



**Oliver Wolcott House**  
 South Street, Litchfield, Connecticut  
 Colonial style; built in 1753  
 Oliver Wolcott Sr. was a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation, as well as a state militia leader in the American Revolutionary War.

## *Imperfect but Perfect*

JANE H. FITZGERALD

**M**Y HUSBAND AND I WERE GOING stir-crazy living in the crowded, noisy city. We needed a place to unwind, smell the fresh air, and hear only nature's sounds. Our dream was to find a house in a rural area that wasn't too far away and was big enough for our entire family.

It was a misty, cold, rainy day in December when we started out to find our escape house. We longed for someplace with privacy, open space, and peace. Searching within a ninety-mile radius, we came across a small, quaint town on a bay near the ocean. We drove up and down every street and were quite far out when we came across a house

with a for sale sign. We pulled over and looked at it for a long time.

I knew the second I saw it that it might be the one. It was set back from a narrow road with a circular driveway made of seashells, and beyond the road was a canal that led to the bay. The house was a symmetrical colonial featuring a white clapboard exterior with beautiful blue shutters. It looked comforting, welcoming, and old.

We sat there for so long that a man came out and asked if he could help us. I said, "We saw the for sale sign, and I couldn't take my eyes off your lovely home."

He asked, "Would you like to come in and look at it?"

I immediately nodded yes. My husband's nod was hesitant, but I had a feeling that this house was meant for us. Upon stepping through the front door, we were in a hallway with polished,

old, wide plank floors that led back to the kitchen. There was a room with a fireplace to the left and a smaller room to the right. A steep, curved, narrow staircase rose to the second story.

The owner explained that the house was built before 1750, and the kitchen was added on in 1850. He told us that he and his partner had expanded the space with a large family room and a two-car garage. He then asked if we'd like to see the small cottage at the back of the house. It was only a few steps away. The moment I saw it I gasped, "This could be adorable!"

My husband blurted out, "This needs an awful lot of work!"

The cottage was also from the 1700s and had two rooms downstairs with a tiny, twisty stairway going up to a bedroom with a petite room adjoining it. The cottage had sadly been neglected. There was also a swimming pool that needed a lot of repair.



**Salubria**  
 Georgian mansion in Stevensburg, Virginia  
 Construction began in 1750

image info





**Heard-Lakeman House**  
Ipswich, Massachusetts  
Colonial style; built in 1776

Built by Nathaniel and John Heard for Nathaniel to live in. He sold it in 1795 to Richard Lakeman III, member of a seafaring family.

To say that the house exuded history and charm would be an understatement. It had been updated but not enough to lose its original features. There were no closets in the three bedrooms upstairs, only pegs on the walls and a few armoires. Three small bathrooms were tucked away in odd places as the house originally had none. These drawbacks made the house more affordable as they would be unacceptable to most buyers.

The whole thing would be a big project, but there was something about this house that spoke to me, made me feel at home. I love history, and the thought that people had been living in this house for hundreds of years fascinated me. My husband was less interested as he saw it as a monumental project and questioned if we were ready to take it on in late middle age. We thanked the man and told him we'd get back to him soon.

I launched into enthusiastic praise of the house exclaiming, "We have to buy it! It's just meant to be. It's big enough for our family of twelve. Let's make an offer!"

My husband really didn't want to do it. He felt overwhelmed. So instead of arguing with me, he tried a tactic that, thankfully, backfired. He decided to make an offer that was so below the asking price that the owners would certainly turn it down. But the two owners were splitting up and so accepted our offer. I was ecstatic. I could just visualize how each room was going to look. What my husband saw as a difficult project, I anticipated to be a delightful decorating and design challenge.

At the closing settlement, one of the owners said to us, "You do know that the house is haunted, don't you?"

This comment startled me, and I wondered why he had waited so long to say such a thing. Was he trying to make us uneasy?

He went on, "There is a large blood stain embedded in the floor upstairs that was covered over by a newer floor. Legend has it that years ago pirates raided the coast and killed a person in the house."

I was both skeptical and curious. I decided to look into the history of the house and visited a small local bookshop. To my surprise, I found a book that included the exact same story about the house that the previous owner had told us. I don't believe in ghosts, but the whole mystery made me want to know more.

I threw myself into fixing and decorating the house and cottage. We redid the little cottage first, so we could live in it while we renovated the main house. A galley kitchen was put in the living room, and we redid the bathroom and bedroom on the first floor. I painted the floor bright red and the walls white. We filled it with secondhand furniture, and in the end, the cottage was adorable. Even though it was small, it could accommodate a whole family. Our two grown children vied for which family got the cottage. Everyone loved to stay there—especially the children. It was like a magical miniature home.

We encountered a big problem in the main house when workmen fell through the rotted kitchen floor. We hadn't planned on redoing the kitchen, but in the long run, it worked out well. We went to the attic, pulled up the widest, oldest floorboards, had them polished, and made a beautiful island in the kitchen. It became an artistic focal point.

The new family room needed paint. One day while debating what to do, I looked at the outfit I was wearing. I had on a colorful top that was blue, light-green, and aqua. This was it! The room felt like the seashore—blue sky, green seagrass, aqua water. The room came alive.

My love of color and design was given free rein throughout the house. We basically furnished the house with old finds that complemented its character.

We settled in and hosted many family members and guests who, in spite of the ghost stories, were eager to come for a visit. But the ghost stories were about to get real.

One night I was abruptly pulled upright in bed. I had heard nothing, but some force had

moved me. A couple of months later, an unusual event happened to our son and his wife. They were awake late at night after the rest of us had gone to bed. They heard a bang and a woman's voice, and then their bedroom door closed by itself. Startled, they went looking throughout the whole house, but everyone was sound asleep. There was definitely an abiding spirit. Maybe that's what had made our house survive for nearly three hundred years.

We had everything we needed for the best of times, not just history and charm. Everyone enjoyed the pool, our small boat across the street, a dock for fishing, walking to the village for ice cream and art shows, and going to the ocean. Mostly, we enjoyed the privacy in our spacious backyard. Our six grandchildren raced through the grass, loved the swing hanging from a big tree, and were constantly splashing in the pool. I threw my husband a big surprise birthday party one year, and our friends came from all over to enjoy a cookout with a DJ and dancing around the pool. We were happier than we had ever been.

My husband, who had been the reluctant buyer, treasured the house even more than I did. It was quiet, we could smell the salt air, and he loved letting our Irish Setter, Penny, run in the open spaces. Penny never left my husband's side; they were totally bonded. We all loved our antique house, but none more than my husband and Penny.

After several years, we both decided to retire. We didn't see how we could leave the house so we traveled to the south in the winter, and back to our house in the summer. This went on for a long time, but eventually, it became too much to take care of two places. We agreed that the winters were harsh, and decided to live year round in warm weather. We had had many years of wonderful times with our family and friends. Our young grandchildren had achieved several milestones there including: taking their first steps, learning to swim, and catching their first fish. The house had enriched our lives beyond all expectations. We had dreamed of a home where our whole family could be together. Our antique, imperfect house, with its special cottage, had perfectly made our wishes come true. The fabric of the house, and the memories of our time there, will always be with us. ❀