



# past, present, perfect

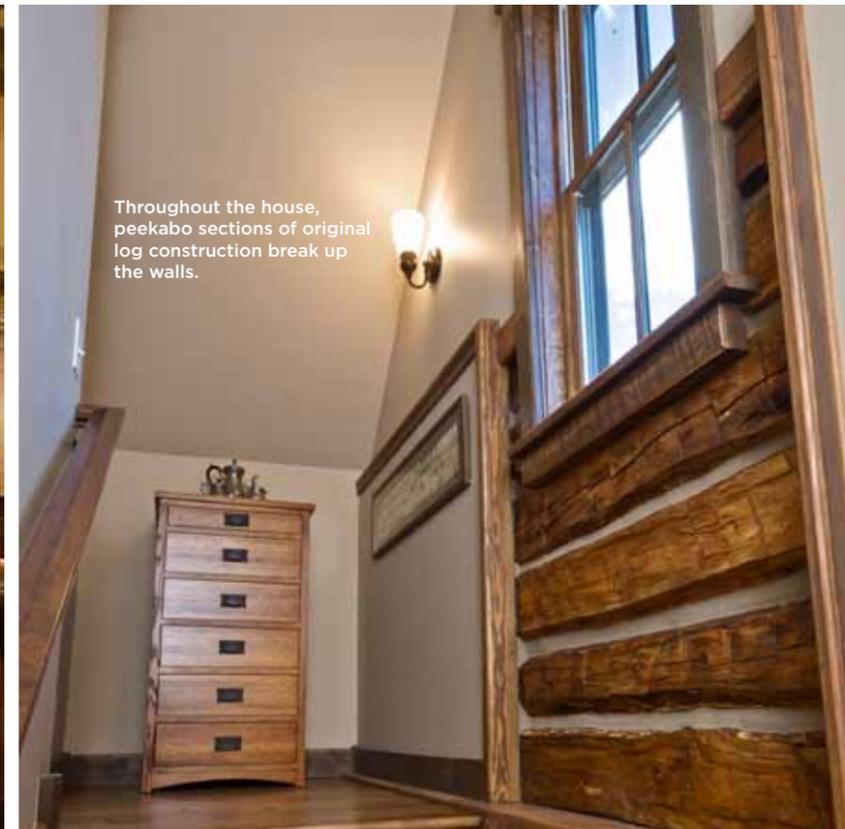
*A restoration of Breckenridge's old Fletcher home embraces history while meeting the needs of today.*

Story by **Joy Overbeck**  
Photos by **Matt Krane**

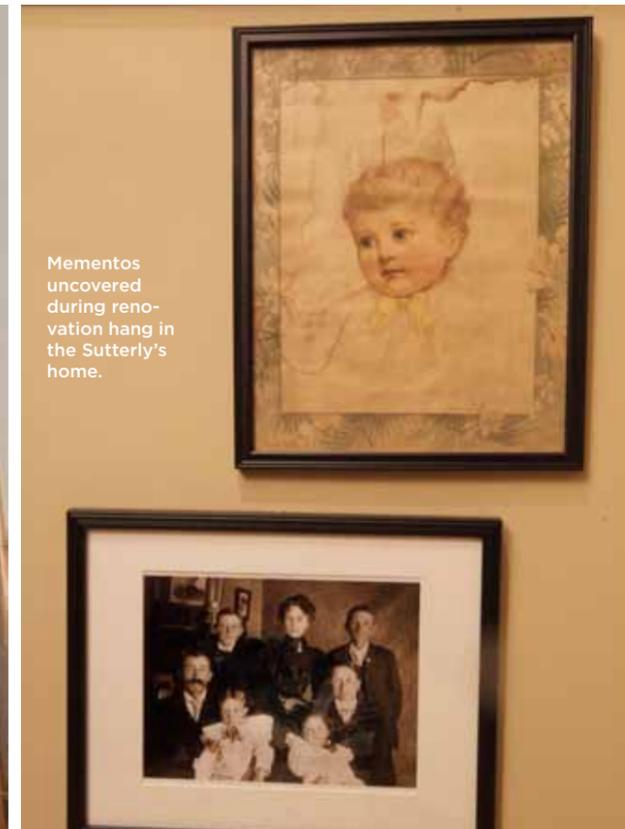
It was the kind of house where whispering kids would cluster on the front sidewalk, double-daring each other to dash up and ring the bell as a means of distracting themselves from that creepy prickly feeling running up their necks. Who knew what lurked behind the softly moving curtains? *Was that a dark shape, a pair of watchful eyes? »*



The home's original log wall can be seen from the kitchen, which was custom built to adapt to the oddities of the original roof.



