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BIOGRAPHY OF A COUNTRY HOUSE

AUTHOR GERALD CLARKE'S SHINGLED REFUGE
ON THE EASTERN END OF LONG ISLAND

*Architecture by Francis Fleetwood, AIA/Interior Design by Lawrence Saul
Landscape Design by Elizabeth A. Lear and John Cowen
Text by Gerald Clarke/Photography by Scott Frances*

"I wanted every room to have views," biographer Gerald Clarke says of his house in Bridgehampton, New York. "Yet I also wanted a Long Island cottage feeling, not a modern all-glass house." ABOVE: Architect Francis Fleetwood's design—reflected in the rear façade—allows for a maximum number of windows.



Some people break up their travels with side trips to cathedrals, monuments or battlefields. When I have free time—and often when I don’t—I search out the houses of much-admired writers: Mark Twain, Henry James, Herman Melville, Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway. It’s a lengthy list by now, and when I include the houses of those I’ve ac-

tually known and written about, like P. G. Wodehouse and Truman Capote, I think I can claim some insight into the domestic styles of the scribbling class.

And what have I learned? What unites such odd couples as Hemingway and James, Wodehouse and Woolf? One thing alone: However turbulent their lives, however far they traveled, their homes were oases of serenity and

security. So, when it came time to build my own writer’s house in Bridgehampton, on eastern Long Island, I too sought such an oasis. I desired peace, quiet and what used to be called a *locus amoenus*—an Agreeable Place.

The land itself was already agreeable: about six acres sloping gently down to a freshwater pond, beyond which lay cow pastures and, in the far distance, a grain

silos—as lovely to my city-bred eyes as a church spire. “I’ve found just what you’re looking for!” the real estate agent had exclaimed. “You’d think you were in Switzerland!” But no; I was in the middle of the Hamptons, five minutes from the Atlantic’s steady roar. I had discovered a piece of paradise.

Such a congenial spot had to have a house to match, and my thoughts first turned to

RIGHT: Designer Lawrence Saul installed moldings in the living room, as throughout the main rooms, to give the spaces a Georgian tone. Schumacher sofa fabric; Cowtan & Tout club chair fabric and blue velvet on stool and pillows.

the eighteenth century, the only really good century, in my opinion, since the fall of Rome. As a consequence, I saw my six acres graced by something Georgian, as beautifully balanced and as neatly symmetrical as a Pope couplet. Nothing grand or ostentatious, mind you; I'm a writer, not a leveraged-buy-out broker. I wanted what Horace Walpole, one of that century's leading commentators, described as a "middling house"—not too big yet not too small.

The architects I interviewed were enthusiastic; Palladio, the father of the Georgian style, is, after all, the profession's patron saint. But when it came time to put pencil to paper, they seemed perplexed, and their drawings were, in my view, pomp-



ABOVE: Etchings, including Whistler's 1894 *Nursemaids*, and a Chippendale mirror hang in the living room. On the table below are photographs Clarke took of Claudette Colbert and Truman Capote, the subject of Clarke's 1988 biography.





RIGHT: Clarke's collection of Chinese Export ware is displayed in the dining room, where a 1755 Chippendale parcel-gilt mirror is mounted above a George III mahogany sideboard. Sterling silverware from Tiffany's; wallcovering from Osborne & Little.

ously suburban—Blenheim Palace meets Beverly Hills. The fault, however, was probably not theirs. Too late did I come across the following passage in Ralph Dutton's *The English Country House*: "It remains something of a mystery that the smaller Palladian house is such a rarity." Dutton wrote that sentence more than sixty years ago, and the mystery has yet to be solved. After two years and more than ten thousand dollars wasted on architectural fees, I was back where I had started.

