

American Style

Builders: BOWA Builders, Inc.

Photography by John Cleave

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Well-executed Colonial themes give the home a warm traditional look that imparts grace and comfort. But there are a few shortcuts to getting the right materials, styles, finishes and effects.

Located along woodsy Potomac shores northeast of Washington, DC, Great Falls, Virginia is now an easy commute to the nation's capital. In the 1800s, though, this village was half a day's ride from the District, and its ambiance reflected the rustic, upstream setting. The need to update and enlarge the family kitchen of the dwelling that had served as the Great Falls Post Office in the 1840s was, thus, an occasion to reassess—and when the owners decided to explore the home's early American themes, BOWA Builders was called to the site. Headquartered in Arlington, VA, BOWA is particularly adept at reconfiguring and adding space in ways that preserve the design integrity of the original home. Though not specialists in historical restorations, the firm's design/build approach proved to be highly effective at capturing a distinctive look and feel.

The starting point in Great Falls was to create space for a dining area by removing walls between the existing utility kitchen and a circa 1950s sunroom complete with Jalousie windows. A cathedral ceiling and French doors opening out to an east-side garden were added to the newly gutted shell. Colonial

themes were set in place with a window design that incorporates narrow gauge muntins. The southern wall was reserved for a hearth – to be constructed entirely from reclaimed brick selected to match originals in the oldest part of the house. “Finding sources for reclaimed materials quickly became one of the biggest challenges,” BOWA principal Josh Baker allows. “But the only way to get this kind of authentic look is to use old materials.”

Selecting wood samples from the oldest part of the residence, the design group eventually found a source with a 150-year-old structural beam. The beam provided the heart pine that was used to construct Shaker-influenced cabinetry. With its crackled lacquer finish, the cabinets are aged to perfection—setting the tone for a room with all the charm of a Colonial tavern.

Finding a match for the 150-year-old brick also proved daunting. While old brick is almost always made from local clays, wide variances in brick colors, textures, and hues show up in even a narrow geographic range. “The only way to know if you have a reasonable match,” BOWA partner Larry Weinberg points out, “is to find a supplier who yards old brick and compare with your own eyes.”

Retrofitting the space for heating and cooling while preserving interior lines was also a challenge. The answer: a flexible duct, high-velocity system that rounds corners like a hose, doesn’t take up much room and, above all, avoids the need to drop ceilings.

Baker and Weinberg offered these tips for those interested in period style remodeling. *First, identify all aspects of the existing architecture.* Knowing the structure’s visual language is essential to achieving coherence. Obtain samples of the materials you want to match. Some materials are impossible to match without a sample, and in some cases, a creative compromise may be necessary. *Find sources for reclaimed material.* You will have to network through various local suppliers to find good sources. *Have photos of the desired furnishings, detailing ideas and other finish work touches before hiring craftsmen.* This kind of work is usually a collaboration between you and the design team. *View finishes applied to samples of selected materials.* Finishes are an integral part of the aesthetic of reclaimed materials, and the variety of effects from various oils, stains and lacquers is astounding, and each is a design option that must be weighed as carefully as choices for paint, fabric or wallpaper. ♦



BOWA Builders, Inc., Arlington, VA, is the recipient of numerous honors for remodeling excellence including election to Remodeling Magazine’s Big 50 Hall of Fame and “Washington Area Contractor of the Year.” BOWA was recently ranked one of the 500 fastest growing privately-held companies in the U.S. by INC Magazine. BOWA launched a custom home building unit earlier this year.