Throughout the house, peekabo sections of original log construction break up the walls.



Mementos uncovered during renovation hang in the Sutterly's home.

For decades, the forlorn-looking white clapboard two-story had stood at the prominent intersection of Lincoln and Harris, surrounded by a hodgepodge of sheds and outbuildings. Everybody in town had noticed it, but few had their eyes on the place quite like Janet Sutterley, a Breckenridge architect and resident for more than 25 years. Sutterley and her husband, Randy Kilgore of Summit Construction Specialties, had raised their children in town, and in the preceding several years the architect had specialized in restoring vintage structures in and around the historic district. She knew the house was very special, but never dreamed it could be hers.

"This place was such a jewel; it was just screaming for a top restoration job," Sutterley recalls. So when a client came to her with the idea of buying the place and hiring her to do the remodel, she was elated. But after the client had his first meeting with the town and learned of its requirements for such a major historical undertaking, he decided the cost was prohibitive. Sutterley was dismayed until she realized that the cost might come down considerably for a local architect and contractor who could do much of the work themselves and would throw their hearts into this one-of-a-kind challenge.

Soon the couple had purchased the place from the original builder's great-grandson and were dusting off the secrets the house had concealed for so long—secrets such as who had lived there and how they had spent their days in early Breckenridge. Their search led them to county records, to articles in the *Summit County Journal*, and to Denver Public Library's

historic photographs collection, where they tracked down a portrait of the original residents, the Eli Fletcher family.

Eli Fletcher was only 5 years old when his parents arrived in Breckenridge in 1865, probably from Missouri. Displaying the industrious spirit which would later make him a civic leader and successful businessman, young Fletcher began constructing a small log cabin at Lincoln and Harris in 1877 when he was only 17 years old, finishing it a few years later in time to carry his new bride, Emma, over the threshold.

Like so many of its time period, the home and outbuildings were built in stages, with the owner adding on as he became more prosperous and his family outgrew the original structure. Uncovering the timeline of the various phases was part scavenger hunt, part architectural forensic exercise for the new owners. They became amateur archaeologists, digging for the telltale evidence that might lay hidden just behind a layer of drywall.

Although it seemed at the start that the two-story structure fronting on Harris Street must be the original dwelling, some big surprises awaited when the couple actually began their excavations. Sutterley's excitement built as she measured the depth of the exterior walls and became convinced that the white clapboard exterior must be nailed over thick original logs. That's just what she and Kilgore found when they began taking down the interior walls—behind a layer of wadded-up newspaper, dated from 1890 to 1893, that had been used as insulation. This discovery meant that the front part of the home was actually the last section added,

grafted onto the original one-story, 17-by-20-foot cabin about 10 years after Fletcher had finished it. That timeline was confirmed when Kilgore tore up the floor and uncovered the original front steps to the first cabin, still there beneath the wood flooring of the two-story addition.

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But the house had even more intriguing secrets to give up. Sutterley and Kilgore knew from research largely done by local historians Maureen Nicholls and Rebecca Waugh that two of the Fletchers' eight children had died very young, not unusual for the era. When ripping off the wallboards upstairs, the new owners unexpectedly found a poignant memorial to one of these lost little ones: a well-preserved painting of a golden-haired child with huge, wistful blue eyes.

"Someone had pinned it in there, between the walls, with the intention that long after, somebody would find it," Sutterley surmises. "And 130 years later, to see this beautiful child, this intimate memorial, it really tugged at our hearts."

Even as the Fletcher family endured tragedies, it also enjoyed prosperity in the growing mountain town. Back in the early 1880s, Lincoln Avenue was an important commercial street

rivaling Main Street in its level of bustling retail activity. Fletcher opened a meat market in the large barn on the Lincoln Avenue side of the lot, a structure originally owned by the Colorado Boot and Shoe Manufacturing Company. But a few years later, he took on a new profession as a painter and wallpaper hanger; Sutterley and Kilgore actually found rolls of tattered wallpaper still hanging on their rods inside the barn.