Giving up on my vision of a pocket Palladian, I decided to go in the opposite direction. "Consult the genius of the place," advised Pope, and wise old Alex, who had built a middling house of his own on the banks of the Thames, knew what he was talking about. As I tramped over my land through the seasons, through scowling winters as well as smiling summers, I realized that the genius of my particular place cried out not for a Georgian but for a native design, something more attuned to Long Island's infinitely variable weather. It demanded a house that would be open to the outdoors in the warm months but a comfortable fortress in the cold, with outsize chimneys and fireplaces in all the main rooms.

Though he had never done anything similar to what I outlined, a local architect, Francis Fleetwood, seemed able to grasp the concept. And when Francis was puzzled—my ideas, I admit, were more literary



than visual—Lawrence Saul, my interior designer, did the translations. A friend of many years, Larry, who had decorated my Manhattan apartment, has a knack for deciphering his clients' sometimes confused mental images, and he often knew what I wanted even before I did. With an eye to bargains, he had, indeed, already started buying antiques at the New York auction houses: a tall case clock here, a Chippendale mirror there, a Queen Anne secretary someplace else. He had a clear picture of what the rooms

should look like, and so, to a much lesser degree, did I. I sat down with Francis, and we thus planned the house from the inside out.

We began with the assumption that every room would have a view of the pond, which is as beautiful in January, when icy winds furrow its small waters, as it is in May and June, when Bridgehampton's royal family, two mute swans and their progeny, glides across its satiny surface. That requirement—every room with a view—dictated a long, narrow house, a layout that

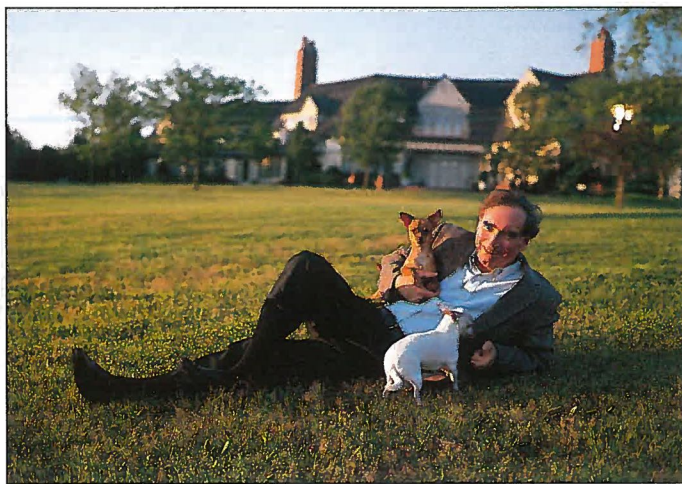
OPPOSITE: The study, where Clarke wrote much of his forthcoming biography of Judy Garland, has French doors on two sides. "One set opens onto a screen porch, where I like to take my laptop and write." The portrait of Truman Capote was a gift from the author.





was saved from boredom, I think, by shifts in elevation, subtle turns and the artful placement of windows and dormers. Francis left the project before the start of construction, but, with Larry's help, I continued to make changes. Building a house, I concluded, is like writing, a process of endless revision—you don't always know what you like until you see what you don't like.

Closing my eyes to the rapidly expanding budget, I



ABOVE: "I want my guests to have everything I have," says Clarke (left, with his Chihuahuas Gwenny and Penny), who had a balcony and a fireplace incorporated into a guest bedroom. The pair of maple chests are 19th century. The floral chintz is from Cowtan & Tout.

OPPOSITE: Landscape designers Elizabeth A. Lear and John Cowen took charge of the plantings on the property, which covers six acres. "The pool is surrounded on three sides by a purple beech hedge," says Clarke. The lights above the gates are refitted chandeliers.



added new dormers and new windows and altered the contour of the eaves. They now have a slight upward tilt—"swept eaves" is the term architects use—that gives the whole house a confident, almost jaunty look, like a ship in full sail. Finally, with what I have been told was an audible gasp, I decided to add an entirely new wing: two bedrooms, two baths, a sunroom and a covered porch.

Months before the house
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