



Now and Again



Rather than drive them apart, an ambitious restoration
of their hundred-year-old Thousand Islands cottage
brought this family back together

BY ANNIE STOLTIE | PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS KATSAROV LUNA



Gabrielle Kurlander backs her 14-foot Wilker Bop Around out of a slip in Gananoque, Ont.,

gliding past rows of bobbing masts that poke up into a bluebird sky. Cottaging in the Thousand Islands means the necessity of watercraft to pick up supplies, visit friends, and explore this liquid territory of the St. Lawrence River, the expansive, bi-national waterway that lies between New York State and eastern Ontario. For an independent person like Gabrielle, making this home, even a seasonal one, after living in New York City for 39 years, means you've got to learn how to drive a boat. It's more complicated than it seems, she says over the din of the engine. "No roads or street signs." And then there are the hidden rocks and other obstacles—"like navigating a 3D video game."

In the stern sits her life partner, Chris Street, a bag of fresh produce from a local farm, and a box with bottles of wine at his feet. Island living is in Chris's DNA. He grew up spending summers at his family's property on Bostwick Island, among the more than 1,800 glacier-sculpted rises in the St. Lawrence River. But at 18, Chris left home in Connecticut, centering his world elsewhere, first at the University of Michigan, then in London, U.K., and eventually in New York City, where he embraced a career in the non-profit sector, dedicating his time to the underprivileged. "Life went on," he says. In fact, it went on for decades, with maybe a weekend here or there on Bostwick, until 2014, when he came back to see his family, this time with Gabrielle.

That's when everything changed.



In a framed black-and-white photograph, J.R. Street and his family—dressed in late-19th-century finery—are tucked beneath a leafy tree on Lake Ontario's Bay of Quinte. J.R., who grew up on an eastern Ontario farm, had been a principal at a school in Caledonia, Ont., and, later, the dean of the Teachers' College of Syracuse University, in New York State. Educators had the luxury of summers off, so J.R. and his wife, Rose, were looking for a warm-weather getaway for their family. They purchased property on Bostwick Island to be close to hometown friends and a familiar landscape.

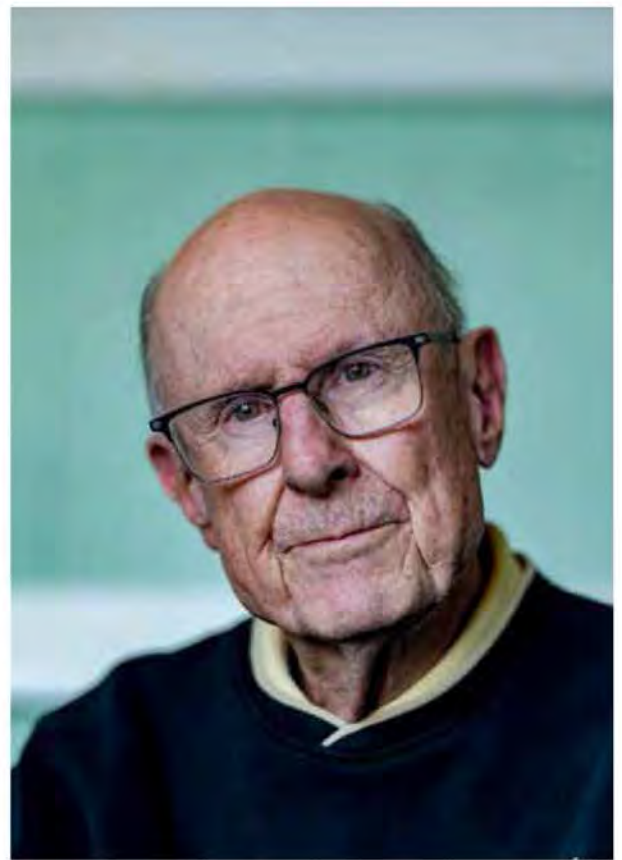
Bostwick, at about 300 acres, was a logical choice. It's within rowing distance from the mainland; in the late 1800s, it already had a working farm and a board-inghouse; and its Half Moon Bay, a crescent of rock resembling a *plein-air* church, was a popular spot, especially on Sunday evenings when mainlanders and islanders would tie up their boats for vesper services.

At first, the Streets set up camp in canvas tents, but, by 1905, J.R. had a cottage with woodsy green cedar shakes built, the foundation and fireplace made with granite from a quarry on the other side of the island. Some 15 years later, after Rose's death and the cloud of the First World War, the place was shuttered. Until, by 1936, the next generation of Streets returned.

