



Photo illustration by Peter Carr and The Journal News staff

They're still old, but made to look new. Homes like this Queen Anne victorian in Grand View fetch high prices to home-owners willing to restore them to vintage condition.

# The 'This Old House' effect

Restored homes with history commanding higher prices

Jennifer Lisle  
The Journal News

Captain Platt's estate, a stunning purple Mansard Victorian along River Road in Grand View, went on the market a few weeks ago with a listing price of \$1.9 million. In part, the price is high because of the house's size (six bedrooms), location (on the river), and overall condition (top-of-the-line appliances, etc.).

But it's also valuable because it has a story to tell.

William Henry Platt, the prominent Irish sea captain who built the house in 1868, made sure it had a commanding view of the river, and when he sold some of his land to the railroad, he made sure that the Grand View stop ended up in his

backyard.

And, although it looks more like the setting for a tea party in an Edith Wharton novel than a hub of feminist activity, Betty Friedan, a former owner, also wrote *The Feminine Mystique* here in 1957. As the story goes, the house became such a busy gathering place for women in the area that she had to get a pay phone installed.

As the Rockland, Westchester and Putnam County real estate markets become more competitive, houses with history are commanding more and more money. At the top end of the market, the larger estate-variety homes are edging up toward the \$2 million mark in Rockland and Putnam and past \$10 million-\$12 million in Westchester. In the middle and lower ranges of \$500,000 and below, homebuyers are paying up to 20 percent more for the charm and character of older houses, especially if they've been lovingly restored.

Please see PRICES, 2G

Restoring old homes means mixing the old with the new

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When Blake and Susanna Tovin bought their circa 1830 house in Palisades three years ago, they knew they had a project on their hands. The house had only been used as a weekend cottage by the former owners and had not been updated for at least 60-70 years. But while Tovin and his wife recognized it needed a complete overhaul to be an adequate and well-appointed space for their growing family, they were also interested in preserving its historic value.

"When it was on the market, everyone who looked at it loved it but they weren't willing to preserve it. We thought it was worth it to save something with character so that it would last another 150 years," said Tovin.



Mark Vergari/The Journal News

The kitchen of this 19th century Sneden's Landing home was redone to keep its historic feel, but also bring it into the modern world.

The Tovins are part of a growing population of residential preservationists in the northern suburbs — old-home owners with the interest and means to renovate their houses and restore the

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# Historical charm

PRICES, from 1G

Call it educated gentrification, or the "This Old House" effect. Wiser, informed renovations are driving up the market for older homes and wiser, informed homebuyers are willing to pay more for them.

"With a lot of the younger buyers, they're looking for a house with character and personality, not the high ranch they grew up in. I mean if you've seen one center-hall Colonial, you've seen them all," said Joanne Trainor, associate broker at Weichert Realtors in New City who specializes in historic and older homes.

"With these older houses, you can't duplicate them, it would cost you astronomical amounts to recreate them," she said.

Jill Lydecker, an associate broker for Lydecker Realty says that the quest for ever-larger houses is also driving some homebuyers to look at older estate-style spaces.

"People are living in bigger, grander houses now. They want bigger rooms and higher ceilings," Lydecker said.

Many older and historic homebuyers are also specifically interested in the history and architecture of certain areas, say brokers.

Molly Samett, who owns Mason Samett Associates in Tappan said that homebuyers looking for Revolutionary-era properties gravitate toward certain areas of Rockland, and Bruce Elton, salesperson for Houlihan Lawrence in Cold Spring, said that homebuyers looking for historic Colonials will go to Cold Spring and other areas of Putnam County.

"We have Colonials that go back to the 1750s here. These properties are getting harder and harder to find," Elton said.

Frank Mancione, manager of Prudential Rand's Nyack office and an old-home specialist, agrees, saying that some of the river towns and other Rockland areas attract buyers of Victorians and other 19th Century houses because of their quality.

"More people are intrigued by older homes now. You just can't reproduce those old Victorians and Tudors that were built in the

1800s and early 1900s. Builders were much more creative and everything was done by hand by craftsman in the area," he said.

