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Christmas Comes Full Circle

BY DAWN C. ADILETTA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY HOAG LEVINS

INSPIRED BY CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF HIS FAMILY'S 1790S DELAWARE HOMESTEAD, LEROY HAZZARD HAS SPENT HIS ADULT LIFE COLLECTING AND CURATING THE ANTIQUES THAT FILL HIS OWN 1774 HOUSE. IT SHINES ESPECIALLY BRIGHTLY DURING THE CHRISTMAS SEASON.



CHRISTMAS CAN never start too early for those who love the season. For Leroy Hazzard, Christmas begins shortly after

Halloween—unless you count the Christmas music he starts perfecting in August. A pianist at a large Washington, D.C., church, Leroy often practices for Christmas performances and services in the heart of summer. So, somehow it doesn't seem too early to begin decorating

in early November and having everything completed in time for Thanksgiving.

For nearly two decades, Christmas for Leroy has included filling his 18th-Century house in Magnolia, Delaware, with greenery, seasonal folk art, lots of music, and good friends. But it wasn't always that way.

Leroy grew up in a 1970s house outside of Washington, D.C., and his first two homes were suburban contemporaries. But in his heart, he wanted an 18th-Century house. His childhood home sat near a late-17th-Century house he admired, and every summer and on family vacations, his family gathered at the 1790s Hazzard family homestead, where even as a boy he marveled at the raised paneled walls and wide-planked floors.

Now he's the proud owner and careful steward of the 1774 Matthew and Elizabeth Lowber House.

AN EARLY START

A talented musician who studied music at the University of Maryland, Leroy considered a career as a concert pianist but ultimately accepted a job at the U.S. Senate, eventually working in procurement in the Senate's Office of the Sergeant of Arms. Serendipitously, he worked next door to the Senate Curator, making his procurement job an unexpected introduction to history, beautiful arts, and antiquities.

The steady income of the Senate job also allowed Leroy to continue as the pianist at his church and purchase a home. Remembering his days living in a small, contemporary "discount budget" house, he recalled, "I didn't really have a style, but a friend gave me a copy of *Colonial Homes* and the pictures reminded me of my paternal great-grandparents' house and reminded me of how much I liked the wide floors and paneling of 18th-Century houses.

Matthew and Elizabeth Lowber built their brick house in 1774 in Magnolia, Delaware, well before the town grew up around it.



A Treharn Furniture tiger maple table is set with flow-blue china holding Paul McClintock's faux Christmas pudding with hard sauce. Reproduction pewter goblets, trenchers, and candlesticks complete the presentation. An antique pewter bowl signed by a yet-to-be-identified maker's mark rests on a penny rug and holds an assortment of stone fruit. Dried apples hang from a chandelier by Great Windsor Chairs. The dining room doubles as Leroy's music room, with a Baldwin artist grand piano fit into a niche created in the 1850s. A Federal-period looking glass, decorated with eagles and dolphins, hangs over the mantel decorated with an assortment of 18th-Century brass candlesticks, pewter, and Christmas greens. Two William Roth reproduction banister-back chairs Leroy bought in Yarmouth Port, Massachusetts, flank the wide hearth, which is filled with a collection of 18th-Century boxes.



I furnished my first house in what I called a Williamsburg style, but it was mostly reproductions.”

While working at the Senate, Leroy met others who liked early houses and period pieces. Encouraged by his friends, he upgraded to a three-storey colonial-style townhouse nestled in an 18th-Century community and began seriously collecting antiques, purchasing 18th-Century case furniture, Windsor chairs, and early tables. He began refining his flow-blue china and pewter collections. But he still wanted an 18th-Century house.

He searched for years. Some were too expensive. Others had very little original fabric. Still others were too remote. In all, he considered eleven period houses before a realtor friend told him of a 1770s house in the small town of Magnolia. Coincidentally, he saw the same house in an online search

OPPOSITE The 6-foot-tall tree is one of nine Leroy puts up every year. It's decorated with colored lights, green satin ribbons, and an assortment of new and vintage glass ornaments. The dining room is visible behind it. Overhead is more of Leroy's flow-blue collection, vintage celluloid deer, and antique copper lustre ware. The mid-1900s nativity Leroy's grandmother gave him sits beneath the tree.

and again in a magazine. The house kept popping up.