Their energy made the cottage, which had enough space for everyone to bunk, the heart of summer. J.R.'s grandson Bob—Chris's dad—remembers those times: lots of cousins, playing canasta beneath the kerosene lamp in the dining room, lively dances accompanied by the cottage's Victrola, and a teenage boat culture, where many kids had access to family boats or their own vessels and the freedom to go where they pleased.

"In 1950, when I was 13 years old," says Bob, "I bought a motor with my paper route money, and then my dad bought a fourteen-foot cedar-strip boat for me. It just flew and was such a fun thing." He recalls cruising all over with friends, visiting islands and the mainland, as well as "shoe-skiing," where the fronts and backs of old skis were sawn off, leaving just enough base for a foot to skim across the water.

In 1953, Bob and his dad, John, built a boxy, 900-sq.-ft. cottage on land beside the existing Street cottage. Meanwhile, as relatives aged and kids grew up and moved on, the original cottage next door languished, while Bob's family cottage, after a renovation in the early 2000s, continued to expand. He and his wife, Paula, renamed it "Sunnyside." By 2015, "Old Camp," as the original cottage was called, was at risk of crumbling into the river if it didn't receive necessary—and costly—upgrades. Bob and his two sisters had inherited it, but the siblings weren't interested in investing in it. "We wanted it to stay in the Street family," says Bob, but its only hope of rescue laid with someone else. "It broke my heart to sell." »



Chris and Gabrielle (opposite) will host upwards of 25 guests each summer. On her "bop around" boat tours, Gabrielle shows guests the islands, a sunken boat, or where a cottage burned down. "You end up telling the same stories over and over, but it's the lore of the place," she says. The lore of the Street cottage covers five generations, much of it preserved in photos. Bob (above) spent his youth on the river with a large, extended family, including his uncle Walter Street (above, left, with Bob on the right).







Nonprofit organizations, particularly ones aimed at transforming the lives of kids from poor and underserved communities, require indefatigable leaders with complete dedication. For more than three decades, Gabrielle, the co-founder and CEO of the All Stars Project, based in New York City, worked alongside Chris to build a thriving organization that uses the arts and mentorship to bring people together across racial and economic lines in many U.S. cities. The pace of their work left little time for anything else.

But that trip to Bostwick in 2014, when Chris brought Gabrielle—by then they'd been a couple for two years—to the Thousand Islands to meet his parents, opened his past. When any kid who hadn't passed the family swim test had to wear a life preserver if they stepped off the porch. The time Bob, a pilot, flew Paula, Chris and his three siblings, their bikes, and the dog in a Piper Cub from Connecticut, landing in a field near Gananoque. And the winters, back when the St. Lawrence froze over, that the family walked, connected to one another with a rope, from the mainland to Bostwick, then sledged over the island's snowdrifts.

Also on that 2014 visit, Chris saw family portraits on the walls; he'd been photoshopped in. Gone, but not forgotten.

Gabrielle was introduced to Chris's family, the Streets' history on the island, as well as Old Camp, which by then had stood for more than a hundred years. It was in rough shape, much worse than it had been during Chris's childhood.

Gabrielle immediately “appreciated Bostwick's natural beauty and the peace,” says Chris. And she saw something else—potential. »

“We wanted it to stay in the Street family,” says Bob. But by then, the cottage’s only hope of rescue laid with someone else

The boat on display (above) was used to row materials from the mainland to the property during Old Camp's build. When Chris and Gabrielle bought the place, they found the boat tucked behind the stones beneath the cottage. Architect Brian Miller had the idea to add mortar to the surrounding stonework and enshrine the boat behind Plexiglas.



- ◀ In the dining room, a white, floor-to-ceiling cabinet showcases the china Gabrielle found in a closet behind the kitchen during the reno. “I had to give some of it away,” she says. “There were five gazillion pieces.” The dishes on the wall rail are just for display; Gabrielle tested them and found that they contained lead paint.
- ◀ Designer Carolyn Pritchett made strategic paint choices in an effort to brighten the cottage’s red-toned wood: a “cheerful yellow” for the butler’s pantry; warm white on the window casings and painted-on lattice-work; and a misty blue for the floors.
- ▼ The standout fireplace is built from granite quarried on the island during construction. “It will probably still be here in another hundred years,” says Gabrielle.
- The original main bedroom is now for guests. Chris and Gabrielle combined several of the rooms on the south side of the cottage to create an updated primary suite.