This appreciation of the quality of older homes has increased their prices 17 percent to 20 percent over the last three years, Mancione estimated.

"A lot of people are taking money out of the stock market and putting it into their home, and when they do that, they want a beauty, something with quality," he said.

"In the lower price end of the market, below \$500,000, these houses are selling pretty fast. Up in the \$1 million range, they're still slower in selling because there aren't as many buyers who want to do the upkeep, but the prices keep going up," he said.

In part, the value of these houses has increased because the general public is more knowledgeable about historic preservation and restoration.

"It's definitely an aesthetic that people are investing in. It's like the antiques market, the market for classic cars, or Elvis memorabilia. As awareness goes up, the value goes up," said George Turrell, who owns Achtercol, a historic restoration consultancy based in Piermont.

But even though the value has gone up, the older, more expensive houses still take longer to sell and appeal to a niche market, that, although it is growing, is still small.

"It's a very specific buyer who wants to buy a historic house. They know that the house may have foibles and may be more expensive to keep up. They know they may be on a busy street, they love the hunt for an artifact that fits in or for the perfect door," said Sue August, head of Weichert's historic homes division, which is based in Ridgewood, N.J. This division was set up by Weichert a few years ago to appeal to the slowly expanding population of historic-home aficionados.

"A house is not necessarily worth more if it is old, but if it has been faithfully restored, or renovated to the nines, as some have, then it's worth more," August said.



Clockwise from top left: The linen ceiling and chandelier, stairway and a green glass doorknob in the Queen Anne victorian built by Captain William Henry Platt in 1864 in Grand View.

Elton agreed, saying that the rural setting surrounding the historic houses in Putnam added to their rarity and value.

"There is a premium on these houses because people are realizing how rare they are," he said.

In Westchester, Jane McAfee, an associate broker, also said that although most homebuyers are interested in living in older homes, they are much more interested in buying an already-restored property than a fixer-upper.

"I always ask them what kind of house they're looking for, and I mostly hear one word: traditional. ... But what they usually want is an older home in move-in condition, that sells much faster here than one that needs work," said McAfee. "Many couples are both working and they don't want to get involved in the restoration," she said.

York's homeowner Michelle Rago said that although she and her husband have been looking to move to a larger house, they would never settle for one that did not have the charm and style of their 1920s Tudor.

"We are purists about the house. When we renovated the bathroom, we kept the original tiles but needed more, so I searched and paid \$10 a tile to get



the exact old white subway tiles that matched," Rago said, explaining that she also searched on eBay for exactly the right arts and crafts drawer pulls.

"If we saw a house that was renovated really well, we would absolutely pay more for it. We may be extreme, we may be purists, but I don't think we're unusual in that regard," said Rago.

As Charles and P.J. Mouquin can attest, this wasn't always the way homebuyers felt about old homes. When the couple was considering buying Charles' grandfather's Second Empire manor home in Sparkill in 1979, an ap-

praiser/friend told them it was essentially worthless from a market standpoint.

"Charles asked him for an estimate of what it was worth. The friend came up with a figure for the land, and then subtracted \$20,000, which was the price for tearing down a house at the time," said P.J. Mouquin, who with her husband bought the house and spent the subsequent years restoring and preserving it.

This year, their restoration efforts earned them a Historic Preservation Merit Award from the Historical Society of Rockland County. And although the majes-

## On the Web

Historic and old home resources:

[www.weichert.com](http://www.weichert.com)

[www.preservationdirectory.com/historicproperties\\_main.html](http://www.preservationdirectory.com/historicproperties_main.html)

tic and immaculate home would probably sell for a high price, the Mouquins took on the project mostly as a labor of love.

"This house has been in the family for 100 years, so it's an ongoing project. The clawfoot tubs are original and we still have one working pull-chain toilet. My husband just doesn't want to let that one go," said P.J. Mouquin.

Other old-home owners feel most rewarded by the benefits of living with history.

"Frankly, you can live in any kind of house and be happy. But it is such a thrill to live with history," said Jim Stanton, who says that it's possible George Washington spent time in his 1740 Montebello home when he was staking out the British from the Ramapo Mountains. "You can't just say that about any house," Stanton said.

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