So, he drove nearly 100 miles to see it in person. “My parents thought I had lost my mind,” Leroy confided, “but when I saw the four rooms with original raised paneling it was love at first sight.”

In 2006, he purchased the 1774 Mathew Lowber House and began his adventures as an old house owner. For five years Leroy worked on refurbishing the house as he commuted between Washington and Delaware. Life got easier when he began telecommuting in 2011 before retiring in 2013.

Originally built for a prosperous Quaker farm family, the two-storey brick house is a typical Delaware

hall-and-parlor farmhouse, three bays long and one room deep. Because it is so representational of its architectural type, and retains a remarkable amount of its original material, it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Floor-to-ceiling paneling lines the walls of four rooms, wide tongue-and-groove planks cover the floors, and two dog-leg staircases lead to the upper level. The original kitchen was in a separate building, so no cooking hearth survives, but the house holds five working fireplaces, including one with a crane for a hanging tea kettle.

In a quiet statement of 18th-Century affluence, the Lowbers marked their initials and the year the house

The 18th-Century Pennsylvania pine corner cupboard was the first piece Leroy purchased specifically for the Lowber House. It displays more of his collection of flow blue. A model of the house, made by friend Howie Alboum, sits on top. Leroy painted the William Gordon tavern sign. Great Windsor Chairs made the double bow-back Windsor bench.





was built with glazed brick headers laid at the peak of the south gable wall. For decades the Lowber manse was the only dwelling in the area that would eventually become the town of Magnolia. It changed hands many times as the town slowly developed in the mid-19th Century, and the house increased in size by a third when a framed and clapboarded wing was added in about 1855.

SAVED AGAIN

But by the 1960s, the once prominent home, then vacant, was slated for destruction. Fortunately, local preservationists convinced the state of Delaware to preserve it instead. The state purchased the structure, placed a historic easement on it, had

it documented as part of the National Register nomination process, and included it in the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS).

Still, the house remained vacant and vulnerable until 1980, when Joseph and Dorothy Eberly purchased it. Leroy credits the couple with stabilizing and preserving the house. With the blessing of the National Register Review, they had the house jacked up and moved intact approximately 100 yards to its current location.

The Eberlys upgraded the electricity and plumbing, updated the bathroom and kitchen, and restored the original fenestration. They also faced the new cinderblock foundation with original bricks salvaged from the move, and uncovered original

paint layers and traces of early wall stenciling. But most importantly they *lived* in the house. In 2006, by then in their eighties, the Eberlys sold their beloved home to Leroy. They were, he remembered, sad to leave but delighted to find a new steward to love and care for the house.

Despite the Eberlys' work, by 2006 the house needed another round of upgrades. Leroy updated the HVAC system to moderate Delaware's temperature and humidity variations and create a stable environment for his antiques. He installed Norwegian Jøtul wood stoves in two of the fireplaces to provide safer and more efficient heat.

Leroy's younger brother repaired the front stairs and remodeled the two

A large Heriz carpet anchors the south end of the living room. A 1760s tavern table with breadboard edges holds an Arnett Santa and a dough bowl filled with greens and a candle. Over the mantel, a Federal-style looking glass and Donna Weaver wax figures are draped in satin ribbon. An early-19th-Century French shelf clock sits on the mantel with Shooner American Redware plates and figurines, flow-blue berry bowls, and mid-19th-Century brass and crystal girandoles. On the right, an 1810 English linen press Leroy bought in North Beach, Maryland, conceals the television. To the left of the window, a reproduction painting of James Madison sits behind a Pairpoint Glass Company lamp with a reverse glass painted shade. Southwood Furniture produced the yellow sofa.



The south gable end of the Lowber House shows the glazed bricks outlining the initials of Matthew and Elizabeth Lowber, the date of construction, and a shadow of an earlier wing.

existing bathrooms. One has primitive painted antiques and the other, which retains the original 19th-Century cast-iron claw-foot tub, is finished in classic black and white.

