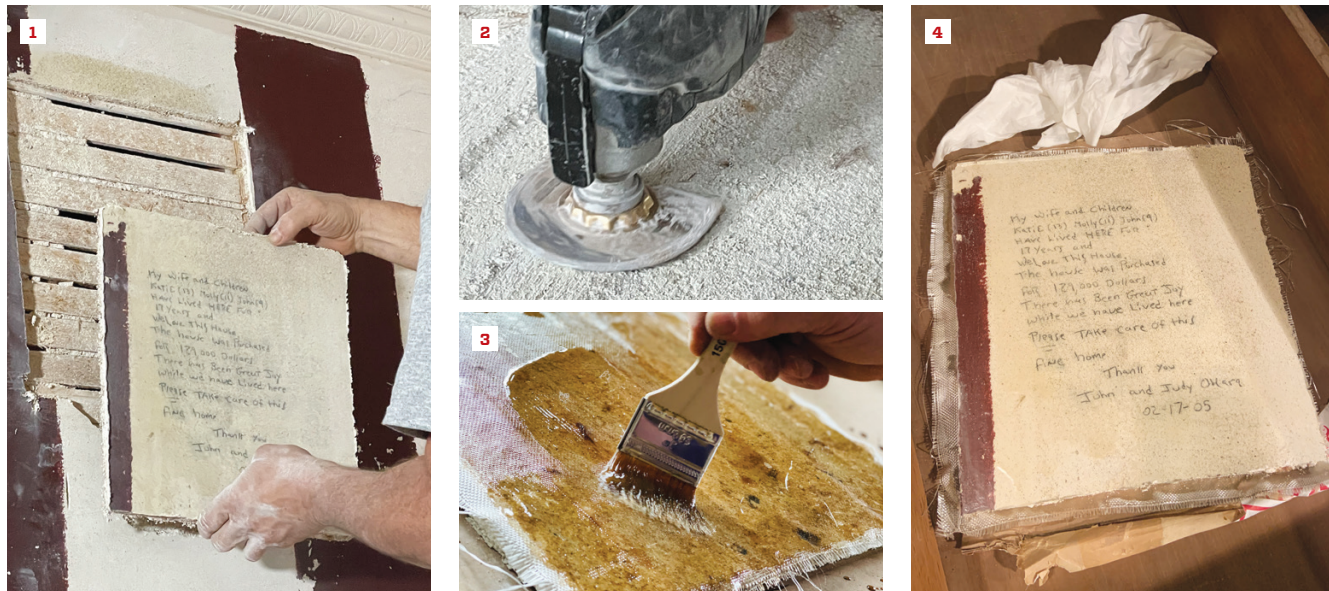


BY JENNA CROTEAU AND WARREN O'SHEA

Salvaging a Memento Written on Plaster



Starting with the earliest cave drawings, the urge to say “I was here” has often been expressed on the walls of our homes. As contractors who specialize in working on old homes, we commonly uncover these moments in time. So while removing wallpaper in an 1882 Queen Anne-style home, we were excited—though not surprised—to uncover a heartfelt note on the plaster wall beneath, written by a previous owner in 2005. The note expressed an immense love for the old home and pleaded with future owners to love and care for it as the writer had. Because he also listed the names and ages of his three children, I did a quick search of social media and discovered that I had several friends in common with the oldest daughter. I sent a picture of the note in a private message and let her know that we were updating the home with the care and love her father had hoped for.

She responded within minutes, expressing her gratitude and joy, and asked if there was any way that this artifact could be preserved. I felt in my bones that I needed to try to make this happen for her, and while I wasn't sure how, I was pretty sure I knew of an expert in old homes who could help me with this delicate undertaking: my boss, Warren O'Shea of O'Shea Builders.

To figure out the best way of extracting the piece, Warren and I did a few test runs on another part of the plaster-and-lath wall. We couldn't access the back of the wall to break away the plaster keying, so we would have to gingerly cut away the plaster and then the wood lath with a multi-tool. Lucky for us, the area fell between studs.

Once we had honed our technique, we sprayed the area with the note with three coats of artist fixative spray. This would prevent smudging of the pencil graphite when we brushed on the two-part epoxy coating after the fixative had dried. After the epoxy cured, we applied blue tape to the area where we planned to make our cuts, then gingerly made shallow, 1/16-inch-deep passes on either side of the note. We worked deliberately, alternating sides with each pass, until we reached the lath. Next, we used the same approach to make our horizontal cuts at the top and bottom in the gaps between the pieces of lath.

Before carefully cutting through the lath, we applied plenty of tape to the area to prevent the plaster from falling away and onto the floor. The vibrations from the multi-tool helped by knocking away the plaster keys, leaving the memento intact (1).

Finally, using a piece of cardboard as a backing to carefully rotate the plaster section horizontally, we carried it to a table where we used the multi-tool to smooth out the back (2). Then we cut out an oversized piece of fiberglass cloth, placed it on the back of the plaster, and painted on a thick coat of two-part epoxy to saturate the cloth (3). After letting the epoxy dry overnight, we flipped the plaster memento over (4) and later cleaned up the edges, using a wood frame to make sure the sides were cropped evenly.

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Photos by Sarah Daughy