PHOTOS BY KRISTA JAHNKE

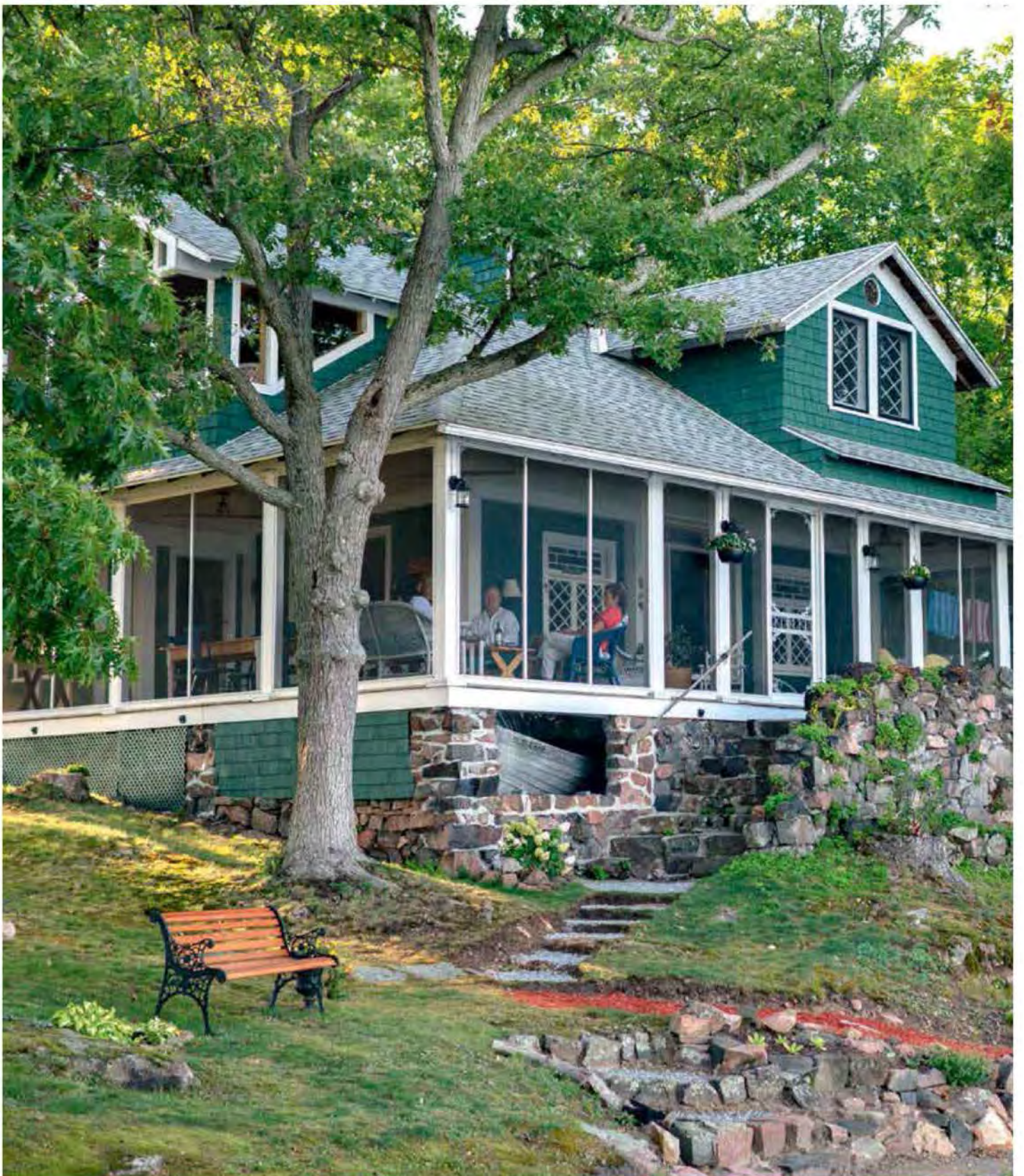


The unrelenting pace of Gabrielle and Chris’s careers and the desire to be closer to Bob and Paula—Gabrielle had lost her parents years ago—led the couple to consider finding a vacation home in the Thousand Islands. “We needed our own place, and we needed to stay close,” says Chris.

Bostwick had family roots, and it’s “an island paradise where it’s beautiful in any weather,” says Gabrielle. She envisioned a restored Old Camp.

So in 2017—after the Street family made the tough decision to sell—Gabrielle and Chris proposed the perfect solution. They bought the old camp in 2019 and embarked on a massive and thoughtful renovation, “something people in this community appreciate, because we stayed true to the original,” says Chris. (New, modern builds on these historic islands aren’t always embraced.)