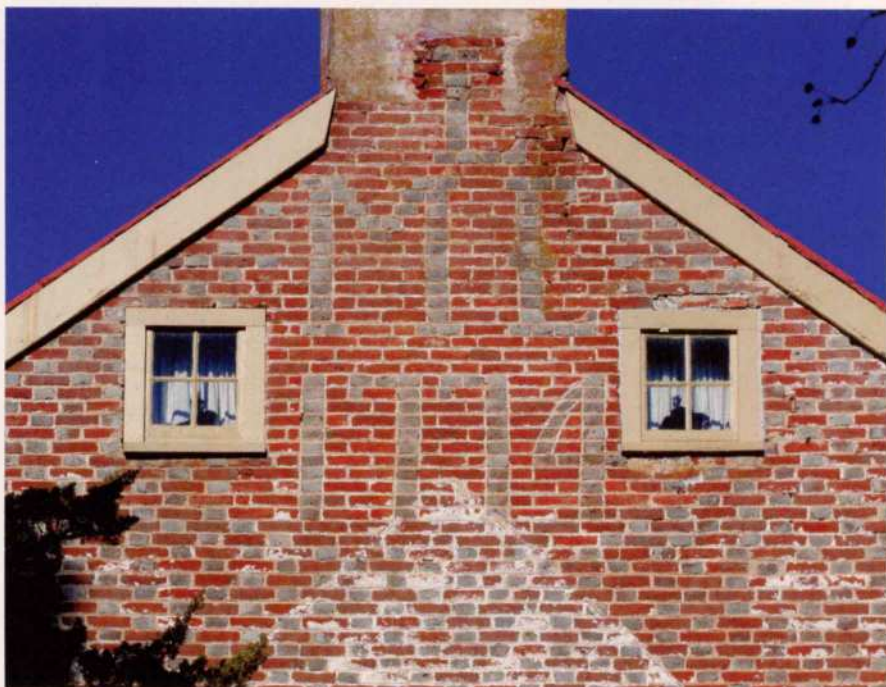
Leroy also remodeled the Eberlys' 20-plus-year-old kitchen. Because he wanted a kitchen to compliment the house and his growing interest in primitives, he hired the Workshops of David T. Smith to create a "collected look" kitchen. Using an original 19th-Century built-in cabinet as a design cue, and incorporating pieces of his own work, Leroy further melded the old with the new.

Outside, Leroy brought in 16 tons of crushed clamshells to create a period-appropriate driveway and added plantings including bearded iris, English boxwood, and hydrangea. In 2020, he added a rear ell to accommodate guests. By installing wooden chair rails and trim to match the originals and using early-19th-Century window sash, Leroy made sure the 21st-Century addition complimented the 18th- and 19th-Century portions.

BRUSH IN HAND

And, Leroy added with a laugh, "I painted every surface, including the standing seam roof." Using unifying but historical colors throughout the house, he covered the plaster walls with Fine Linen by Ralph Lauren Paint and the paneling and trim in Benjamin Moore's Williamsburg Paint George Pitt Caramel.

Throughout the refurbishment, Leroy visited historic house museums



to study period room layouts and curatorial thoughts on historical interiors.

He'd been a fan of Colonial Williamsburg for many years, but now he sought out individual houses to learn more about domestic spaces. He went to the John Dickinson Plantation in Dover and the Peter Wentz Farmhouse in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, observing how curators combined furnishings from different periods.

"I began to see the beauty of painted primitives and the way they transitioned to the more formal English and American pieces I had already collected," Leroy explained. "This developed into an interest in trying my hand at folk art, beginning with my take on a Rufus Porter mural in the kitchen staircase in 2015."

Pleased with the finished mural, which includes images of the Lowber House, Leroy started painting tavern

signs and small case goods. Among his first projects was an old dough bowl he painted in a primitive finish. It turned out so well its successors are popular sellers in Leroy's antiques business, Hazzards Corner.

Like many collectors, Leroy began selling pieces as his collections grew or his interests shifted. Hazzards Corner opened in a multi-dealer shop in Wyoming, Delaware, where he met Magnolia neighbors and now friends, Rose and Howard Alboum. Rose is the celebrated creator of *The American Legacy Quilt Index*, and among Howard's many talents are his miniature folk art houses, including a version of the Matthew Lowber house he gave to Leroy.

During the pandemic, Leroy realized (as many antiques dealers have) that he could sell through Hazzards Corner's online presence. He posts objects beneath the 18th-Century



LEFT Leroy painted the tavern-style sign that hangs outside his home, festively decorated for the holidays. The sign lists the dates of the home's original construction and the two additions.

RIGHT Longtime friend Ken Bouchard gave Leroy this National Register sign for Christmas. Coincidentally, the house was listed on Leroy's date of birth.





