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## A VICTORIAN TIME CAPSULE IN FREEHOLD, NEW JERSEY



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by Elizabeth Finkelstein

I call this column “Before & After,” but this particular piece should actually be called “Before and WAY BEFORE.” Some of you may know Ken Roginski — aka The Old House Guy — from his fantastic [website](#) that offers an endless supply of information related to researching and renovating old houses. Oddly enough, before he reached out to me, my mom discovered his website and sent along it along to me with note: “You have to meet this guy!” Well, I finally got to, and Ken shared with me the whole story of how he restored a vernacular Queen Anne-style home in Freehold, New Jersey.

Around the suburbs of New York and in New Jersey, houses like Ken’s are a dime a dozen. I admit that I very rarely stop to look twice at them, because so few of them retain their original Victorian detail. Enter: Ken! Being a purist, Ken purchased the home with the intention of restoring it to EXACTLY how it would have looked in 1910, when it was constructed. Right down to the wallpaper! So few people do that nowadays that I’m always very interested to meet someone with that approach. Ken has LOTS more photos on his own [website](#) – my favorites are below. Be prepared to step back to 1910!



*The exterior of the house when Ken first bought it.*

**KEN, THANKS SO MUCH FOR SHOWING YOUR HOME! WHAT SOLD YOU ON THIS PARTICULAR HOUSE? WERE YOU LOOKING SPECIFICALLY FOR A VICTORIAN?**

I was searching for an old house that needed someone to bring it back to life. I didn’t know how to do it but wanted to learn. I looked at all different styles as long as they were pre-1930. I preferred a Victorian, but most houses I found either needed too much work or were already updated with new windows, plastic siding, etc. I was not handy and really did not know anything about old buildings except I really liked the charm and the feeling I got when in an old house. I looked at a lot of houses and gradually kept going farther away from my home town. One day while driving around – checking out different towns and driving the streets, I stumbled on an open house. I knew right away that this was the house for me. It needed work but it was work I could handle. Then came the time to learn how to do it right.



*Another view of the house when it was first purchased.*

**CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE HOUSE’S CONDITION WHEN YOU BOUGHT IT?**

The house was rented at the time and it was very run down. Grass was overgrown, junk in the back yard (the house is on a corner too) junk on the porch, buckets in the bedrooms for leaking ceiling/roof. The 15 year-old boy would practice archery – shooting arrows at the plaster wall in his bedroom. The house was in one of the best neighborhoods in town but a real eyesore. I don’t know how the neighbors put up with it. The garage was bolted up with peep holes in the side garage door. It was very secure. After many excuses, I finally got inside it was obvious why they wouldn’t show me the garage until much later. They were witches – the black magic kind and had an alter in the garage.



*The exterior after restoration. Gable fretwork was added, and historically-accurate paint colors were selected.*

## **YIKES! ANY SPECIFIC FUN/INTERESTING RESTORATION STORIES YOU WANT TO SHARE?**

It took 3 years to strip all the paint. My aunt had just retired and she spent many hours along with my parents helping. Once the walls were painted and pictures ready to be hung, a modern connection on the toilet broke and the house had \$10,000 in water damage. (more about this on the [HGTV video on my website](#)). I had a circa 1860's charcoal portrait in an ornate plaster frame (see the portrait that is now hanging over the piano). It was damaged from the water. I bought it at a yard sale for \$4.00 and the insurance company gave me \$450.00 for its restoration. For that money I could have bought lots of old portraits but I felt that I owed it to the man in the portrait. This may be the only image of him and it was only right to restore his image.



*Another view of the exterior after restoration. An original diamond pane window was found in attic and reinstalled.*

## HAVE YOU DUG UP ANYTHING INTERESTING ABOUT THE HOUSE’S HISTORY?

No real dirt. I am compiling my history of the house and researching the past resident. I have a [page on how to document your house](#). There are many reasons to do it but it must be safely stored at a historical society.

