

# Ten Years After Being Dismantled Historic Parsons House is Rebuilt in Williamsburg and on the Market

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The Noah Parsons House on Village Hill Road in Williamsburg.

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## WILLIAMSBURG

After a decade in pieces, the historic Noah Parsons House that once stood on Old South Street in Northampton is whole again and on the market.

Owner and restorer John Otis of Williamsburg said the old home is also new and improved at 18 Village Hill Road in Williamsburg.

Area historians watched in dismay 10 years ago as one of Northampton's oldest homes was dismantled board by board on the spot it had stood since at least 1755. Cameron Coe of Canaan, N.H., bought the house and took it apart with aspirations to rebuild and restore it in New Hampshire. He scrapped the plan within a year.

Enter John Otis, who had been longing to work on a major historic home restoration project. He bought the materials, found a spot in an old part of Williamsburg, and worked diligently for six years to rebuild it there. Finally ready to sell, Otis is holding open houses this weekend.

The 3,750-square-foot house includes much of the original structure, plus an addition and the comforts of a modern home like radiant heat and central air conditioning. Otis said that's what makes it the perfect home for someone who loves antiques and has money to spend. The sale price is \$1.25 million.

"It's a new old house," he said. "My best selling point is it has the interest of an old house but it doesn't have the problems of an old house."

Homes that are certified historic are exempt from some building and fire codes, but because a pile of boards and nails can't be certified, the project didn't qualify for an exemption.

"They can't certify it as historic until you rebuild it, so you have to build it up to code," he said.

Because of that, he had to make some changes to things including adding fire safety features to fireplaces and adding a few inches onto doors because doorways now are required to be taller.

After working on more than 100 projects involving historic houses and barns, he's seen all manner of problems, from crumbling foundations and termite damage to rotten posts.

Otis said he knew rebuilding the Noah Parsons House would be a huge undertaking, but it took him two years longer than he expected. He had to redesign parts to fit fire and building codes. He spent years finding antique doors and other old or reproduced pieces to replace unusable bits of the original house. He used antique tools like a broad ax and hand planer to fashion new pieces he needed.

Otis declined to say how much the project cost.

"When you get into restoration work, everything is expensive," he said. For instance, he spent \$500 getting reproduction nails that were hand forged like the original ones.

Northampton architect Tristram Metcalfe, who served on the Northampton Historical Commission when Coe dismantled the house, is pleased the Noah Parsons House is back in the Valley, if not in Northampton.

"We watched it go down, and there was nothing we could do about it," he said. "It's great to see it come back."

The house is named for Noah Parsons Jr., the great-grandson of Cornet Joseph Parsons, one of the founders of Northampton. Noah Parsons Jr. built the home on the corner of Old South and Conz streets in 1755, as nearly as historians can tell. At that time, King George III ruled the new world and the Mill River, diverted away in the 1940s, ran nearby. The house stayed in the family until 1936.

Several developers owned it in the 1970s, including one that built the convenience store next door. In 1985 it was sold to three partners who leased the first floor as office space and the second floor as an apartment. It was vacant when Coe bought and dismantled it in 2003, to the consternation of historians like Metcalfe. It was said to be the fifth-oldest home in Northampton at the time.

The dismantling of that house prompted the city to adopt a demolition-delay ordinance in 2005 to allow the Historical Commission to delay the demolition of a historically significant structure for up to a year so alternatives to demolition can be explored.

“It’s important in stopping historical houses from disappearing,” Metcalfe said. “This house would have had a demolition delay for sure, and instead it disappeared just like that.”

### **Taking on a project**

Otis, 60, said that when he shows the restored house to people, he always hears the same question: “Don’t you want to live in it?”

“But I’ve basically been living in it for six years; living and breathing it,” he said, standing near the home’s rebuilt fireplace and brick bake oven on a recent tour. “I’m more interested in the process.”

Otis, who grew up on Village Hill, worked on numerous restoration projects over the years. He hoped that he would get hired to oversee a major restoration project, but no jobs came along. “I realized the only way I was going to get to build something like this was to do it myself,” he said.

He had read about the Noah Parsons House being dismantled by Coe, and in 2004, he read another Gazette article about Coe’s decision to sell the materials instead of building it himself. He wrote to Coe, offering his restoration skills if Coe sold to a buyer in the area. Coe eventually wrote back, dropping his price to \$52,000, and asking Otis if he was interested in taking on the project himself.

Otis went to look at the materials — boards and beams stacked in piles under tarps. It didn’t look like much, but he and his wife, Angela Otis, decided to go for it.

“We kind of closed our eyes and leaped,” he said.

He bought the materials in 2005 and found the right spot for the house on four acres not far from the Village Hill Cemetery. The area was the center of town centuries ago, he said, and there are a dozen historic homes within a mile.

Working with Windsor architect Jack Sobon, Otis redesigned the house and sought out the materials he would need to bring it back to life. He started to frame the house late in 2007.

He said he worked on the house about eight months of the year and then worked the other four months on paying jobs.

