake person,” but since meeting Jeff, she, too, has fallen under the ocean’s spell. The two now enjoy kayaking and paddle surfing together.

Given their connection to the ocean, it was natural for this couple to seek a home by the shore. They were newly engaged when they found the right house—an 1840s gambrel in Newburyport, Massachusetts, located within steps of the water. Earlier owners had attempted to modernize the home, adding banks of windows and a wraparound glassed-in porch, but the historic charm remains.

“I loved the house right away,” Michelle says. “Jeff liked the location but wasn’t sure about the house; then he came around. From the beginning, we knew we wanted to bring back more of the home’s original style. We repaired the crown moldings, wainscoting, and woodwork because they really give the house its unique character.”

Neighbor and friend, William Soupcoff, principal architect with TMS Architects of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, helped the Nelsons with the home’s redesign. “The house was basically the victim of an odd renovation that had taken place some 15 years before,” he says. “The home’s historic character had been diminished, and Jeff and Michelle wanted to reclaim more of its original appeal. Thankfully, a lot of the nice wood remained so we could do that.”

*Shaped by
the Sea*

WRITTEN BY CRYSTAL WARD KENT
PHOTOGRAPHED BY ROB KAROSIS



One major change the couple was forced to make was to take out the giant fireplace that divided the kitchen. “There are five fireplaces in the house, and we kept the others, but this one just dominated the room and chopped up the space,” Soupcoff explains. “Removing it allowed us to expand the kitchen with a better layout and more room for entertaining.”

With the fireplace gone, the Nelsons now have a lovely, large kitchen that flows into the dining and living room areas. The maple flooring found throughout most of the house is original and the couple extended that into the kitchen, thus unifying the spaces.

Given their love of the sea, and its proximity, the Nelsons decided to bring ocean hues into the home. The kitchen cabinets are done in cool white, like the foam of a wave. These contrast nicely with the black granite countertops, which echo the rocky outcroppings of the coast. Soft gray walls set the mood in both the kitchen and the living area; like the water, their tone changes with the light of the day. White wainscoting in the living room brightens the gray. Michelle chose a dark brown sectional for the living room, then added an ivory rug for balance. A nineteenth-century sea chest serves as a coffee table and hints at the home’s possible maritime connections. Newburyport has a seafaring heritage, and while the Nelsons have not yet explored their home’s historic origins, it would not be unusual for it once to have been the home of a ship’s captain or owner.

Because of its size, the home has two first-floor living areas, separated by a large Rumford fireplace. The second living room connects to the glassed-in porch. “When we bought the house, the porch was not insulated and the windows were just flat glass panes that did not open,” Jeff says. “We added spray insulation, heat, and replaced the windows with ones that do open. It’s one of our favorite rooms. The sea is all around you and the light is wonderful. In the summer we get great breezes. It’s perfect.” For the front living room, Michelle kept the gray wall color, but went with matching white sofas, which pick up the white of the fireplace surround and perfectly complement the gray. Lime-colored pillows add a punch of color, while a mirrored coffee table captures the sweep of sea and sky just outside. The overall effect is modern, yet harmonizes perfectly with the home’s seaside location and historic roots.



Facing page, above: Michelle kept the same palette throughout much of the house, choosing ocean colors of white, gray, and black with pops of bright color here and there. | Below: The color scheme brings the sea indoors, and the natural light, thanks to abundant windows, changes the mood of the rooms as the day passes. | This page: Nautical and ocean accents further connect the home to its seaside roots. Note the old-fashioned lifeguard rescue buoy in the hallway, the ship’s lantern-style lights, and the copper sailboat — a nod to a former owner’s pastime of racing yachts.



Throughout the home, the couple has added touches that showcase their interests, relationships, and backgrounds.