LEFT Leroy tops an 1850s English sideboard in the living room with a 1940s Fontanini nativity he found in Cape Cod and more pieces of flow-blue china. **RIGHT** Leroy found this 23-piece chalkware nativity set, probably from the 1930s, in an antiques store in Lewes, Delaware, about 20 years ago. He has displayed it every year since and considers it a favorite.

The sitting room in the new addition features early-19th-Century windows Leroy found in Harwich, Massachusetts. He bought the large reproduction theorem between them in Cotuit, Massachusetts. It is flanked by Colonial Tin Works sconces. A late-19th-Century chalkware nativity sits on top of a one-drawer box atop a mid-19th-Century jelly cupboard with its original plum-colored paint finish. The dough bowl at the base of the cupboard is painted dark blue. An overshot coverlet from Family Heir-Loom Weavers is draped across the wing chair covered in Virginia Sampler fabric from Primitive Homespuns Wool and Needleworks. The 9-foot tree is decorated with white lights, dried orange slices, popcorn garlands, pinecones, and new and vintage glass ornaments.



RIGHT A c. 1780s sampler by Phoebe Harrison, a relative of Presidents William Henry Harrison and Benjamin Harrison, hangs above a mulberry transferware ewer and basin. The 19th-Century hanging shelf above holds a 1920s German nativity, Staffordshire lions, and small redware pieces.

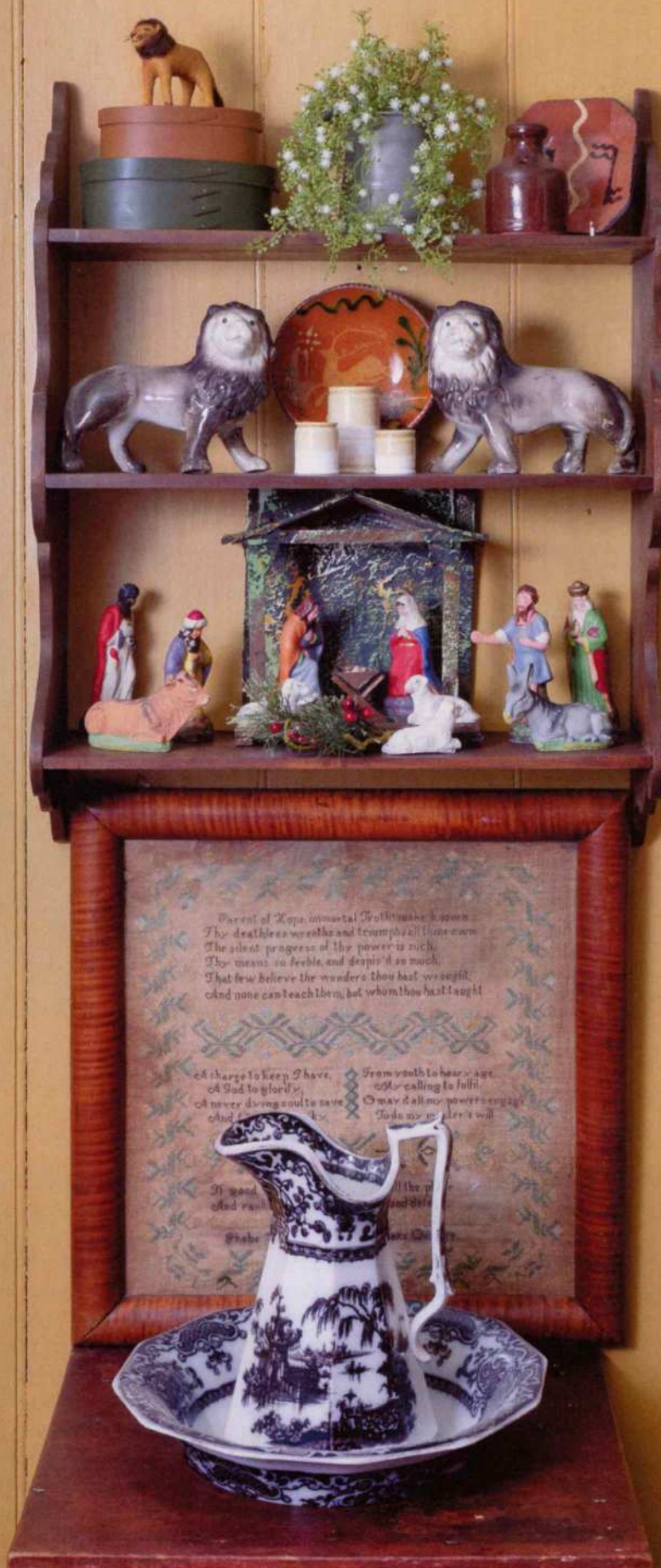


Leroy purchased the incomplete c. 1900 German nativity on ebay then hunted down the missing pieces. Janet Erbe painted the fraktur depicting the Lowber house and Leroy's initials on the end leaves of an 1849 hymnal.



