

BY CLAYTON DEKORNE

Old-School Newel

Last September, my family and I were part of that large American demographic fleeing big cities during the pandemic. In our case, with two small children and no outdoor space attached to our sixth-floor, Brooklyn, N.Y., apartment, we mostly wanted a yard, and the closest place of any size we could afford was three hours away in the Catskills. The yard came with an elegant Italianate home built in 1855, which we fell in love with instantly. The walls had never been painted, only wallpapered; the woodwork and doors—unpainted clear chestnut—are intact; the original oak and fir floors are water-stained in places and reveal the placement of old rugs but show almost no wear; even the porcelain-knobbed window latches remain and are operable. With all this charm, however, comes a serious lack of modern performance, and as elegant and intact as it may be, this home hadn't been occupied since the 1990s and nearly every square inch needs love. That is, all but the stairs.

Arguably the most charming woodwork in the home is the stair to the second floor, and never have I walked on a set of wood stairs as old that didn't creak and have a wobbly handrail. This stair is silent and immovable, and the newel, a single piece of turned oak with carved flutes and an integral pedestal set into the first step,

feels as rigid as a tree trunk. When I looked to find out how it was secured, I found something I'd never seen: The bottom end (below the pedestal block) is cut into two opposing tenons that are mortised through the subfloor (see photo 3). Each tenon has a slot cut into it at subfloor level, and an oak wedge was driven into each of these slots to draw the post straight down, snug to the floor. To complete the connection, the pedestal is braced by the stringer and the first tread and riser and locked in by finish flooring.

As for squeaks, there is no substructure, no glue and screws, just good wood and not as much of it as I'd expect—one set of 1-by oak treads and risers supported by 1-by oak stringers. (Granted, all these pieces are a full inch thick and cut from tight-grained, rift and quarter-sawn oak, which probably best accounts for their resilience.) On the closed side of the stairs, the stringer is nailed to a 1-by oak apron nailed to the wall. On the open side, the finish stringer, which is also the carriage, is supported by a flat-framed wall tied together with oak laths and plastered on both sides.

I'm not advocating that this method is best for a new set of stairs today, but I am full of admiration for a long-gone carpenter's skill and chosen materials. Only time can prove good practice.



The newel gets a lot of action these days but remains immovable **(1)**. The integral block **(2)** at the base (about 6½ inches square) has two tenons cut on its bottom end that project through the floor and are drawn tight to the subfloor by wedges driven into the slots **(3)**.

Photos by Clayton Dekorne