

Hatching a dream house

Charming Mendham home that began as a chicken coop boasts Gilded Age touches of elegance

By MARY ANN MCGANN
SPECIAL TO THE DAILY RECORD

An oil painting of a preening rooster hangs in the parlor of Ed and Rachel Damiano's Mendham home. With its vivid red, purple and golden hues, the painting is a fitting tribute to the original inhabitants of the building: chickens.

As the story goes, a builder bought six chicken houses in 1946 at the estate sale of Audley Manor — the former residence of John Frelinghuysen Talmage — and moved them to their current location near town. With the help of architectural and decorative flourishes salvaged from opulent mansions in the area that had been demolished, the builder refitted the chicken coops

— transforming them from smelly outbuildings that once teemed with clucking poultry into charming and stylish residences fit for ... well, humans.

"It's a long way from a chicken coop," says Rachel Damiano, of her 1,800-square-foot, two-bedroom, two-bath, cottage-style home.

The front door opens into an inviting parlor — its leaded glass windows and heavy oak moldings reminiscent of the Gilded Age estates from whence they came. Pocket doors that once graced the rooms of one of the mansions are now walls separating the parlor from the kitchen.

"This was a pocket door — here's the handle — from the mansion," Ed Damiano points out

"The (builder) made a wall out of it because (the chicken coop) didn't have any (interior) walls."

Then there is the simple push-button doorbell — now silent — on the molding of one of the parlor windows.

"(The builder) took the wood (from the mansion) and made window moldings out of it," says Ed, a real estate broker and developer. "These were the moldings from a door — maybe a back or side door. I'm sure the front door wouldn't have had a bell like that."

The original planked flooring runs through the former chicken house, which was roughly 1,100 square feet and just 15 feet wide at its inception. The house is beautifully updated

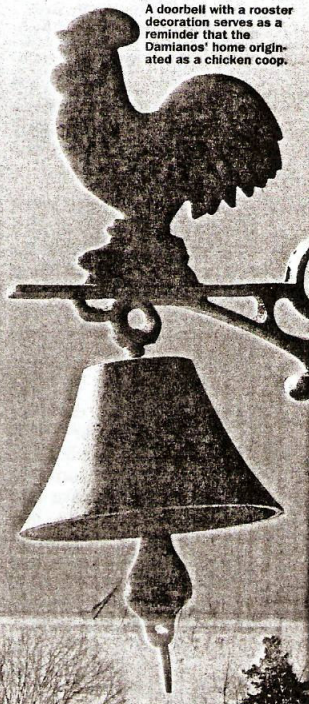
throughout, and the Damianos (and the previous owners before them) took pains to stay true to the structure's history — matching the plank floorboards, wainscoting the ceilings, and installing custom-made, yet more

energy-efficient, leaded glass windows.

"It makes it fun to live here because of the history," Ed says. "(Everyone) who comes in says, 'Oh, wow. What kind of

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A doorbell with a rooster decoration serves as a reminder that the Damianos' home originated as a chicken coop.



STAFF PHOTOS: KAREN MANCINELLI

Ed and Rachel Damiano's 1,800-square-foot, two-bedroom, two-bath, cottage-style home features architectural and decorative flourishes salvaged from opulent mansions. Ed Damiano is in the parlor of his home. The picture features leaded glass windows and heavy oak moldings are reminiscent of the Gilded Age estates from whence they came.



Hatching

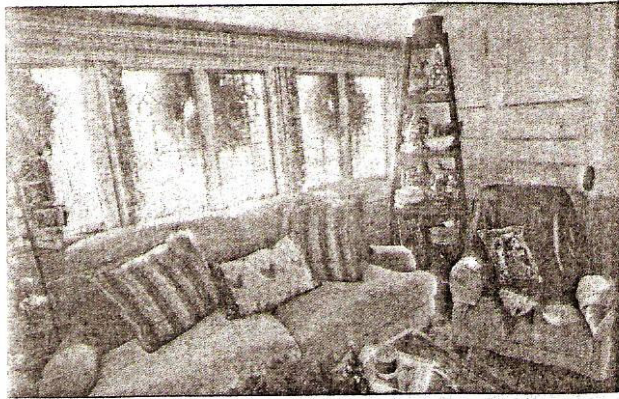
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house is this?" I tell them it's a chicken coop, and I go through the whole story."

"They're not sure what to expect," says Rachel, a paralegal. "That's exactly what has happened when we've had friends up."

"It's a little tiny, so if you have to entertain, getting more than five or six people in here, you sort of bump into each other," Ed says. "But, other than that, it's a nice place to come home to."

The Damianos — who have two grown children — added a master suite, with Country French decor and a distinctive antique chandelier. There are two outdoor brick patios — one overlooks an in-ground pool and a garden that is abloom and fragrant in the warmer months with hydrangeas, rhododendrons, day lilies and peonies; the other is shaded in the spring by a rose-covered pergola and warmly lit by



STAFF PHOTO: KAREN MANCINELLI

Pocket doors that once graced a mansion now serve as walls separating the parlor and a kitchen sitting area in Ed and Rachel Damiano's Mendham home. The room also has custom-made, energy-efficient, leaded glass windows.

an antique candle chandelier, rusty with age. There are koi and goldfish in the front yard fishpond.

It is the parlor, however, that beckons the couple — a favorite place to relax together.

"It's warm and cozy, and that's where we usually sit to just enjoy ourselves," Rachel says.

"It's warm. It's cozy. It's comfortable. It's sort of like stepping back in time," Ed says. "I'm sitting in a place where the woodwork and the moldings

came from another time. I love that room for that reason."

But lest one forget the building's humble beginnings, there is a porcelain hen and rooster in the kitchen, along with biscotti and farina tins with a poultry motif. There are chicken Christmas ornaments, rooster cups, and a front door welcome mat depicting a barnyard fowl. And, of course, the oil paint image of the strutting cockerel, not unlike one that probably once ruled this particular roost.