Professor Karl Kuolt, who designed monuments and chapels in southern Germany before he turned to carving, produced the designs for this c. 1970 ANRI hand-carved, hand-painted nativity. It's displayed in Leroy's kitchen.

Leroy bought this c. 1920 German nativity from an online auction. A vintage papier-mâché Santa sits to the right. Two c. 1850s acorn pattern sponge ware plates stand behind the nativity. Leroy's music director gave him the modern jingle bell trees at left.





The east end of the living room contains one of two dog-leg staircases leading to the second floor. An 1810 English tall-case clock is flanked by Donna Weaver wax figures and an assortment of late-18th- and early-19th-Century silhouettes. An antique drum on top of a reproduction drum stand made by Chris Malone and painted by Leroy sits to the clock's right. An Arnett Santa on top of a Hannah Davis wooden band box sits to the left. A Seraph wing chair covered in Brewster flame stitch fabric sits in the right corner. The wing chair on the left is a vintage reproduction covered in an animal pattern fabric.

shopkeeper's salutation "for your consideration." In addition to antiques, Leroy sells his own work—not only the painted dough bowls but also a growing number of bench-made pieces produced by friend Chris Malone, which Leroy finishes in a primitive style.

"Chris is amazing," said Leroy. "I send him photographs of antiques, which he reproduces and I finish." Leroy also often shares inspiration with and receives advice and encouragement from longtime friend Mark Lauer, who is formally trained in the fine arts and a skilled folk artist in his own right.

GOING ALL OUT

Christmas means producing extra pieces for the shop and friends, but for Leroy it also means filling the Lowber house with greens and decorations. "Being part of the *Early American Life* Christmas issue is especially meaningful," he confessed. "Every year, weeks before hauling all the decorations out, I sit down with past Christmas issues of *EAL* to help get into the spirit and get ideas."

He likes the thought that it's his turn to help inspire others.

"I start decorating the week

before Thanksgiving with a goal of having everything indoors done by Thanksgiving Day, and the outside completed by the day after Thanksgiving," Leroy explained. He usually leaves everything up until Epiphany.

When he's done, there are nine trees throughout the house, ranging in size from the 2-foot-high tabletop trees to a 9-foot German twig tree. Although Leroy doesn't have specific themes for each tree, they do vary. One large tree might be decorated with vintage glass decorations, colored lights, and satin ribbon swags, while another



ABOVE The kitchen stairs lead to an upper hall and guest room. Leroy included an image of the Lowber House when he painted the Rufus Porter-inspired mural in 2015, his first attempt at folk art. Friend and fellow antiques dealer Anita Rash gave him the handmade primitive Santa and mohair deer. The repurposed handmade wrought-iron towel rack used as a stair rail was also a gift from Rash. **TOP RIGHT** Friends Anita Rash and Rose Alboum teamed up to surprise Leroy with an Arnett Santa in his favorite blue. Anita created the new costume using wool fabric Rose supplied. **BOTTOM RIGHT** Leroy's childhood stuffed dog sits beneath a tree next to a vintage Santa.

might hold dried fruits and flowers, pinecones, and strings of popcorn.

Evergreen garlands drape doorways, mantels, and banisters, and small trees stand atop cupboards, mantels, and even fill a flow-blue sugar bowl. Because the decorations remain up for more than six weeks, Leroy always uses *faux* trees but augments with fresh greens, adding that “magnolia leaves are plentiful in the gardens.”

Tucked among the greenery and beneath the trees are multiple Arnett Santas, early-20th-Century celluloid

reindeer, and nativities. Especially nativities.

While he was growing up, Leroy's family gathered at his maternal grandmother's 20th-Century Maryland house for Christmas Day. Although her house wasn't as old as his paternal great-grandparents', some of his earliest holiday memories are based there. Especially those that include his fascination with the nativity beneath his grandmother's large Christmas tree.