My house was on a local tour and a woman who lived in the house during the 1940 came to see it. She later brought her family to visit and they became an extended family to me. They told me the garage was used for chickens and how the pantry looked. The pantry was an illegal bathroom put in by the previous owner and removed before it was sold. Behind the fake bead board were ghost lines for shelves. With their information I was able to have them rebuilt.



*The front entranceway, before & after. The walls are faux painted in green. Frieze and ceiling are stenciled on plaster.*

## IS THERE A FEATURE OF THE HOUSE YOU'RE MOST PROUD OF?

While most people are proud to show off their period parlor, they are a dime a dozen. I proudly show off my furnace. See my [blog post](#) for the full story. Also – most kitchens in old houses are modernized or renovated with a period interpretation. Unfortunately my kitchen was modernized. I did not bring it back to 1910 since I was not knowledgeable enough at the time to do so. I therefore brought it back to the 1920's. Glass inserted into the cabinet doors, wood counter, etc. Nothing modern is visible. I converted my modern refrigerator into an antique looking icebox so it would be in context with my 1931 stove. I now sell instructions online on how to do it. I've [written extensively](#) on why flow and

context is important.



*The kitchen was restored to an authentic 1920s look.*

**WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST ABOUT YOUR HOUSE?**

Watching people’s faces when I give them a tour. They say they feel they are actually transformed to an earlier time. That’s because there are no contemporary distractions.



*Ken disguised his refrigerator as a period ice box!*

**I AM A HUGE FAN OF YOUR WEBSITE! WHAT CAN YOU TELL NEWBIES ABOUT IT? (WHEN IT STARTED, WHY IT STARTED, AND WHY PEOPLE SHOULD VISIT IT?)**

See my [About Page](#) for my crazy story and how it began. From just liking old houses to a preservation advocate to starting a consulting business. It's geared toward newbies who want to protect their homes from themselves and big box marketing and contractors. I try to give them an education. My pages are long but with all my photos the homeowner should walk away and recognize design flaws. They will then have a trained eye for this. With my graphical consulting services, I can show the homeowner what the completed project will look like. They know what to expect and can make sure their contractor knows too by showing them an image.



*The rear parlor, before and after. The floor was not stained because the patina from its age provided a rich amber color. The nail holes from the previous flooring add to the character.*



*The frieze is white wall liner that was painted and stenciled – handmade wallpaper..*

**WHAT SERVICES COULD YOU OFFER CIRCA FANS CONSIDERING BUYING A NEW HOUSE, OR THOSE WHO JUST PURCHASED ONE?**

The main purpose of my Aesthetics page is to show people how to achieve curb appeal. People are frightened by the word “historic preservation”. I try not to use it. If someone wants good curb appeal (not what advertisers call curb appeal just to pick people’s pockets), but design based on architectural principles – rules of proportion etc – not personal taste or fads. A home owner may hate “historic preservation” but if they follow timeless rules they will still end up restoring their house. The homeowner wins by getting curb appeal and we preservationists win by seeing a restoration.

Most of my consultations are for newer homeowners or homeowners new to old houses who need an introduction to their house. We do a walk through with the photos they send me. Many times they are just not aware of what is important or what would work with their house. Many times I have old catalogs and photos to show them as examples. One woman wanted to remove the tacky modern porch supports and buy historic columns from a salvage yard. I explained that just because they are historic, the style does not belong on her 1860’s home.



*The front parlor, in progress and after. The wallpaper design was taken from fabric on a Victorian chair. Edison phonograph 1910. Music stand lists a genealogy of residents since October 1910. Stromberg-Carlson candlestick phone 1915.*

**IF THERE IS ONE LESSON YOU'VE TAKEN FROM YOUR OWN RESTORATION WORK, WHAT WOULD IT BE?**

Do the big messy work before you move in. For example, my attic floor is insulated as it should be. It is a wool insulation that is quite old and the house would benefit with more in the floor. Too late now – there is too much stuff up there. The floor boards would need to be removed to add it.

