

# SHIP SHAPE

The key to getting an antique cottage vacation-ready in weeks flat: a few coats of paint and the good sense to leave well enough alone.

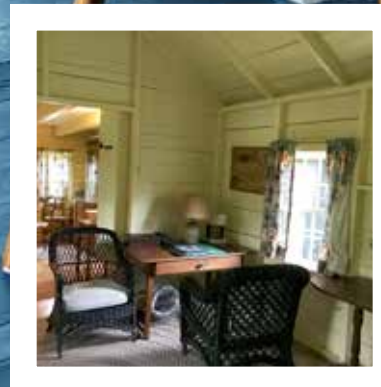


2018 — BEFORE & AFTER



In a historic Nantucket home designed by Kevin Isbell, a onetime living room became a space for dining. The vintage T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbings dining chairs are topped with cushions covered in African textiles from New York's Chelsea flea market on 25th Street. Matchstick shades, The Mine. **OPPOSITE:** A lattice creates a grid of greenery on the roof of the 1880s wood-shingle cottage.

BEFORE





"I call this the morning room because of the light it gets at that time of day," says Isbell. Faced with a ceiling height of just under seven feet throughout the house, he employed visual tricks to make this peaked-ceiling space feel loftier: Art is hung high, and roller shades are installed above the window frames. With no time to rewire, swag lights, including this 1960s one from Stamford, Connecticut's Antique and Artisan Gallery, were used throughout the house.

**BEFORE**







In the formerly dark-wood kitchen, Isbell whitewashed the walls and original cabinetry in Benjamin Moore's White Dove but left the ceiling untouched. "The whole house had a wonderfully distressed patina," he says. "I wanted to maintain as much of that as possible."

## BEFORE



# Y

**You turned a former fisherman's shack—the previous incarnation featured a brown kitchen and floors the color of pancake makeup—into the quintessential Nantucket cottage in just three weeks. How did you accomplish this feat?**

**KEVIN ISBELL:** It really was like pulling a rabbit out of a hat. The family bought the house on Memorial Day, closed on the 5th of July, and wanted it ready before August. I started with a collection of needlepoint pillows made by the owner's mother, who had recently passed away. She also left her daughter enough furniture to fill the basement of her Connecticut home. I drew on those pieces and filled in the gaps with vintage furniture and antiques. I made use of websites like Chairish, eBay, and Etsy to source artwork and accessories. It helped that these are longtime clients who say yes quite readily.

**KATHLEEN HACKETT:** **When faced with Nantucket ferry schedules and freight fees, most people would have relied on "optimism and white paint," like Elsie de Wolfe.**

Optimism, yes; white paint, not necessarily. It's easy to resort to white, but the approach can fail miserably if not done properly. Rooms need an anchor and that all-important tension. That's what brings a space to life. Here, I opted for cobalt-blue floors, which nod to nautical without screaming it too loudly.

**Yet I see quite a few seaside references—a porthole mirror, some wicker pieces, framed sailor portraits, anchor lights, and ship paintings.**

But no lobster-trap coffee table! Seriously, those maritime elements are merely part of a global mix, which is entirely appropriate given that the island is a former whaling capital and once hosted ships from all over the world. Asian, English, and African furniture would have arrived here from overseas and made its way into homes that were originally built for sea captains and their families.

**What other strategies did you use to meet that oh-so-tight deadline?**

Architecturally, the 1880s house is a bit wonky, but there was neither the time nor the inclination to knock down walls. We removed a few sagging bookcases. One of the most significant changes was simply a reassignment of rooms: There was a large dining room that no longer



## BEFORE



**ABOVE:** The narrow stairs leading to the cottage's second floor are, in Isbell's words, "inconveniently charming." By painting the entire staircase in Benjamin Moore's Champion Cobalt to match the living room floor, he turned an architecturally awkward feature into a striking design element. **LEFT:** The former dining room has been transformed into the living room.



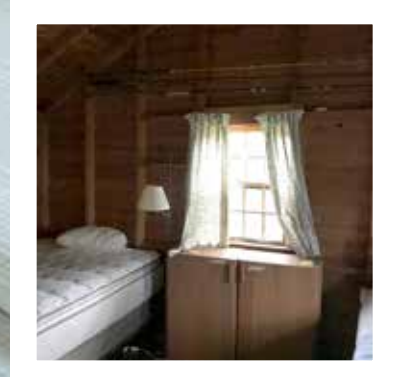


**ABOVE:** The living room's Serena & Lily sofa was too wide to fit through the narrow front door, so Isbell had the legs shortened right on the front lawn. "And it was raining," he says. "I'm a get'er-done kind of guy." **BELOW LEFT:** A needlepoint pillow made by the owner's late mother adds a nautical note to a diminutive guest bedroom; the Biedermeier table is from the 19th century. **BELOW RIGHT:** The entrance to the ground-floor master bedroom.



Isbell anointed the master bedroom "the captain's quarters." John Stuart rosewood campaign chests from Hamptons Antique Galleries in Stamford, Connecticut, frame a West Elm bed. Bed linens, Yves Delorme. Isbell added to the homeowner's collection of needlepoint pillows and artworks—many by her mother—with vintage versions from Chairish.

**BEFORE**







**ABOVE:** In another guest room, an 1860s British campaign chest, which separates into two sections, replaced a makeshift closet. Victorian bamboo-and-cane side chair, Hamptons Antique Galleries. **BELOW:** “For me, this is the best room in the house,” Isbell says. “Once you brave the steep stairs, you’re rewarded with windows on all sides. Architecturally, it’s called a ‘wart’—a room that ‘grew’ on the original structure. A fresh coat of paint makes it a gleaming oasis.” A vintage Danish swing-arm sconce is from the Antique and Artisan Gallery. Bench, Selamat Designs. Jute rug, Birch Lane.



*I was determined not to crush the soul of the house by renovating it too much.*

made sense in a home of this modest size. And the original living room had very little wall space, making it hard to arrange a conversation area. So I flopped the two rooms. What is now the dining room has a table for four, with stools tucked under the console to seat an extra two people in a pinch.

**You like a swagged light.**

I had better! The house is more than 100 years old, which means the only electrical sources are outlets in the walls. There was no time to wire the ceilings for pendants, so I used lots of extension cords and chains. I screwed hooks into the ceiling to position lights overhead. Hanging the lights also draws the eye up to the ceiling, which makes the rooms—most of which are less than seven feet tall—appear loftier than they are.

**Did the scale of the house present other challenges?**

We had to hoist furniture through the second-floor windows, because the stairway is not standard width. But I was determined not to crush the soul of the house by modernizing it too much, not even by widening the doors. I didn’t remove the bedroom sink, known as a ‘Sconset sink—it’s named for the village where this house is located. There is no television. The windows have bamboo shades that require tying off on a cleat—no remote control in this cottage! And on the first floor, we left the Rube Goldberg-like pulley system that turns on the hall light on the second floor—there is no light switch.

**Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently?**

Just one thing. Against the kitchen’s original brown-wood walls, the stove looked bright white. But when we painted the walls white, the stove’s color took on a butter-yellow cast. I desperately wanted to swap it out, but this was Nantucket, where replacing it required advance ordering and ferry logistics. I had to live with it—and guess what? No one died!

**Lack of resources has saved many a historic home from unsavory renovations. Was the lack of time here more of a curse or a blessing?**

The latter! For a detail-oriented person like me, having to figure things out quickly was an excellent exercise in trusting my instincts.



Surrounded by a leafy lawn, the cottage is located in the island’s historic ‘Sconset village. FOR MORE DETAILS, SEE RESOURCES