Madison architect Duo Dickinson just loves a challenge. He found one in an historic cottage perched on Guilford's rocky Sachem's Head.

BOUNDED BY THE SEA

BY DUO DICKINSON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DENNIS BELL

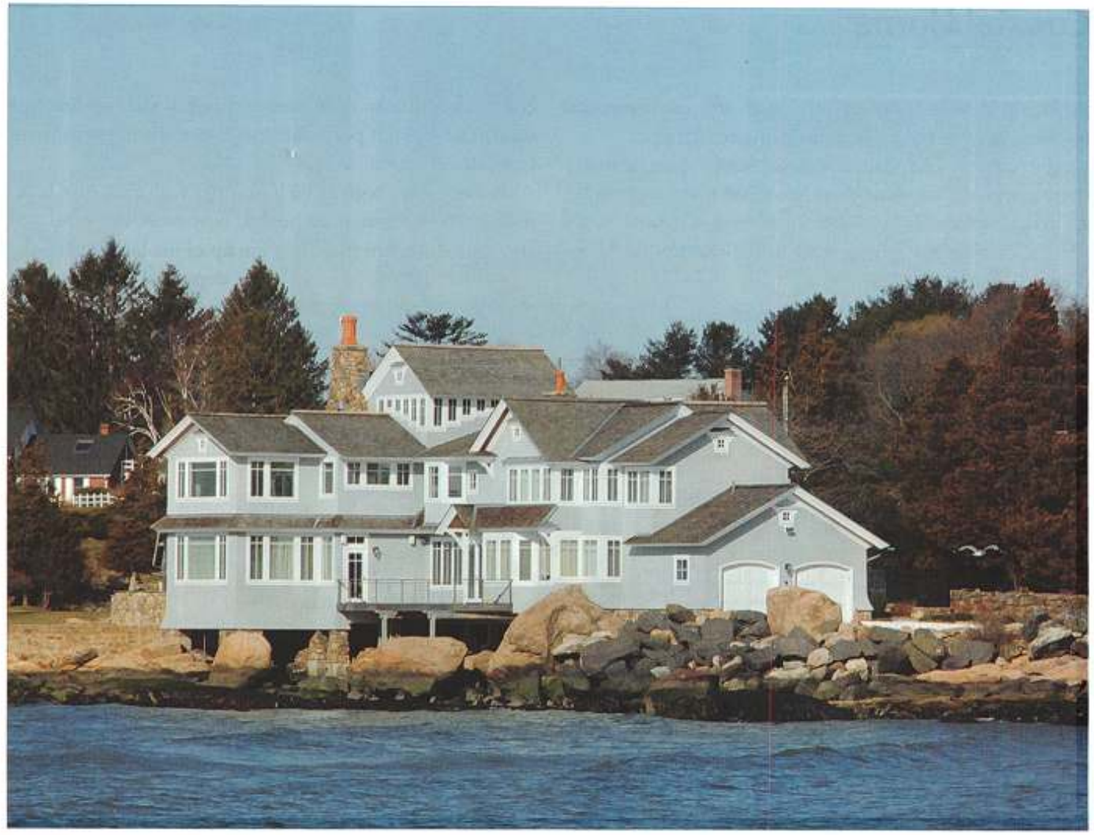
Some homes are given names to lend them character. But a name alone does not confer special significance. That comes from a structure's presence and location. So when a home is named because of its extraordinary qualities, it carries a real sense of power, of *gravitas*. So it is with "Rockbound," on Guilford's beautiful Sachem's Head.

Rockbound was the very first cottage built in the early summer colony and was originally dubbed "Seward's Folly," because of its precarious perch out over the water.

As with many 19th century coastal shacks that became summer homes, then year-round dwellings, Rockbound started off as a tiny "cape" (for lack of a better description). Later, it gave birth to wings and floors over a period of 100 years so that its rambling mass ended up literally being cast out over Long Island Sound and supported by stone piers – the entire home bound by rocks to the coastline. (Thus the name "Rockbound.")

Rockbound sits perched on Guilford's rocky Sachem's Head on Long Island Sound, bravely facing the sea. Because of its precarious location, the summer cottage was dubbed 'Seward's Folly,' after its first owner.

Playful rooflines and deep eaves give the new structure character and a sense of place, with a nod to its early days as a rambling summer cottage.



Extreme engineering for extreme weather conditions was called for to rebuild Rockbound today. Structurally the home had to withstand the strongest of hurricane force winds and a tidal surge bearing down upon the underside of this house. But the home has its delicate side, with its elegant interior.