Fletcher was also a talented ski maker and a handy guy to have around. In the winter of 1899, when supplies to Breckenridge were cut off because the train tracks were choked with snow, he skied over Boreas Pass to Como and returned with a load of canned goods. Eli further aided the community as a fireman, even being elected chief in 1885.

"Bringing an important property like the Fletchers' house back to life is really an honor," Sutterley says. "Randy and I both feel there's a lot of satisfaction in contributing something tangible to our historic district, hopefully something that will be here hundreds of years longer than we are."

Restoring such a historic property entails much more than the usual cosmetics such as new cabinets and floors. A project of this magnitude involves complicated logistics, from the underground up. Because most of the historic buildings in town are standing on rotten floors that are badly out of plumb, dealing with structural problems is a must. So the couple's first practical move was a dramatic one that stabilized the house as well as roughly doubled the square footage. Kilgore had to jack the house up 14 feet and install steel beams in order to excavate and pour a foundation that the original structure lacked.

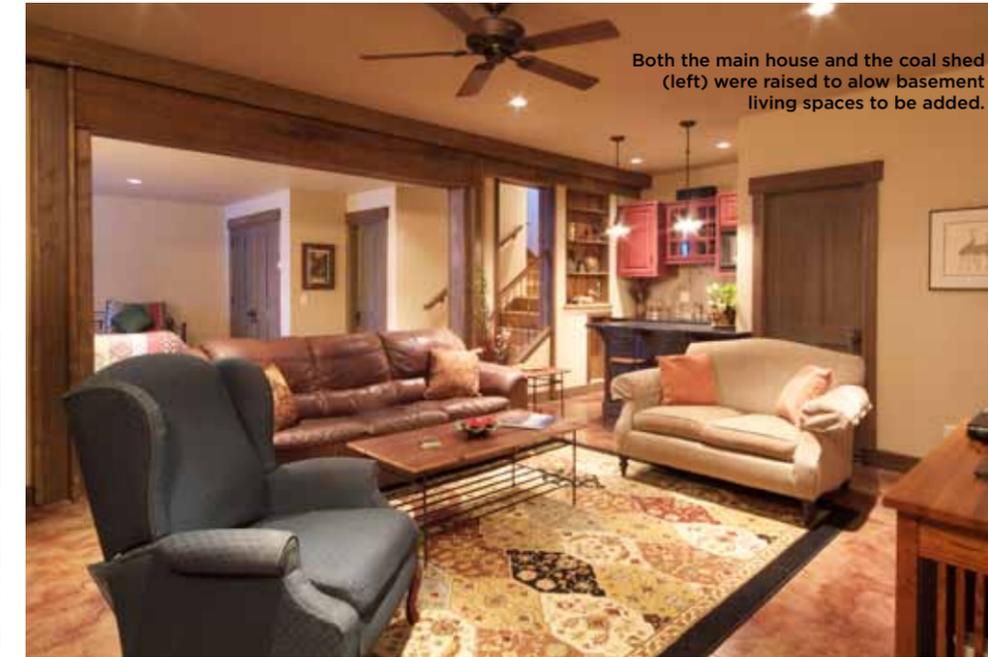
The restorers used the resulting 1,500-square-foot bonus basement to add a large family room with mini kitchen and bar, a bedroom, and two full baths, plus laundry and storage rooms. Sutterley made sure to include expansive window spaces, lined outside with stone, that fill the interiors with light; next spring, she plans to plant the areas with flowers. She applauds Breckenridge for its policy of permitting this “free density” underground that enables owners of historic homes to add basement space that won’t be counted against the allowed square footage. This policy enhances the livability of vintage homes that were often very small, she explains, giving owners a way to create enough room that it’s practical for them to purchase a historic home to renovate for their families.

“And it’s good for the town, too,” Sutterley adds. “It makes the historic district a vibrant, alive place where people want to live because they can walk to everything. And that means less energy use and traffic.”