Otis described himself as stubborn — a trait he said came in handy those times that he would work for weeks on the tiniest details of the restoration and feel like he had nothing to show for it. “I’m not going to quit. Once I decide to do something, I do it,” he said.

Though he had worked on restoring old houses before, trying to recreate a dismantled house from bits and pieces was a new challenge. “I learned a lot, and that was part of the appeal of it,” he said. He read a lot about the topic and asked tradesmen for tips, he said.

The main rule of restoration, he said, is “reuse anything that you can, and if you can’t, replace it with reproduction, but not unless you absolutely have to,” he said. “Anything that survived, I repaired and reused it.”

Otis used clues from photographs Coe provided as well as notes workers made while taking the house apart to put the house back together.

Otis said the house had been through four major renovations before he rebuilt it. Originally, it was built as a hall and parlor house — a traditional English home with four rooms on two floors. In the 1780s, the Parsons family added onto the house to make it into a salt box house, an asymmetrical style that expanded the first floor. They

added a shed roof on the back of the house at some point, and eventually they built upwards, making the house taller and giving themselves more room on the second floor.

### **Today's home**

The house and its 1,344-square-foot addition includes four bedrooms, 2½ baths, a walk-in basement, a deck and a patio.

The exterior of the house, damaged by weather and age, is made of reproduced materials to match historic photographs of the home, with the exception of the original window pediments. “Nothing that far back is going to survive,” he said.

Unable to tell what kind of entrance was originally on the house, Otis they made an educated guess that it might have been a so-called “Connecticut River Valley” entrance, popular in the 1700s. The large door is flanked by column-like structures on either side and has “bullseye glass” panes which feature a circular shape.

The interior of the home is built around a 10-by-10-foot chimney of original brick. It had to be large enough to connect to all four fireplaces in the house. “It’s the heart of the house,” Otis said.

In the kitchen is a historically-accurate cooking fireplace, which features a pot hook for cooking over a fire and a bake oven. Whoever buys the house can bake with it, he said, but it would take about four hours to heat up the oven space enough with coals to bake anything.

The bricks from the old house held up well, although the sticky Connecticut River mud that originally glued them together deteriorated. Otis pointed out where small fingerprints — probably from the children who made them — were visible in the red brick.

When the house was taken apart, workers found several pairs of old shoes in the masonry around the chimney. Otis said it was a superstition to throw shoes belonging to the owner of a new home near the chimney to keep the devil from coming down it. The shoes are now on display on a sill in the front stairwell, as are historic photographs of the home on Old South Street.

When he couldn’t use original material in the updated house, he bought antique boards and pieces from around the region. If he couldn’t find a good replacement, he got reproduction pieces or made the boards himself with historical tools.

“If you’re going to do real restoration work, you have to learn how to use the old tools, otherwise you’re not going to get the same look,” he said.

Assembling the floor of the parlor from old boards from an 18th century Goshen house was like putting together a puzzle, Otis said, because the boards were asymmetrical and most were a few inches wider on one end than the other. He had to lay out all the boards outside to see which ones went in which spots before he could even get started, but he liked the project.

“I like working on old buildings because it’s challenging,” he said. “There are problems you have to figure out.”

The two front rooms are wholly old fashioned, with the exception of the electrical outlets. Otis said the imperfections of the antique pieces is what gives the house character.

“I love this old stuff,” he said, lovingly stroking a worn old corner cupboard. “See how the paint is chipped? You don’t touch that.”

In contrast, the kitchen in the middle of the first floor is ultra-modern with all new appliances, fixtures and blond wooden walls. Behind that is the addition he built on the rear of the house — two stories, each 672-square feet. It is made up of all new materials built around a frame from a centuries-old hay barn in Cummington.

He said the addition was necessary to provide the amount of living space a modern family would expect. “I just knew that otherwise, within 10 years someone would want to hack into it to add onto it again,” he said.

The addition also means he can ask for enough money to justify the amount of time, energy and money he had put into the project. He also needed a place to add a staircase that was up to code, since the front staircase was not.

Now that the house is finished, Otis is eager to get it on the market. In addition to holding an open house this weekend, he has created a website, [www.noahparsonshouse.com](http://www.noahparsonshouse.com), and plans to advertise the house in newspapers and historic home magazines.

His plan had been to sell the house in time to pay for his three kids to go to college. Although he’s a few years behind schedule — his oldest, Nicholas, 22, is in his final year at UMass — the sale could definitely help pay off his loans and help the twins, Stephanie and Marisa, 18, head off to college this year.

He is confident that the updated version of the Noah Parsons House will appeal to buyers who want to live in one of the areas most well-known old homes. “You can have an antique house, but you can be comfortable in it,” he said.

Metcalf, an architect who specializes in preservation work, said he is thinking of visiting the house at its new location during the open house Saturday and Sunday from 2 to 4 p.m.

“I think it’s great that it got saved,” Metcalf said. “It’s been a long process.”

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- <http://www.gazettenet.com/news/8053064-95/ten-years-after-being-dismantled-historic-parsons-house-is-rebuilt-in-williamsburg-and-on>