

Can a Condo Be Early American?

BY THE EAL STAFF
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USING PAINT, HARDWOOD FLOORING, AND ANTIQUE FURNISHINGS, VETERAN OLD-HOME-RESTORERS BARBARA AND JOE WEBB TRANSFORMED THEIR CONDOMINIUM. WE ASK OUR READERS: CAN SUCH A CONTEMPORARY HOME EVER ASPIRE TO THE WARMTH OF AN EARLY HOME? AND CAN HISTORIC HOUSE LOVERS FIND HAPPINESS THERE?

Despite all the homes, inns, and taverns claiming a historic connection to our first President, you can be pretty sure George Washington never slept in a condominium. In fact, pervasive as it may be today, condominium ownership wasn't even legal in the United States until 1960 when the Utah legislature enacted the first condo law.

But the lure of condominium living is as undeniable as early American style is comfortable. Can the two possibly come together?

That question ordinarily doesn't play around in our idle minds but did arise when we got a call from Michael Combs. A bowl-maker, Combs wanted to show us his work and contrast it with antique burl-treen at the home of avid-treen col-

lectors Barbara and Joe Webb in Wadsworth, Ohio. Their home—which proved a fitting early American background to Combs's handwork (as seen in our story on page 10) as well as matching the Webbs' collection of 18th- and 19th-Century antiques—wasn't a frayed old Cape Cod or saltbox or even Federal manse but a condominium hardly old enough for that 21st-Century

On the living room walls, a mural painted by Debra Darnall helps bring the tree-lined pasture inside. A Pennsylvania pewter cupboard holds part of the Webbs' collection of burl-treen, most of it purchased from New York dealer Steve Powers. Next to the cupboard stands Willie Ray, carved in the 1850s by a carousel company in Tonawanda, New York. His arms move to simulate playing the calliope. The wooden rooster weather vane on the hearth and the hippocampus on the mantel are New England antiques, as are the three-legged candle stand and scrubbed-top tea table in front of the sofa. The high walls allow the Webbs to display their advertising signs, like the early-1800s New England example at right.



new-home smell to have faded. But in style we could not call it anything but early American.

We were so impressed with the decorating that we photographed it, thinking it might become a feature for our pages (we now demonstrate our prescience). But would you, our readers, stand for an unabashedly 21st-Century condominium pretending to be two hundred years old?

From a practical standpoint, the idea makes sense. For a couple who no longer has the time or inclination (or for others, the ability) to maintain a large home and yard, condo living has much to offer. Any modern home minimizes maintenance, but a condo takes things a step further and eliminates many day-to-day worries. After all, when a house is on its second or third century, something is liable to need attention when you're least ready to give it.

The freedom afforded by condo living enticed Barbara and Joe to accept the challenge of—shall we say *colonializing*—a condo after having restored or decorated some nine previous homes in early American style.

They had both retired from careers in education (Joe was, among other things, a high school principal; Barbara, a middle school principal) and, “We knew we wanted to travel more,” Barbara explained. A condo would be their ticket to fly.

They chose Wadsworth, Ohio, because they found the town to be charming and close to family and friends. Luckily, they also found a condominium that lent itself to colonialization.

“We were fortunate that Sharon Hoffman, the lady who owned the condo before us, also liked antiques,” said Barbara. “She did a lot of the work. She removed all of the modern light fixtures and gave the house its basic color scheme.”

The Webbs built upon that beginning, adding hand-painted tree murals to link the inside of the house to the woods surrounding the yard behind it.

“We ripped up the carpeting, put hardwood floors down, had a painter stencil it, put paint colors

on the floor, and aged them,” said Barbara. “I put draperies only where they were needed and tried to make them not obvious and not modern.”

But the most important part of the look and creating a link with history came from what they put inside. “We surrounded ourselves with antiques,” said Barbara. “Because we downsized from our last house, we choose to keep only our favorites.” In that the Webbs had been collect-

ing together since they were married in 1968, they had a lot to choose from and selected their oldest pieces, many from the 18th Century.

