

A House Rewards Affection

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

nishings with care and planned layout and storage meticulously.

It is understandable, of course, that we are happier in a house where we can (and do) get up with the first colors of the sunrise and watch the gulls commute morning and evening over a harbor that turns from blue to pearl or steel with the changing weather. Or where one starts the day with a tour of the garden to see which flowers have bloomed or faded overnight.

But chiefly, it is not a house one worries about. It is an easy house that rewards affection and any kind of care. It is full of old things, and comfortable things, and shabby things—objects that have been used and loved or just discarded gently. Some of these things are useful and some are not. (Still, I could not spare the framed membership certificate in the Warren G. Harding Memorial Association, or the Grover

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I FIND that I have to remind myself that New York is the center of the universe after several weeks in a New England town. It is not just that one is seduced by the insidious idea that small is beautiful, or that one builds up a false ideal of small-town virtues that may be largely in the mind, or that one confuses the reality of work with the unreality of vacation—it is that the living is easy. That means that compared to life in New York, every minute of the day isn't a hassle. Compared to life in New York, every encounter isn't a joust with survival.

The weather has something to do

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with it, of course; summer is the time when one sheds one's tensions with one's clothes, and the right kind of day is jeweled balm for the battered spirit. A few of those days and you can become drunk with the belief that all's right with the world.

But the one thing that stands out, and that I do not really understand, is why the house where we spend those weeks is so much more comfortable than the apartment in New York. It is a rented house, to which we have returned for many years, so while we have done some rearranging and added a few personal touches, we had nothing to do with the design and furnishing in the first place. That it seems to work so much better is surprising, because we have devoted a fair amount of time to how our New York place looks and functions. We have selected the fur-

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New England Home, Far From Chic, Rewards the Affection Lavished on It

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Cleveland plate.) There is wicker, but it is not the expensive wicker that surfaced fashionably this year; it is the kind with irretrievable dust in the crevasses. There are no loveseats or *étagères*, but a collection of old rockers—even one that kicks you when you come down-stairs in the dark.

An assortment of tables has no relationship to known styles, periods or purposes, but there is always one where you need it. The bric-a-brac ranges from Bennington and art glass to vintage Woolworth and early Sun-sweet, and it includes whatever you could possibly want at the moment you want it. Beds are high and old-fashioned and easy to make. The flagpole has a view of the ocean and so does the laundry line. There is fresh mint for cutting outside the kitchen door, and friends supply parsley and basil.

The house is full of surprises, even after years of intimate association. This year I found a Thebes stool. I had not noticed it before because it has always been covered with Caruso records or old magazines. It was such a handy place to toss an afghan or sweater, in one of those convenient dark corners that new houses totally lack.

The only reason that I know it is a Thebes stool now, or know what a Thebes stool is, must be credited to the Tutankhamen exhibition and an old issue of a British journal, *The Architectural Review*. It seems that a stool called the Thebes stool was in Tutankhamen's tomb and was copied endlessly in the 1920's, at the time the great archeological discovery caused fashion waves in clothing and homes.

The Liberty stool, by Liberty of London, was probably one of the first best copies of the type—I am not sure, but it may have been a 19th-century version, dating from one of those British arts-and-crafts episodes of earnest intellectual nostalgia. The process of reproduction and knockoff is going on again today with the latest Tutankhamen vogue. Our house version was clearly a 1920's product, and after "restoration" with soap and water and

scouring powder and the addition of a velvet cushion, it came out of the corner. This was the home furnishings event of the summer.

Every year brings similar projects. In summer houses, the caned seats of chairs constantly break through, and an entire, instant decorating scheme can be set in motion by a search for cushions to camouflage them. One table (known as "the gaming table" because of its permanent shaker of alphabet cubes for tossing on rainy days) listed relentlessly to port; it was a summer's job to break it apart and reglue it at right angles. Considering its dubious provenance, this was clearly a labor of love.