Rockbound was in fact truly dangerous to those who inhabited it. Since it survived the 1938 hurricane, its "guts" were tested, but despite subsequent gestures to keep its grip on the rocky shore, including retro-fitted steel rod tie downs and iron chains set to pins that were grouted into the bedrock coast, it was clear that by the 21st century, time had not been kind to this exposed stack of sticks sitting in a weather-compromised state on its prominent perch.

The home's structure and design was improvised over the years; its 21st century shape cobbled together room by room – each one tacked on to the previous one over a few generations.

The young owner, having spent years growing up in the house during his youth, knew he could never finally leave it. His wife shared his passion for sailing and the pair enjoyed its prime coastal location to the fullest.

But soon this young couple realized that unless drastic measures were taken, the house itself would simply fall into the Sound. They managed to buy the property from his father, and over a two-year period of approvals, worked to create a home that, by necessity as well as design, captured the informal exuberance of the original Rockbound, while

providing a state-of-the-art structural and environmental response to what can be an unforgiving coastal site.

The footprint of Rockbound could not be changed in any significant way. Structurally the home had to meet all the latest design criteria for hurricane force winds and tidal surge.

The total square footage had to be exactly that of the original home (4,375 square feet), and with the perimeter completely fixed, the height had to conform to Sachem's Head zoning codes.

A rambling estate: Rockbound in its heyday graces a hand-colored postcard from the 19th century. Courtesy Guilford Free Library.

Even with all these restrictions, variances had to be obtained because of the preexisting nonconforming location of the house. The Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection had to approve of every jot and tittle of the proposed rebuilding before any work could be considered by the town. Those variances and approvals were obtained, the engineering required to keep the structure in its existing location with its new height and shape were completely vetted out and approved by the town and the state. Finally, a second series of variances were required when virtually none of the existing home proved to be salvageable and a new house needed to be constructed simply to maintain the home's safety and insurability.

With all these daunting process and engineering questions, one might have built more of a bunker than a beautiful abode, but the owners' remarkable builder, Petra Construction headed by Guido Petra, and I worked long and hard to make all the extreme engineering disappear behind layers of expressive trim and natural materials.

Zesty shapes, expressive window treatments, protective rooflets, a fabulous landscape design by Ann Christie, and the very best materials possible (fieldstone, tightly spaced red cedar shingles, extraordinarily high quality windows) create a home that seems vibrantly alive and timeless. The exterior is both guileless and artful and the interior is astonishing. Here I worked closely with the owners to create a plan that would tie all the elements together. In the lofty central space of the home, we placed a duet of stairs that were as sensuously expressive as the exterior of the home was craftily intricate. So arching steps, balconies and railings culminated with an open, centered helical stair leading to a third floor lookout perch that has one of the finest views of Long Island Sound.

Bedrooms are segregated into wings with their own bathrooms. The kitchen, once buried, now faces the view, and an exposed interior rock (it is the tip of the largest glacially deposited free-standing boulder on the shoreline) was kept inside after one of its previous spontaneous expansions and is now celebrated by the dining area of the kitchen.

As you might expect, a house that is built virtually over Long Island Sound has some pretty spectacular views. Unlike the original Rockbound, this house has windows that wrap around corners, creating 270 degrees of sweeping water views. Unwanted glare is prevented by rooflets that are applied to virtually every window, and the use of air conditioning is also minimized by the careful placement of windows to allow for pass-through ventilation throughout the house. Cathedral ceilings mitigate any sense of squeeze. State-of-the-art insulation and careful attention to weatherproofing have made this home withstand several years of brutal weather with few troubles.

Anyone who has ever lived on the water knows that, despite all the best materials, design, and detailing, the structure will take a beating. Wind-driven water, harsh sun, and fierce winds can compromise even the stoutest home.

The structural design, as designed by Ed Stanley of Guilford, involved a fair amount of steel superstructure throughout the interior of the building, and the solid precast concrete slabs used for the entire first floor, have created a home of great stability. The old Rockbound used to sway with even moderate winds (making owners feel like they were out at sea even after they'd come ashore), but this new structure is as fixed as if it had been built 100 miles inland.

By using native stone for virtually all of its exposed foundation work (as well as a grand three-story chimney) this version of Rockbound has taken to heart the meaning of its original name. So in the best tradition, the gutsy spirit of the old Rockbound lives on in this new incarnation, like a stout Yankee whaling ship bravely facing the sea.