“Five boatloads of accumulation, including mattresses, clothes, and magazines were cleaned out,” says Gabrielle. To modernize the cottage, Kate and Brian Miller—a father-daughter architectural team at Stone + Pine in Cobourg, Ont.—designed a bump-out from the side of the building—adding a laundry room, mudroom, bathroom, pantry, and an outdoor shower. >>





Gabrielle and Chris kept much of the original cottage's furniture, which was either refinished, painted, or reupholstered. Some pieces came from island neighbours; others they found locally. Artwork with personal significance was hung throughout. A tin-lined ice-box became a liquor cabinet; the original Street family guest book was dusted and set out for new entries; the Victrola was displayed in the living room with the records (still in ready-to-play condition) that accompanied the foxtrot all those years ago; and the old canasta table with J.R.'s initials on its side was left as centerpiece of the dining room. Chris and Gabrielle kept ice tongs, cast iron pans, a beaver-skin flensing knife, and other artifacts, including sets of china that had been packed in apple crates. "They left everything in this rustic camp," says Gabrielle.

After the construction teams finished, interior designer Carolyn Pritchett, who'd worked with Gabrielle and Chris on their historic home in Dallas, where the couple had moved for work in 2021, came to Bostwick. With Carolyn as a helpful resource, Gabrielle, who likes a challenge, painted the verandah walls, wicker furniture, metal chairs, and more than a dozen windows with what seemed like endless diamond lattice. Gabrielle also restored some of the cottage's antique furniture and built several new stone steps leading up from the dock.

But "the real MVP of this project," according to Carolyn, as well as Chris and Gabrielle, was—and continues to be—Peter Reid.

Peter first came to Sunnyside when Bob and Paula hired him to help seasonally, beginning in 2001. After Gabrielle and Chris bought Old Camp, they hired Peter as a full-time caretaker to look out for both Street family cottages. Peter grew up in "Gan," where his dad was the town's chief of police. For more than 50 years, his brother Terry has been caretaker for a cottage on the other side of Bostwick.

Peter is quiet, his humour apparent in a subtle smile and, often, his choice of T-shirt. Among his collection is one that says, "I'm not perfect but I have a freaking awesome wife. That's close enough." Another: "I need a new friend. The last one escaped." And then there's, "What happens on the river, stays on the river." He's become a master at making furniture, meticulously replicating designs from books and catalogues. "It's something I like doing," says Peter. "I look at it, tear it apart in my mind, and build it." But he's also a respected boat-builder and restorer who's been at it since the mid-1980s. »

The screened porch features a swing that Gabrielle gave Chris for his 50th birthday. "I dreamed it up, and Peter built it," she says. Though the couple considered changing the cottage's exterior colour, they opted to keep the original green.

Gabrielle and Paula (below, from left) chat in front of Bob and Paula's place. Historic cottages are abundant in the Thousand Islands. During the reno, Chris (opposite) and Gabrielle visited some nearby to study design features for their restoration.

In Chris and Gabrielle's cottage, he rebuilt the verandah's screens and refinished the doors, stripping and sanding them to a buttery finish. From some island trees, he built side tables, coffee tables, and benches, and he used reclaimed barnboards for the kitchen's butcher-block counters. He added clever touches, such as a fold-down bench in the mudroom, mimicking a pocket seat on a boat.

"He's very involved in our lives and having him around every day is one of the wonderful things about being up here," says Gabrielle. Knowing how important Bob's beloved cedar-strip Peterborough had been to him as a child, Peter set to work to restore it as a surprise. When he presented the boat to Bob last fall, it was followed by "victorious tooling around the river," says Gabrielle.



On the lawn of Chris and Gabrielle's cottage—renamed Beach House for the property's sliver of sandy beach, unusual in a place where most islands heave, steep and rocky, out from the river—a hammock swings in the breeze. Toward a marshy island cove, a family of swans swims by, cygnets in tow, and ink-coloured cormorants flap overhead. Across

the horizon, islands punctuate the vast St. Lawrence. Gabrielle takes her daily swim while Chris, now the president and CEO of the All Stars Project (Gabrielle stepped down to serve on the board's executive committee), is inside on a work call. The couple spend four months a year on Bostwick and have found a rhythm that includes rules, such as no phones on the verandah, and "bop-arounds," as Gabrielle calls them, to visit with island friends, as well as sunset cruises and regular visits next door with Bob and Paula.

"This is all very meaningful and spiritual in a way I wasn't expecting," says Chris. "We're continuing a legacy." He adds, "My parents are beside themselves."

Indeed, Bob says he's thrilled. He recently received his Canadian citizenship, something he's long wanted. Now, at 88, his mind wanders to this island that's brought him so much happiness, which often leads him to tears. But he also looks to the future. Bob and Paula donated the majority of their property to the Thousand Islands Watershed Land Trust, including a recent addition to help preserve Half Moon Bay. They know Chris and Gabrielle—"so dedicated to doing good," says Bob—will continue to protect, preserve, and love this place. "Bostwick's never been more important." 🐾

Annie Stoltie is the editor-in-chief of Adirondack Life magazine. This is her first feature for Cottage Life.



