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At long last... Littlefield



Interior Designer, Caroline Burke from Top Rail Interiors and Patrick Ahearn, Architect join together to create a timeless home in West Chop.

Story by Kathleen McKenna
Photography by Elizabeth Haynes and Taylor Ahearn where noted



Image by Taylor Ahearn



In March 2020, the world learned to get things done remotely thanks to a global pandemic. But designer Caroline Burke and one of her clients had already mastered the art of working long distance.

Both women lived in Saratoga Springs, New York, where Burke's husband is a successful equine veterinarian with a rehabilitation facility, and where Burke has used her background in all aspects of design; project management, architectural drafting and decorating services to launch a thriving interior design business. After studying at Skidmore College, Burke earned a masters degree in interior design from the University of Florida. She and a client became fast friends when Burke helped her renovate a carriage house at her traditional Renaissance Revival home nearby. When that same client told Burke that she and her husband had bought land in Martha's Vineyard, and that she wanted help building a "new/old" home, Burke was unfazed by the distance between herself and the project.

"We know what we like, and we were so fortunate to have someone like Caroline, who knows the industry so well, understands architecture and history, and has so many amazing ideas," the homeowner says.

"We asked her, 'How do we take something new and make it look like it's always belonged here?' She knew just what we were after, and exactly what it would take to make it happen."

Creating a New England home with a sense of history comes naturally for Burke, who was raised on Cape Ann and now has a summer residence in Mashpee. "Saratoga is home for me, but I grew up on the ocean, and go back whenever I can. I think that's why the coastal vernacular is so comfortable for me."

"We had a lot of video chats," Burke says of the project that connected Saratoga Springs to Martha's Vineyard, and leveraged the talents of her very hands-on homeowners, as well as famed architect





Patrick Ahearn, FAIA and Edgartown contractors Colonial Reproductions. “There were some challenges due to COVID for sure. But all in all, I think we were only delayed by four weeks or so. I have to hand it to Patrick, his drawing set was so thorough, it really helped the design process. We did a lot remotely of course, but ultimately we made it work and Patrick and Colonial made the whole project super easy. It was really pretty seamless.”

The homeowner lives year-round with her husband and two daughters in Saratoga Springs and now the family gets to enjoy summers in the house built upon the land the couple bought in 2008. “The house was a dream of ours for a very long time,” she says. For years, she and her husband would sift through ideas and imagine what their dream house would eventually look like. “We would visit all the time,” she says of the intervening years between when they purchased the land and when they began to build upon it. “I think we had the grass mown once, and maybe we climbed a few trees.” Eventually, the family plans to spend extended time in the house which is across the street from the water in the West Chop neighborhood of Tisbury.

West Chop is a special place for the homeowners. They met there in the early 2000s, where as the

homeowner tells it, she was running a camp for kids at the West Chop Club, and a ten-year-old camper fixed her up with her older brother, whose family had a long history in the area.

“We were at a fundraising dance for the West Chop Club when she introduced us,” the homeowner said of the fix-up performed by the young girl who is now her sister-in-law. Today that young girl has evolved into a young mother, and her baby shower was one of the first events held in the Martha’s Vineyard home the homeowners call Littlefield.

It rained on the day of the baby shower, but thanks to the open-floor plan which Ahearn deftly incorporated into the design, the homeowners were able to provide a spacious and welcoming atmosphere for their guests by setting up several tables adjacent to the one in their dining room for the luncheon. That is one example of the modern flexibility that likely would not have existed if the home had been built when the neighboring houses were constructed.

Both the homeowners and Burke are quick to give credit for the home’s authentic design to Ahearn. The building project began in 2018 with plans created by the architect, who was chosen for his well-honed

reputation for building homes on the Vineyard that appear timeless. “West Chop really harkens back to another time. The movie ‘Summer of 42’ could have been filmed there. Having done other homes in the area, I understood the subtlety that was so important to them. It was a very carefully orchestrated idea,” says the architect, who has designed or redesigned more than 350 homes on the Vineyard, 250 of them in the quaint neighboring village of Edgartown.