In the front hallway, next to some antique milk cans, sits a 1920s lifeguard's metal rescue cylinder. Dave Cropper, who owns Cinnamon Rainbows Surf Company in Hampton, New Hampshire, gave this to Jeff. "Because it's metal, it's pretty heavy to lug around and would have gotten very hot after being in the sun," Jeff says. "I'm glad today's tools of the trade have improved!" In the bathroom, a large mirror with a striking driftwood frame is an immediate focal point. Another friend, Michael Fleming of Maine, whose work is sought after both locally and in New York City, made the mirror.

Steel and copper pendant lights hanging in the stairwell recall ships' lanterns of old, while a copper sailboat, another testament to the Nelsons' love of the sea, adorns a wall. The home itself has strong ties to sailing, as much earlier owners once raced trimarans (three-hulled racing yachts) across the Atlantic and were able to winch their boat directly from the water into the barn on the property. The boat winch still remains.

Heading up to the second floor, one notices the stairways, which are works of art with graceful curves carved into the risers. The second floor has two guest rooms with fireplaces, plus a third living area, opening onto a waterfront deck.

The third floor contains the master bedroom and bath, laundry room, and a walk-in closet. "The large kitchen fireplace extended up through the whole house," Michelle explains. "When it was removed, we gained all this space upstairs. Any sadness over losing the fireplace pretty much evaporated when I realized I could have a walk-in closet!"

The master bedroom at the top of the house is built like a ship's cabin with original tongue-and-groove paneling on the walls, snug built-in drawers, chests, cabinets, and banks of windows set into the sloping walls. Michelle stayed with a gray-on-gray color scheme, accented by clean white linens and trim. The effect is calm and restful. "When you lie in bed, all you see is sky and sea," Jeff says. "It is literally like being on a ship in the ocean."

The third floor has a unique feature that the Nelsons especially love—a hatch to a rooftop deck.



This page: With the ocean so close, guests can easily boat, kayak, or simply relax on the terrace and savor the sea breezes. | Facing page, above: Downstairs, a formal living room connects to a glassed-in porch with ocean views. It is the perfect setup for entertaining, which Michelle and Jeff do frequently. | Below: The airy upstairs sitting room opens onto a sunny deck.





Facing page, above: The master suite is surrounded by sea and sky. An ocean sunrise greets the couple each day. | Below: The suite is built like a ship's cabin, with every inch of space maximized by built-ins. | This page, above: The master suite contains a small kitchen at the far end of the corridor. | Below: The master bath continues the theme of soft grays and whites to keep the mood restful.



From here, they have a panoramic view of the ocean and the town. In good weather, they frequently have cocktails on the rooftop as they watch the sun set.

The Nelsons love to entertain, and do so often and informally. "We enjoy putting our commercial kitchen to the test and having family and friends over," Jeff says. "In good weather, we frequently start relaxing on the rooftop deck, then work our way down to the second floor deck, which is wired for sound. It's a great place to watch the Red Sox and enjoy the ocean at the same time. We also use our back patio a lot and are thinking of installing a wood-fired pizza oven out there."

The Nelsons made exterior changes as well. "Before Jeff and Michelle purchased the home, the earlier owners had installed these huge blank windows that were totally wrong for the house and looked like big, black holes," Soupcoff says. "Going back to smaller panes, which would have been on the house originally, has restored much of the home's historic feel."

Soupcoff notes that the home sits close to the street and across from a popular boat launching area. "When they first moved in, there was not much privacy," he says. "But by adding a stone wall around the front and a patio off to the side, they have nicely defined their boundaries and gained a more secluded space."

Although the Nelsons love their renovated home, they have already had to make some changes. In April 2012, Jeff and Michelle welcomed their first child. "One guest room is now the baby's room," Michelle says. "We figured, why not make every life change you can possibly make in little over a year! We got engaged, bought a house, renovated a house, got married, and now have had a baby. It's been a whirlwind. I think we're just going to settle down for a while!"

Jeff notes that the home is well suited to a family. "There is a great space over the garage that I'm planning to turn into an in-law guest suite. We know we will be having a lot of company," he says. "And the fenced-in yard is perfect for our little guy to run around in when he gets bigger. When we found this house, we really did make the right choice. It was meant to be our home." ■

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