When she died many years ago, Leroy's maternal grandmother

bequeathed her 1970s nativity set to him. Her gift inspired a collecting focus, and Leroy now owns thirteen different nativities dating from the 1890s through the third quarter of the 20th Century. But his grandmother's crèche remains his sentimental favorite, and it's the first he unpacks when he decorates, placing it beneath his largest Christmas tree, as she did.

Once the decorating is complete, Leroy invites friends and family to see his latest accomplishments. For many years he hosted large



An 1870s rocking horse sporting antique sleigh bells arches over a late-19th-Century tramp art apothecary box. Leroy wanted the horse to be taller, so Chris Malone built the boxes beneath the arch. The horse and chest stand on a c. 1800 New England single-board tavern table. On the left, an 18th-Century English chest-on-frame holds more band boxes, a 19th-Century portrait of an unknown man, and a papier-mâché fox and hound by Craig Yenke. A stack of some of Leroy's collection of overshot coverlets can be seen beneath the chest. Just to the right of the chest hangs a Susan Daul fraktur. On the right, a shelf with its original paint holds an 1850s mantel clock with reverse glass painting. Two early equestrian hats hang below. The blue settee is from Johnston Bench Works.



The Workshops of David T. Smith based Leroy's collected-look kitchen on an original cabinet located beside a fireplace retaining its original crane. Carpenter Chris Malone made the eight-drawer spice box, which Leroy painted. Leroy created the Malone tavern sign specifically for magazine's visit.

“It really is something how collecting antiques, or loving old houses, gets strangers to connect and become instant kindred spirits.”

Christmas parties or held open house tours. Recently he's switched to hosting multiple smaller dinners with close friends, at least three parties every year—one for his musical colleagues, one for his former colleagues in the Senate who share his enthusiasm for antique houses, and one for the new antiques dealer friends he has made since moving to Magnolia.

The party is progressive, with guests moving from house to house for separate dinner courses. Leroy's house is always last so he can serve dessert.

STORIES AND MEMORIES

“Remembrance, like a candle, burns brightest at Christmas time,” wrote Charles Dickens. And while that may be true, Leroy knows that it's his collections that illuminate his memories. “When I first started out collecting antiques,” he mused, “I didn't realize I was creating a memory timeline of people, places, and events in my life. And this feeling is echoed by so many fellow collectors.”

He is quick to acknowledge the many friends and family who have contributed consciously or unknowingly to his knowledge of antiques and appreciation for 18th-Century architecture and material culture. The good fortune of a childhood that included a 1790s family house. (The Hazzard house is now preserved as part of Ship Carpenter Square in Lewes, Delaware.) The friendship of Rose Alboum, who introduced him to Hannah Davis band boxes. The early encouragement of a childhood pastor and his wife, who collected flow-blue china.

“There are so many stories,” Leroy said, laughing, thinking of his collections and the connections to those who have guided him. “It really is something how collecting antiques, or loving old houses, gets strangers to connect and become

instant kindred spirits.”

Leroy's life has been filled with synchronicities, from winding up in an old house only a few miles from his ancestors' farmstead, to the unexpected luck of working for decades next to an expert in fine arts and restoration, to discovering that a favorite grammar school teacher in Maryland is descended from Matthew and Elizabeth Lowber, or the charm of turning strangers into friends because of a shared appreciation of 18th-Century houses or primitive folk art.

Leroy's family takes turns hosting Christmas day, moving the celebration among their homes. And when it's his turn, family members gather around the fireplaces, settle in the comfortable wing chairs, and admire Leroy's vision that revived the Lowber house.

Thinking back to when his parents questioned the logic of buying a 1774 house because of the work and



Mark Lauer made the Baltimore album quilt, with hand-turned appliqué and machine stitching. Leroy painted the hanging box and picture frame made by Chris Malone. On the right are an antique grain-painted shelf clock, more Shooner redware, and a reproduction wrought-iron candelabrum.

time it required, Leroy added that they finally understood when they saw how it was turning out. “One day my Dad said, ‘The house needed you,’” he concluded.

It did indeed. ★

Dawn C. Adiletta is a writer and historian from Woodstock, Connecticut.

A century-old reproduction tiger maple highboy holds a stack of 19th-Century band boxes, an early-1800s Maryland sampler, an 1800s barn lantern, and a flow-blue saucer.



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