Learn what needs to be done from the right people! Find someone qualified such as a historic preservation architect, architectural historian or preservation consultant. Just because your favorite contractor loves old houses and has experience working on them does not mean he is qualified to restore a house the way it should be. Let the buyer beware – you have to be the expert or hire someone that has historic restoration experience with grant funded projects in your state. To be involved with these projects you must be approved by the State Historic Preservation Office. Contact them for a list of qualified preservation architects. There is a huge difference between an Architect and a Historic Preservation Architect. People may rave about an architect’s work but a trained eye can pick out their errors when their creativity distracts you from the simple basic form.

THANKS KEN! CIRCA LOVES THE OLD HOUSE GUY!

## FOLLOW KEN:

Website: [www.oldhouseguy.com](http://www.oldhouseguy.com)  
Facebook: Old House Guy



### AUTHOR ELIZABETH FINKELSTEIN

Elizabeth is the founder of CIRCA and a practicing writer, architectural historian and preservation consultant living in Brooklyn, NY. Elizabeth has loved historic houses for as long as she can remember, having grown up in an 1850’s Greek Revival gem that was lovingly restored by her parents. Elizabeth, her husband Ethan and their beagle Banjo remain on a relentless hunt for their perfect “Thanksgiving house.”

- Dan Miller  
Thank you Elizabeth and Ken for a very nice article. Nice work Ken. Great pictures. Very inspirational.
- Rita Shukla  
I Really enjoyed reading this interview.Ken, the work you did on your old house is inspiring.

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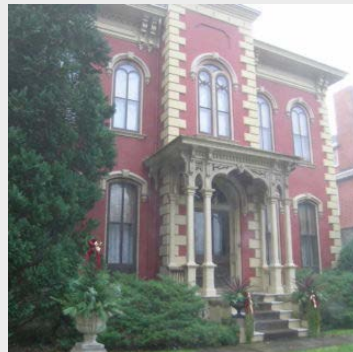
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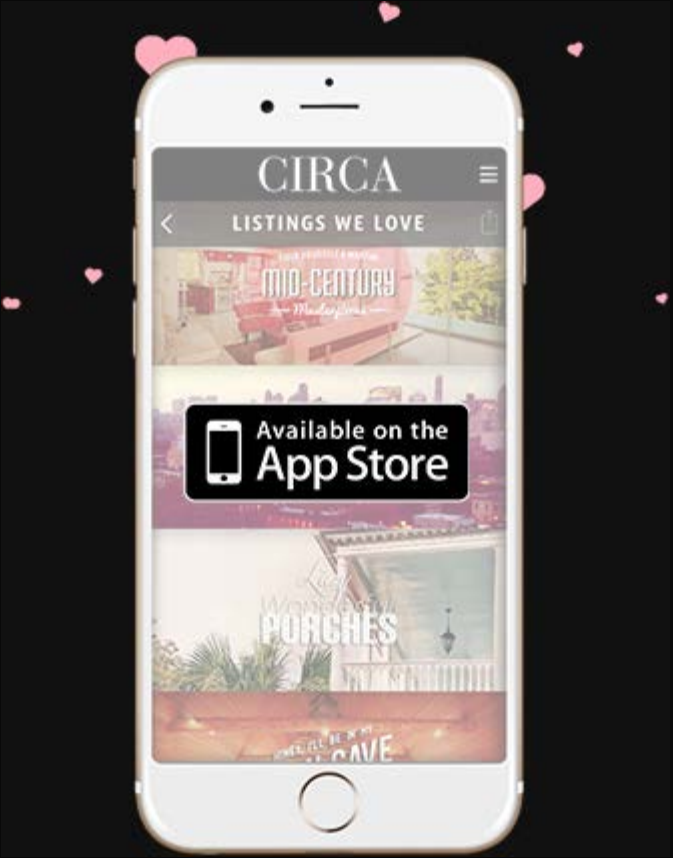




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