STATIONMASTER HOUSE

One homeowner renovates a Victorian cottage in Grandview and preserves the charm of a bygone era.

BY MICHELE MCCARTHY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANGELIKA RINHOFER
Fran Moss was celebrating her birthday the day a friend suggested they lunch in Nyack and spend a leisurely afternoon looking at houses in the river villages north of New York City. Fran was living in Manhattan, and although she already owned a country house in the Hamptons, “Looking at houses was a hobby of mine, and I agreed to go just for the fun of it,” she says. But as soon as she saw the spectacular setting and the expansive front porch of Stationmaster House, Fran knew she wanted to buy the Victorian cottage situated high on the Palisades with splendid Hudson River views.

Located in Grandview-on-Hudson, 17 miles from Manhattan and minutes from the Tappan Zee Bridge, Stationmaster House was built between 1863 and 1867 by Captain Joshua Platt, an Irish seafarer who became involved in local real estate. As Fran tells the story, Captain Platt deeded land to the Erie Railroad, and in return he was granted a scheduled train stop close to his property. Platt appointed himself stationmaster, and the house took its name.

By the time Fran went to see Stationmaster House, the Erie-Lackawanna train had long stopped running, and the old railroad bed had been transformed into Hader Park Walking Trail, part of a network of local hiking trails.

Fran was charmed by the tranquil setting of the house that's tucked away on several beautifully landscaped and wooded acres bordered by Clausland Mountain and the river, and accessible only by private roads. But she wasn’t the only one interested in the idyllic property, which also includes ornamental ponds, a spacious garden room formed from the foundation walls of another house that burned in 1915, and a winding “horse and buggy” road built by Captain Platt that still meanders down to River Road.

Fran learned the owners of Stationmaster House were searching for a special buyer, someone who would maintain their beloved home and the magnificent multi-tiered gardens family matriarch, Connie Voss, had painstakingly carved out of the hillside.

“I thought I could be a guardian and care for this house,” Fran says. “But I didn’t understand what was involved, how slow the process of renovating a historic home is.”

Founder, owner, and president of Logos and Promotions, Fran had years of experience successfully developing branding logos, including one for the “I Love Central Park” campaign. But she was a novice when it came to renovation—the art of
preserving the look and feel of a historic home while making accommodations for modern living.

When she embarked on the project in April 2003, Fran had no idea it would take more than a year and a half to complete. But through the often grueling and sometimes disheartening process, she acquired a working knowledge of what a successful renovation involves. She learned a few lessons about the quirks of historic houses and a lot about herself.

“Early on, an architect told me that given the aggravation and the high cost to retrofit this house, I could build a gorgeous house—at a bigger budget, but nonetheless a grander house fitting to the site,” Fran recalls.

It’s difficult to imagine a house more suited to the site than the elegantly simple, 2,000-square-foot home Fran envisioned. “This cottage wasn’t built to be a grand home,” she says. “It’s an authentic house of the period.”

Working with her architectural designer, Jerry Vis, and Eric Hovde of AAA Quality Paint and Restorers, who Fran says “saved my life,” she rebuilt the entire back of the house, which was too far gone to salvage. While maintaining the original footprint of the house and the wide-plank floors, she reconfigured the floor plan, evened out the roof height and the varying ceiling heights, and added a side entrance and a mudroom.

While Fran wanted to preserve the authentic character of the house and the charm of a bygone era, she also wanted a home that included modern creature comforts like central air. Most of all, “I wanted to see the river,” she says. River views meant opening up a warren of small, dank, downstairs rooms, including the kitchen, which was covered in green tile, and what Fran describes as a “mildewed, funky, almost abandoned room” at the back of the house that evolved into a lovely sitting area with an original asymmetrical fireplace. Despite resistance from a variety of experts, Fran insisted on breaking through a wall from this room to the foyer and exposing the staircase. “Every time you open a wall, it’s a money pit; you don’t know what you’ll find,” she says. “But now I can sit by the fire and look out through the front doors to the river.” Off the foyer, in the carefully furnished but deliberately understated living room, there is also a fireplace.

Fran’s modern makeover resulted in a spacious kitchen/dining room with a stunning river view that marries the house to the Hudson. “I feel like I’m on a houseboat in here,” she says.

Fran added white kitchen cabinetry with a period look and granite countertops but kept the old butcher-block prep island. Hanging above it is an antique meat-drying rack from England. The only furniture in the room, besides a round wood table and wrought-iron chairs, is a 200-year-old, 10-foot-long dry sink she found at the Chelsea flea market that functions as a sideboard and a chaise longue.

When it came time to paint inside the house, Fran found a butter-white rose and had paint mixed to match. She chose Ralph Lauren’s brightest white for the trim. “This is an old house,” she says. “But I wanted it to feel fresh and new.”

Upstairs off a central hallway is the master bedroom. A guest room and two full baths offer dramatic views of the river and the Tappan Zee Bridge aglow with lights at night.

Now that the renovation is behind her, Fran is busy working on Ford’s “Tied to the Cause” campaign that benefits the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation. Her company handles the production of the Lily Pulitzer–designed silk scarves for sale. (For more information on Tied to the Cause, visit www.fordvehicles.com/thecause/gettied.) The Stationmaster House and grounds are available for photo and film shoots; contact thestationmaster@aol.com.

Fran’s good fortune has led to personal involvement with Coalition for the Homeless. These days she’s meditating on the deep-seated meaning of home. Every morning from the home she’s made in the Stationmaster House, she watches the sun rise over the river. “I’m in awe,” she says.
A HOME WITH VIEWS
CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT, LANTERN LIGHT CASTS FILIGREE SHADOWS. MOSS SAYS THE RIVER VIEW "QUIETS MY MIND." KITCHEN STILL-LIFE WITH DRY-SINK SIDEBOARD. THE TRANSFORMED SITTING ROOM AND FIREPLACE. OPPOSITE, MOSS CALLS THE WALLED GARDEN HER MEDITATION ROOM.