

Chestnuts Roasting, Embers Glowing

Revisiting the charm of first-period fireplaces

BY CAROLINE FORRESTER



Modern living has removed much of the uncertainty about staying warm at home, but nothing can match the charm of a first-period fireplace. Imagine the pleasure of occasionally sitting for a fireside chat, rather than eating alone by the glow of the computer with a central heating system to keep us comfortable.

Technology has made amazing advances, but some simple pleasures of yesteryear have been lost in the process. Our historic homes hold within them the stories of families gathering to cook, to play music and to cozy up to the warmth of the fire before retiring to a long, cold winter's night.



The main fireplace features three ovens and an inglenook seat. TOP: Upstairs fireplace at the Lummus House—original bricks were kept for historic integrity. Photos by Kirk Williamson

Ipswich hosts the greatest collection of first-period homes in the country, built by our first colonists from 1625-1725. Take a winter walk down High Street as soon as the temperature drops; you can take in the wonderful smells of fires burning in these historic fireplaces. There are so many remnants of those days when the reward for chopping firewood in bitter cold temperatures was central to life.

So important was the fireplace in early colonial times that the renovation of the Daniel Lummus House in Ipswich is paying particular attention to the home's four brick fireplaces. Owners Al Boynton and Kathy Bruce are painstakingly taking every historical detail in consideration.

Among the four fireplaces is a very special walk-in structure that features three ovens and possibly one of the only inglenook seats in the region. The inglenook – a built-in seat – was common in Europe, particularly in Scotland. “Inglenook” is of Scottish origin: “ingle” for “fire burning on the hearth,” “nook” for “small space.”

When Boynton and Bruce first bought the Lummus house, this grand fireplace was panelled over and a Rumsfeld fireplace was within the hearth for maximum warmth. In the house renovation, the Rumsfeld insert was removed to reveal the walk-in hearth.

The restoration project called for details like matching the beams and brick restoration, all thoughtfully considered and executed. But Boynton explained the importance of not making the renovations flawless. The historic detail would be lost if everything were perfect because these houses have settled. Floors now are crooked and things have shifted. It's all a part of the charm.

Which many people without such a wonderful fireplace will envy during the long, cold winter season. ■