The Webbs' furnishings are almost uniformly antique save for the working amenities in the kitchen and the big-screen television hiding in a cupboard in the den. There's no skimping here. Except for the inevitable electrical lamps and the upholstered pieces, the furnishings in

In addition to providing space for large trade signs, the condo's high walls enabled the Webbs to install this “tax door” from a store in Ohio—the first piece of folk art they bought 30 years ago. The door led to the room where residents paid their taxes, and the date at the bottom was repainted annually. The Webbs had to replace the original hardware to make the door functional in their previous homes. Here it opens to a coat closet.





The Webbs converted the master bedroom into a den, adding a mantel and painting the wall below to mimic a fireplace. The stenciling above is the work of Jeannie Mosier. The portrait of a young boy, c. 1830, came from New York. The stretcher-base table, c. 1810-20 from New England, retains its original gray-green paint. The passageway beyond (a closet) has been transformed into a small room with a faux fireplace, chandelier, and wall stenciling.

the public rooms would not seem out of place in a colonist's home. In fact, colonists might have eaten out of some of the Webbs' treen bowls.

The modern design of the Webbs' condo includes high ceilings and some odd angles, but Barbara used them to her advantage. "I like the high ceilings," she explained. "We have a large advertising sign collection and were able to display signs higher on the walls and around things."

The high ceilings also let them install an oversized door. Moreover, the earthy brown colors help minimize the cathedral visual effect, although the Webbs have painted their ceilings cream since we took our photographs. ("It lightens up the rooms," noted Barbara.)

Best of all, the Webbs found that decorating an early American condo took less time and effort than working on an old single-family home. "It was easier to decorate the condo than a house," said Barbara. "You have complete freedom when you start with plain drywall and nothing on it. You're not so much a slave about making the interior look old and the right age for the house. And you don't have to worry whether everything is historically accurate."

Barbara believes the move into the current condo was her last. Joe, however, sees another house in his



An 18th-Century hutch table from New England—unique for having wheels on one end that make it easy to move—and the step-back cupboard both came from the home of a New England antiques dealer 25 years ago. The pig auction sign was Joe's first folk art purchase. The tall clock has a painted case made in Ohio. The ladder-back chairs are New England antiques, the heart-and-crown banister-back a reproduction.



Barbara said the kitchen sold her on the condo. She removed the upper cabinets, replacing them with antique hanging cupboards and shelves, and added a chandelier. The trees on the hallway walls beyond lend perspective. Debra Darnall painted the oak floor. The Webbs bought the antique cupboard at right, retrofitted with drawers and shelves, from the condo's previous owner.

future. "He misses the property," said Barbara. In fact, both discovered they missed gardening, so they joined their condo association's landscape committee. Their association also allows them to do their own garden work around their condo.

"You put a yellow stake out front and you do your own gardening," Barbara explained. "We brought in antique stone sinks, stone carvings, and boot scrapers and put them all around the house outside."

The Webbs understand that condo living is not for everyone, but they also believe that it's not beyond consideration. "Don't be afraid to look at a condominium," advised Barbara. "Good antiques will look good anywhere. Just enjoy it." *

In a guest bedroom, another faux fireplace ages the room. On the mantel are Noah's ark animal figures. The portrait of two sisters came from New York. The antique rope bed is from original paint is from Ohio Amish country. The plaid-covered wing chair is a reproduction from Primitive Keepings. The unusual joint stool left of the "fireplace" is also a New York antique.



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

From a purist's standpoint, the idea of colonializing a condo is an abomination. There's electrical wiring and plastic plumbing behind the sheetrock. The ceiling angles and semi-open kitchen are all wrong for any period but contemporary. Worst of all, it's just not old. No patina. No heritage. No hard work required.

But a condo is no different than any new home made to look old and is only a step removed from a restoration with modern amenities grafted on or into the old shell.

We were impressed with the results, but we wondered if our readers would appreciate the fresh approach and good ideas in making eras match. Or is such a condo too much a collision of cultures?

Let us know on our web site, www.EarlyAmericanLife.com, by e-mail at letters@firelandsmedia.com, or by writing us at Early American Life, 16759 West Park Circle Drive, Chagrin Falls, Ohio 44023.