

DAY'S END

Focus on good design and clever construction



New Railings for the Pinnacle

by Nate Plasha

Built in 1896 as a summer camp on a cliff overlooking Lake Champlain in Vermont, the Pinnacle features some stunning interior trim details, including a double-height great hall with an oversized fireplace, in the great lodge tradition of the Adirondacks. The exterior is less distinctive, except for a two-story belvedere on top and a deep porch that surrounds the house on the first floor (A). From the porch, the Adirondack Mountains are clearly visible across the lake.

A few years ago, the camp was purchased by a buyer who wanted to convert the house to a year-round residence, and my job was to repair or replace the nearly 300 linear feet of railings that enclosed the porch. The homeowner's goal was to repair what could be salvaged and make any replacement parts virtually identical to the existing railing. In some jurisdictions, that would have been impossible; the rail height would have needed to have been raised to 42 inches. Here, historic preservation guidelines allowed us to "replace in kind" the railing (B).

The basic railing design was sound, with details that had allowed the painted but untreated wood components to endure for years (C). I've replaced a number of wood railings using these same details, such as a beefy top rail with a water-shedding profile and a beveled bottom rail, but the rustic stone piers that support the porch threw me a bit of a curve ball. Fitting a wood rail to an organic stone shape is tricky.

Not counting the stair rails, there were 25 sections ranging in length from 9 to as much as 14 feet; 10 needed total replacement, while the rest could be repaired, scraped and sanded, and repainted following RRP protocols for lead paint. I used the sections that needed replacement as full-scale templates as I rebuilt them in my shop out of sapele mahogany. Prior to assembly, I coated the parts with oil-based primer and two coats of paint.

Per the original design, I fitted the top rails into pockets in the stone columns and locked them into place with mortar (D). At the base of the columns, I scribed



the bottom rails to the stone and fixed them to the deck with blocks underneath. While the railings were just a small part of the overall project, they help preserve the historic character of the house without distracting from the views (E). ❖

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PHOTOS: A, D, & E: NATE PLASHA; B & C: TIM HEALEY