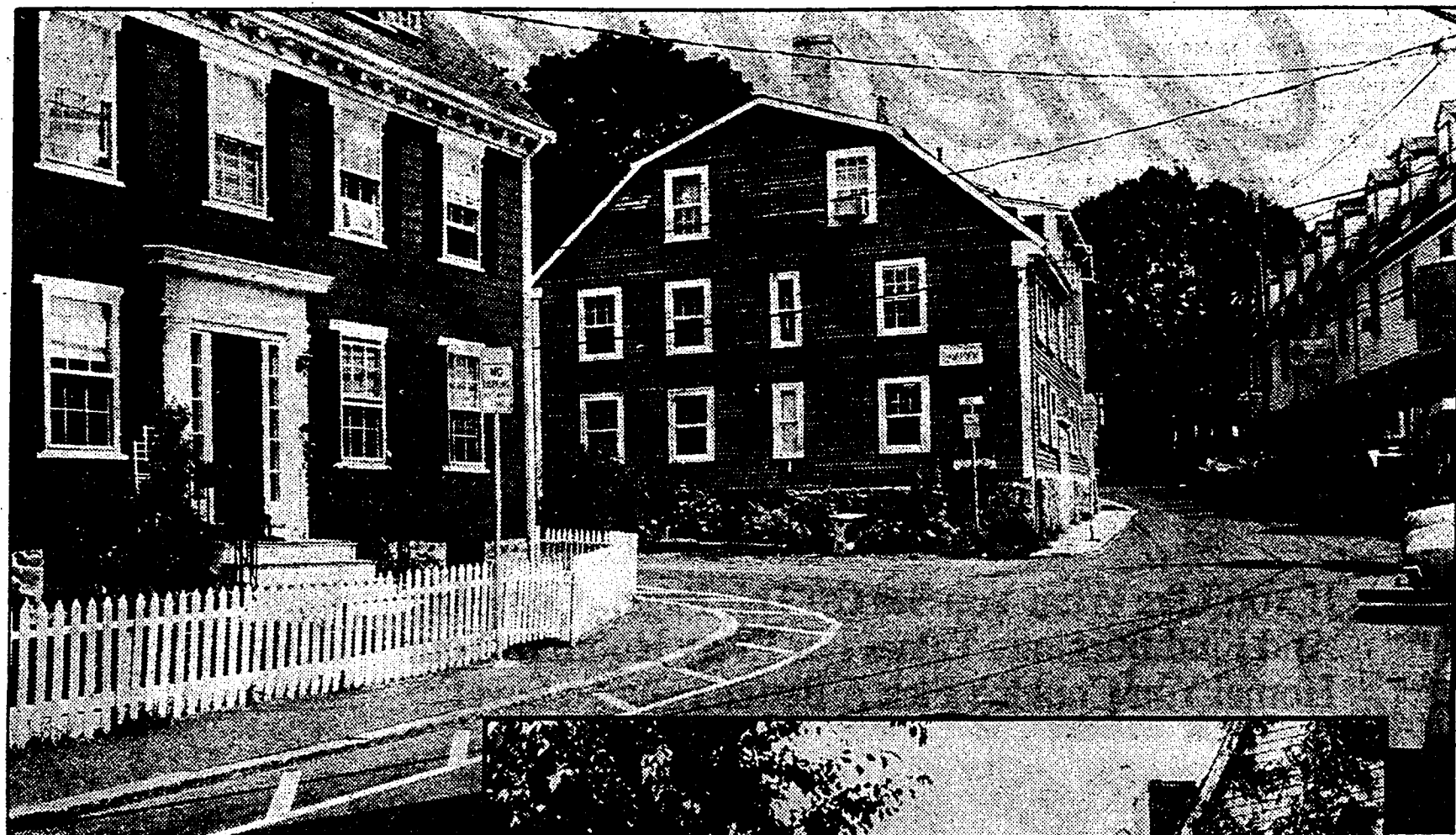
Chairs are "upholstered" on impulse with mill ends and pins. Everything is relaxed, undemanding and inviting. There is nothing new or showy or fashionable. The effect is as far from the British idea of tatty-chintz country-house status as it is from the trendy vacation homes featured in the glossy shelter magazines. I would say that the house has a certain kind of class.

The town has class, too. One of the loveliest sailing harbors in the world is surrounded by a pre-Revolutionary settlement that did much of its building by about 1820. The narrow Massachusetts streets are a casual treasury of Federal and Greek Revival, cheek-by-jowl, clapboard houses on rising hills with gardens tucked between. It is all topped by a red brick, Ruskinian Gothic, Victorian Town Hall, which houses that archetypal American painting, "The Spirit of '76."

Old Town, as the original section is called, has had its share of buffeting by hippies and groupies, and geometrically increasing numbers of cars have made streets all but impassable and unparkable. The buildings are increasingly filled with boutiques. But the place withstands the invasion of 20th-century life styles surprisingly well, and it has also resisted both Williamsburg and Disneyland influences. The blows of change are softened by installing traffic islands, where needed, of solid masses of brilliant petunias.

Priorities are, properly, the availability of the first corn and the state of the tides, and important events tend to be ice-cream socials at the local historical mansion.

If there is anything here of the kind that makes New York go round—super-chic, supercost, overreaching for status—I have managed to steer clear of it. This is a home and life style forever away from stainless steel and black glove leather. I have managed, in fact, to restore heart and soul here for another year's go at the great metropolis. There are country tomatoes and parsley in the city refrigerator. I cannot see the morning sky or the gulls skimming through the open porch (old houses have porches, with and without screens) and the hassle is on from the moment I arise. I think of that house as the single most beautiful thing that I know.



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Garth Huxtable

