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THE MAGAZINE OF MAINE

# Down East

OCTOBER 2011

## The Ultimate Maine Cottage

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**INSIDE-OUT** From the eight tons of imported Portuguese limestone surrounding the living room fireplace to the infinity edge pool and hot-tub on the patio outside, no expense was spared in the quest to create one of Maine's most luxurious new homes.



The work of top Maine  
craftsmen reaches a  
crescendo in an elaborate  
new home in Southport.



# Magnum Opus

by JOSHUA F. MOORE | photography by BRIAN VANDEN BRINK



CREATIVITY, MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, IS A SOLITARY affair. Composers, painters, writers — each toils alone. And yet on tiny Pratts Island, on Southport's western shore, over the past four years, dozens of Maine's most talented craftsmen have been gathering, at times literally elbow-to-elbow, to create one of Maine's most spectacular new homes. The result, a 17,884-square-foot oceanside complex situated on 5.69 acres of granite ledge, is proof that creativity and collaboration are not, in fact, mutually exclusive.

"When I talk to the other people who were down there, they say it was a dance — you had to learn how to dance with the electricians, and the carpenters, and the painters, and the video guys," says Dan Ucci, whose East Pittston-based Ledge Hill Creations served as the mason contractor for the project overlooking the Sheepscot River. "But once everybody learned to dance together, everybody worked together."

The inspiration and motivation (not to mention the significant funding) behind this creative endeavor came from a fifty-eight-year-old bachelor named Paul Coulombe. The CEO of White Rock Distilleries in Lewiston, maker of the popular Pinnacle line of liquors, Coulombe says he considers himself to be a liquor marketer more than a liquor manufacturer. He wanted his dream home to be an expression of creativity: both his own and that of his master Maine craftsmen. "This house is a creation, and I love the creative aspect of things," Coulombe said

during a recent tour. "I knew that I wanted to be heavily involved in the project."

But he also recognized that he couldn't possibly gather all the right "dance partners" for a project of this scale himself, and so he turned to Steve Malcom, who has been building homes in the Boothbay area since 1976, and Malcom's Knickerbocker Group. "Steve had the most extensive crew, the most in-house architects, and he had the sophistication, knowledge, and experience to build my dream house," says Coulombe, who also maintains homes in Cape Elizabeth and Bonita Springs, Florida.

In the 1,421 days that elapsed between Malcom's first meeting with Coulombe and the day last June when the builder handed the homeowner his front-door key, a metamorphosis happened on Pratts Island. Instead of being just another job, the project evolved into a point of personal pride for each of the craftsmen who crossed the wooden, one-lane bridge onto the island, population twenty-one. "Because we were pushing the envelope on all the trades, people were excited to be involved," Malcom says. "They became invested in the project, where they were interested not just in their own piece, but in all the other things going on. Nobody wanted to be the weak link."

PRACTICALLY FROM THE MOMENT YOU DRIVE ONTO the wraparound cobblestone driveway, the dedication and skill that went into this project is apparent. The post-and-beam barn,

**WOW WELCOME** The double staircase in the foyer of the property's 8,770-square-foot main house draws visitors' eyes up to the paneled ceiling above and to the Atlantic beyond. Marrying the house to the granite outcroppings, at left, was a key challenge for the Knickerbocker Group's architect, Rick Nelson. The resulting floorplan flows seamlessly from the living room and round sunporch onto the granite terrace and eventually onto the shoreside ledges. Virtually every inch of this nearly six-acre property has been refined toward helping the homeowner entertain his guests.



which Coulombe says he built “to store summer toys” (he only plans to use the property seasonally), and a collection of arcade-style video games for visiting children, features joinery appropriate for the finest living rooms. In the 3,250-square-foot guesthouse, where Coulombe lived over the course of four years during his weekly visits to the job site, granite trim brings the surroundings inside and contrasts wonderfully with the house’s white-painted cottage style. And finally the “boathouse” — actually a 2,440-square-foot garage with a full apartment upstairs and an exercise room downstairs — hides one of the property’s many surprises. Its basement contains all the utilities for the property, a dizzying array of heating and plumbing lines that connect to the main house through a full-headroom, concrete-lined tunnel that ensures Coulombe and his guests (he had clients and friends scheduled for sleep-overs every summer weekend this year) will never be disturbed by the sound of a boiler kicking on in the middle of the night.