The town’s free-density policy also gave the couple the gift of the adorable “mother-in-law” cabin in the backyard, where Sutterley’s mother actually lives. Originally a coal shed probably built at about the same time as the original cabin in 1877, the 322-square-foot structure was also jacked into the air so that a basement could be excavated to add another 322 square feet of living space, which became a bedroom and a bath. After additions of a row of front windows and a compact kitchen and living room, the former shed was transformed into the perfect cozy abode for independent living close to family in the main house.

Throughout the restoration, Sutterley and Kilgore remained true to the home’s legacy by recycling its vintage wood and reclaiming its original vision. For example, Kilgore spent countless hours, along with students in the local Colorado Mountain College Historic Restoration Program, painstakingly scraping and restoring the window frames throughout most of the home. In many of the windows, the wavy glass typical of the period of the house’s construction is still intact. Rescued wood from the original ceiling and floors was used to construct the new home’s decks and the front porch, as well as the siding for the mother-in-law cottage. When removing the white horizontal siding from the front of the house revealed the house’s original square logs—with the axe marks still visible—Sutterley and Kilgore knew they had to restore the home’s exterior to its 1890s glory. Glimpses of the exterior logs were left exposed here and there in the upstairs master bedroom as reminders of the home’s past.

Downstairs, the interior walls were removed to accommodate the open floor plan favored by the new owners. The living room received a new hickory floor, ceiling beams, and a handsome dry-stack sandstone fireplace crafted by Bruce Hough of Alpen Masons in Silverthorne. In the combined kitchen and dining room, which occupies the footprint of the Fletchers’ original cabin, the log walls were covered with drywall to allow for insulation. When the ceiling was opened up for more volume, the dark, square logs from the home’s front section, another legacy of the home’s origins, could be seen from the dining/kitchen space. Cherry cabinetry was



Both the main house and the coal shed (left) were raised to allow basement living spaces to be added.

Breckenridge’s “free density” policy allows owners of historic homes to add basements without counting toward allowed square footage, giving owners a way to create enough room for *modern families*.



The coal shed was turned into a mother-in-law apartment. The barn, left, will eventually become a two-car garage.

supplied by Kitchen & Bath Center of Evergreen and custom-installed by Kilgore to conform to the century-old oddities of the extant ceiling and walls. Countertops of black soapstone from Dorado Soapstone were installed by Greenstone Fabrication, and appliances, including a Wolf range, a Sub-Zero refrigerator-freezer, and a KitchenAid dishwasher, came from Kitchenscapes in Breckenridge.

Beyond the main living spaces is a guest bedroom and bath clad in travertine tile. Interestingly, when Sutterley and Kilgore began the project, the only plumbing on the property was in the small kitchen that occupied an add-on shed structure at the rear of the house, precisely where the guest bath is now.

A number of Sutterley's Early American family antiques give the place an echo of bygone days that feels perfectly in synch, although many items are actually much older than the house itself. The corner cupboard in the dining room dates from 1741, and the exquisite antique secretary that belonged to Sutterley's father has taken up residence in the living room.

The only part of the massive overhaul still to be completed is the big barn that once housed Eli Fletcher's painting and decorating business and will soon become an oversize two-car garage. The two large wooden doors opening onto Lincoln Avenue have already been equipped with garage door openers with only a minimum of retrofitting.

The owners' two years (and counting) of labor culminated in the red and gold plaque proudly displayed on the front porch. It reads:

This structure contributes to the Breckenridge Historic District. "We call it our \$2 million plaque," jokes Kilgore, "though happily it didn't cost that much."

Even though the home has emerged from its restoration as a beautiful and thoroughly modern residence, haunting murmurs linger from the past—such as the old upright piano that can be seen behind the Fletchers in a surviving family portrait. The piano was left in the house when the new owners purchased

Others who have lived in the house since the Fletchers have reported *strange shuffling noises upstairs.*

it. Now that they've moved in, they're trying to figure out whether to bring home the instrument, which was transferred into storage during reconstruction. One hitch to that idea: they know that others who have lived in the house since the Fletchers have reported strange shuffling noises upstairs.

"We've thought of putting the piano in the living room," Sutterley says, "but what if it starts playing at two in the morning? ... Not that we would really mind!"

*Joy Overbeck is a regular contributor to Colorado Summit Magazine. Her work has appeared in Redbook, Health, Parents, Woman's Day, LUXE, 5280 Magazine, and other publications. She is also the author of three books.*