

DESIGN NEW ENGLAND

Around New England: A True Original

**Design New England**[@DesignNE](#)**ABOUT THIS BLOG**

An insider's look at must-have products, fresh trends, and inspired spaces from the team at Design New England magazine.

February 18, 2015 2:45 PM

Thomas Fenner house, Cranston, Rhode Island. The 17th-century section is to the right.

By William Morgan

A friend rents an old barn in a nondescript suburban area of western Cranston, Rhode Island, where he is restoring a 1974 Citroën DS19. Being a French car maven, I jumped at the invitation to see the engineless chassis up on blocks, surrounded by bits of hydro-pneumatic suspension and other exotic parts. My

friend happened to mention that I might want to take a look at the old house next to the barn.

Unknown to me, the house is Providence Plantation's oldest dwelling. The Major Thomas Fenner house was built in 1677, right after King Philip's War, when Narragansett warriors torched just about every house near Providence. Richard Fenner, a transplanted New Englander living in California and a descendant of the colonial soldier, owns the house.

Fenner learned about the house while researching family genealogy. He visited the home about a dozen years ago, and purchased it not long thereafter. Fenner hopes to someday furnish the house with period furniture, fill it with family memorabilia, and open it occasionally to the public. Right now, the house is secure but empty.

This is a state with lots of old houses, but what is amazing about this one is that it has hardly been changed in nearly two centuries. While the 17th-century part of foundation, two rooms, and an attic saw some evolutionary additions, the latest changes were made back in 1835. None of the several generations of Fenners who lived here were ever wealthy enough to undertake major changes to the house. (The farm is now only three acres, although there is a pond.)



The chimney in the main hall of the Fenner house.

As first built, the house's ground floor was a single room, the so-called keeping room (any room in that early a house would have been multi-purpose). But one wall features a magnificent 10-foot-wide, 4-foot-deep fireplace large enough to redefine the meaning of the word hearth. The Rhode Island volume of the *Buildings of the United States* singles this room out as "perhaps the most dramatic seventeenth-century interior in the state." Early New England survival-style simplicity, rather than the more refined Georgian is the order of the day.



The stone end wall/chimney of the Fenner house. (Note the late Medieval form of chimneystack.)

Outside, that fireplace is reflected in the striking feature of the huge chimney that takes up most of the north wall, reflecting the late Medieval style of rural England from whence early New Englanders came. There are two other examples of these "stone-enders" nearby, the Clemence-Irons house in Johnston and the Eleazar Arnold house in Lincoln.



The Clemence-Irons house in Johnston, Rhode Island, in the late 19th century. (Historic American Building Survey)

While better known than the Fenner house, these neighbors were extensively “restored” in the early 20th century by pioneering preservationists who believed that taking a building back to a perfect if imagined early appearance was the proper antiquarian approach, even if it meant removing or obliterating significant later changes.



The Clemence-Irons house after restoration. (The Cape Cod Cottage, Princeton Architectural Press: 2004)

Those well-intentioned renovations are interesting from an historical standpoint, but in avoiding such a facelift the Major Thomas Fenner house became a significant survivor.

Great design is always at your fingertips! Read *Design New England's* [January/February 2015](#) issue online!