In a property replete with superlatives, it seems unlikely that the 8,770-square-foot main house would top the rest of the estate, and yet from the front doorstep it becomes apparent that this building represents the pinnacle of craftsmanship on the site. “Veneer work is pretty standard, but around the stairs we were tying in capstone details and even cutting the little mouse lights into the stone,” explains mason Dan Ucci. “If we had an eighth of an inch gap, the guys would sweat over it. It’s not often you have the chance to put your skills to work in that kind of a setting, and it was that attention to detail that got people excited to go to work.”

Pass through the front door — like all the others on the property, it and its jambs are slightly curved — and into the foyer, and there’s no denying that you’ve entered a higher level of fit and finish. Twin staircases draw your eye up past a crystal chandelier Coulombe discovered in France, yet both Malcom and the homeowner himself take pains to point out smaller details that are no less impressive, such as the way the bannisters tie into the multi-faceted molding at the top of the stairs. (This single bit of easily overlooked joinery took seven hours to complete, the builder says.)

Beyond, the eight tons of Portuguese limestone surrounding the fireplace and the intricate moldings rimming the living room almost succeed in distracting a visitor from the main attraction — the bold Atlantic crashing literally just a handful of steps beyond. Ensuring that the living room would flow seamlessly, without a step or other transition, out through the wide

#### SUM OF ITS PARTS

The craftsmanship that went into creating Paul Coulombe’s summer mansion is among the best in Maine. The double camber of the master bedroom ceiling, at top left, was so complex it had to be designed at Bath Iron Works. The raised cabana, at top center, and the wood-paneled bar, just off the kitchen, both reflect the owner’s interest in enjoying a cocktail — appropriate since he made his fortune in the liquor industry. Porches, at lower left and right, are sprinkled throughout the main house as well as various guesthouses. Finally, the faux finishes that lead to the master study are fitting for a showpiece home of this magnitude.





**17,884** Total square footage of interior space

**386,892** Total man- (and woman-!) hours involved in the project

**8,770** Square footage of main house

**3,250** Square footage of guesthouse

**2,400** Square footage of garage, including apartment

**35** Televisions installed

**46** Trades involved

**62** Highest number of craftsmen on-site at any one time

**4** Years to complete project



patio doors and onto the granite ledges was the single most important factor in the entire house, Malcom says. “I had always envisioned that anyone who built a house on that lot would step from the house right onto the stone terrace, the ledge,” he says, noting that his civil engineers were extra-careful to make sure they toed, but did not cross, the shoreland setback line. “That’s where it all started.”

And yet the project hardly ended there, due in large part to the owner’s ever-expanding enthusiasm and dreams. “Paul had a fairly extensive program, and he kept wanting bigger and bigger spaces and more elbow room,” Malcom says, adding that working around restrictive covenants on the property was a significant challenge. Footings for the raised “cabana,” for instance, had already been poured when Coulombe purchased a neighboring two-acre parcel, allowing the cabana to be relocated (and a 1,874-square-foot caretaker’s cottage to be built).

Interior details, too, kept getting more elaborate: Instead of a flat ceiling in the master bedroom, Coulombe requested a double-arched overhead that he’d seen in Versailles, the lofting of which required a specialized CAD device available only at Bath Iron Works. Every bathroom features wall-to-wall marble. Each bedroom is

paired with its own sitting area, complete with a full bar and television and sun porch. “You know, I don’t watch TV, but I thought it was important for my guests to have the option of a TV,” Coulombe remarks. “People tend to gather around bars — they’re comfortable around them. And I do sell liquor for a living!”