The house’s exterior features a shingle design that Ahearn calls playful. “There is a lot of ‘shingle dialogue’—we rolled each shingle on instead of using rake board,” he says. “Then we did a little swoop on the roof, which is an element you typically find on West Chop. The sense of implied history was really important.” He put equal care into the separate-but-attached carriage house, (which helped keep the house in scale and frame the backyard) and the “whimsical” second-story terrace. Once the bones of the home were in place, he says the team moved on to focus on the interior, where they had an on-site meeting.

The team of Burke and Ahearn designed the home’s gorgeous cabinetry and ubiquitous molding, and installed beamed ceilings, bead board, paneling, and detailed trim throughout to add the sense of

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*"Most of the home's furnishings are antiques or reproductions, but there are a few carefully curated modern pieces, including a vintage Hans Wegner leather chair covered in green leather."
(As pictured above.)*



history the homeowners desired. Ahearn's unique talent is apparent in everything from the sunroom meant to look like it was once an enclosed porch, to the style of floor joists which are reminiscent of an entirely different building era.

"Caroline's work really complemented everything we did," he says. "She understood and agreed with our program and our attitude, I'd say we all interfaced very nicely."

The house features a wide array of colors and textures. Much of the home's interior is painted in shades of white. But there are splashes of color in unexpected places. A butler's pantry off the kitchen, for example, is a deep shade of blue. A first-floor library is a calming shade of green. "We were very careful with the colors we selected," Burke says. "Lots of whites of course, because it's a beach house. But definite pops of colors because we want it to be cozy all year round. We were very mindful of that, and generally how this home and homeowner would live together."

Once the house was built, but before the furniture was delivered, the homeowner arrived with "an air mattress and some ramen noodles," to finally spend time in the home they had imagined for so many

years. "It was just incredible to see everything we had planned come to life," she says of the first night they spent in the house.

Burke refers to the homeowner as "a master planner," and recalls the time the two of them rented a U-Haul and drove to Brimfield to shop for antique furniture and decor, including a Danish table for the mudroom and a long dining table for the patio. "It was such a great time," Burke says of the trip that involved hiring a couple of kids to transport their purchases to the U-Haul so the pair of enterprising women could strategize during a four-hour shopping window.

"I was really lucky with this project because the homeowners' tastes just matched mine so well," Burke affirms. "We were really able to take Patrick's design to the next level. In my mind, that's the best you can hope for when a designer and an architect work together."

Most of the home's furnishings are antiques or reproductions, but there are a few carefully curated modern pieces, including a vintage Hans Wegner chair covered in green leather, and bamboo shades crafted by artisans in India that are found in



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many rooms of the house. Most of the home's artwork comes from the Cape or the Vineyard, confirming the homeowner's commitment to support and showcase local talent.

The attention detail, and to making sure every detail was just right, is found in the rug in the entryway. A thatched-grass company fabricated the diamond-patterned rug, but since the space called for a custom size, Burke sewed on extra diamonds, supplied by the vendor, herself. Throughout the house numerous built-ins, such as window seats and alcoves, lend extra cozy charm. The master bathroom is a designer's dream, with double sinks framed by creative and roomy cabinets, intentionally crafted to add storage space so the elegant pedestal sinks could stand alone. An old-fashioned clawfoot tub, with a gleaming faucet at its center, adds another layer of appeal.

Some of the home's elements—light fixtures in the kitchen and fabrics in the living room, for instance—were sourced from artists and designers the two women know from Saratoga Springs, resulting in a finished design that really reflects both places the homeowners call home.

Soon after the house was finished, Ahearn says, he received an email from a neighbor who lives up the road from Littlefield. "He wanted to let me know how he pleased he was that the house captures the essence of West Chop," he says. "It was a great compliment."

"West Chop is such a unique community. It's multi-generational—very few houses end up on the market, outside of the families who live there already. It was important to capture the spirit and the essence of what West Chop is all about and Caroline and the homeowners were really in tune with that."

Burke, who still enjoys a close relationship with the homeowners, says, "It was really such a fun project," she says with a laugh. "I miss it." One thing for certain, these homeowners won't miss many more opportunities to enjoy the Vineyard home this special team has built just for them. 🏡

Kathleen McKenna is a contributing writer for Cape Cod Life Publications.



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