Hallway walls took on a faux finish that resembles velvet, while the study’s ceiling looks like actual leather to all but the most trained eye. “This was Paul’s dream home, and he wanted it to be everything that he wanted — his favorite colors, with rich deep tones,” says Tracy Davis, of Portland, whose Urban Dwellings interior design firm was one of the first subcontractors on the site. “The fine details were extremely important to him, but this house is not ostentatious from the exterior by any means. It’s really luxury that is built on quality and craft, versus garish statement.”

Though Coulombe refuses to consider just how much such details added to the overall cost of the project — “It’s still shocking to me how much this house cost,” he admits — knowing that he got the best out of Maine craftsmen was worth every penny. “Steve told me once that I made him a better builder,” Coulombe says. “And that’s really what it’s all about.” ▲



# Cast of Characters

The most noteworthy aspect of this elaborate project may well be the craftsmen themselves.

An impressive undertaking at any time, the building of Paul Coulombe's summer home had an especially big impact during a period when most Maine craftsmen were feeling the pinch of the economic recession. "This project came at a time when people were really desperate for work," says Knickerbocker's

Steve Malcom. "For months on end we had sixty people on-site there, so there's no doubt it pulled a lot of families through some tough times."

Here some of the key craftsmen explain their role in the project, in their own words, and how it impacted them personally:



**Dan Ucci**  
*Mason*

"Originally I was contracted to do the guesthouse fireplace, plus the sitting room floor and some work on the barn. Then we added the pool. And then the walkways, and eventually the outdoor fireplace. I'd say we averaged eight guys for about three and a half years, and we were putting in good fifty-hour weeks most of that time. When you think of all the people that got paychecks from that project, it's pretty impressive.

"We had people coming down from the Camden area, Washington, Yarmouth. It wasn't bad in the wintertime, but summertime on Route 1 can be tough.

"Everyone knew that your job was just as important as their job. The cooperation was phenomenal."

*Ledge Hill Creations, Inc. East  
Pittston, 207-458-1819*



**Herb Clarke**  
*Painter*

"I started on the job last November. We took the middle of December off so I could have a son, but otherwise my employee and I stayed in a rental property in downtown Boothbay Harbor.

"Tracy Davis called me about glazing the cabinets, and that's how we got into the job. Then I think there was the study, doing the faux leather. And then they asked me to paint marble pillars in the north suite. At that point, foyer ceiling and walls were up for grabs, and there we were!

"What I liked about Paul was that he was very clear — he knew what he didn't like. Some people don't even know what they like, so you end up running around in circles. But I could bring him just three choices per area, and that narrowed it down really quickly."

*Chameleon Coatings, East Baldwin,  
207-233-1520*



**Lee Lareau**  
*Audio-visual systems installer*

"There are 170 speakers on that property, but the owner didn't want to see any of them. So we had to do things like embed them in the ceiling, and then put a credit-card thickness of plaster over them. In the octagonal wood sunroom we knew we had a real challenge, so we found a product that turns the wood itself into a transducer — it actually excites the wood. We used it there and also outside, in the cabana.

"We've done a lot of really nice homes, but the particular fit and finish of this house, even for Maine, was certainly among the best.

"We put about 1,800 hours into that house. My business is almost ten years old, and we were really fortunate to have a project of that size and scope, especially in this economy."

*Custom Home Theater, Brunswick,  
207-373-1147*



**Tim Vigue**  
*On-site superintendent*

"I've never worked on a project with so many skilled craftsmen in all trades who saw what the opportunity was and stepped not just up to the line, but across it.

"One of the reasons that the owner ended up with the house that he did was that everything was mocked up. You could've built a nice house for what he spent in mockups!

"It was a great help for me and for everybody on that job site in getting us through these tough times. He couldn't have started the project at a better time, but I heard him say that his business actually increases during a recession, so I don't think he ever considered pulling the plug on us."

*T.J.'s Fine Woodworking, Bath,  
207-443-1385*