Photo: Robin Pendergrast

ABOVE: An attic fire forced the Walkup family to restore their historic home in Crystal Lake. INSET: John B. Walkup completed his Greek Revival house in 1856 (1920 image courtesy of the Crystal Lake Historical Society).

Restoring the Walkup House

The Walkup House *holds great historic significance in Crystal Lake. Although a fire last year destroyed its attic, thankfully its trademark handcrafted cobblestone walls were left intact and a local developer was able to bring the interior of this beauty back to life (and up to code).*

| by Jeff Ruetsche |

On January 2, 2010, the historic Walkup House in Crystal Lake suffered a devastating attic fire. This landmark home — the second to ever be so designated by the McHenry County Historic Preservation Commission — was left near ruins.

"The fire department got here quick," said Michael Walkup, great-great-great grandson of the home's builder and original owner, John B. Walkup. "But all that water destroyed the woodwork below. We had to strip it down to the bare walls."

Gone were the skillfully crafted cornice returns, front door transom and 6-over-6 window surrounds, among other features that marked this home as such a fine example of the Greek Revival style. But it was what remained — those bare cobblestone walls — that helped make the Walkup House so historically and architecturally unique.

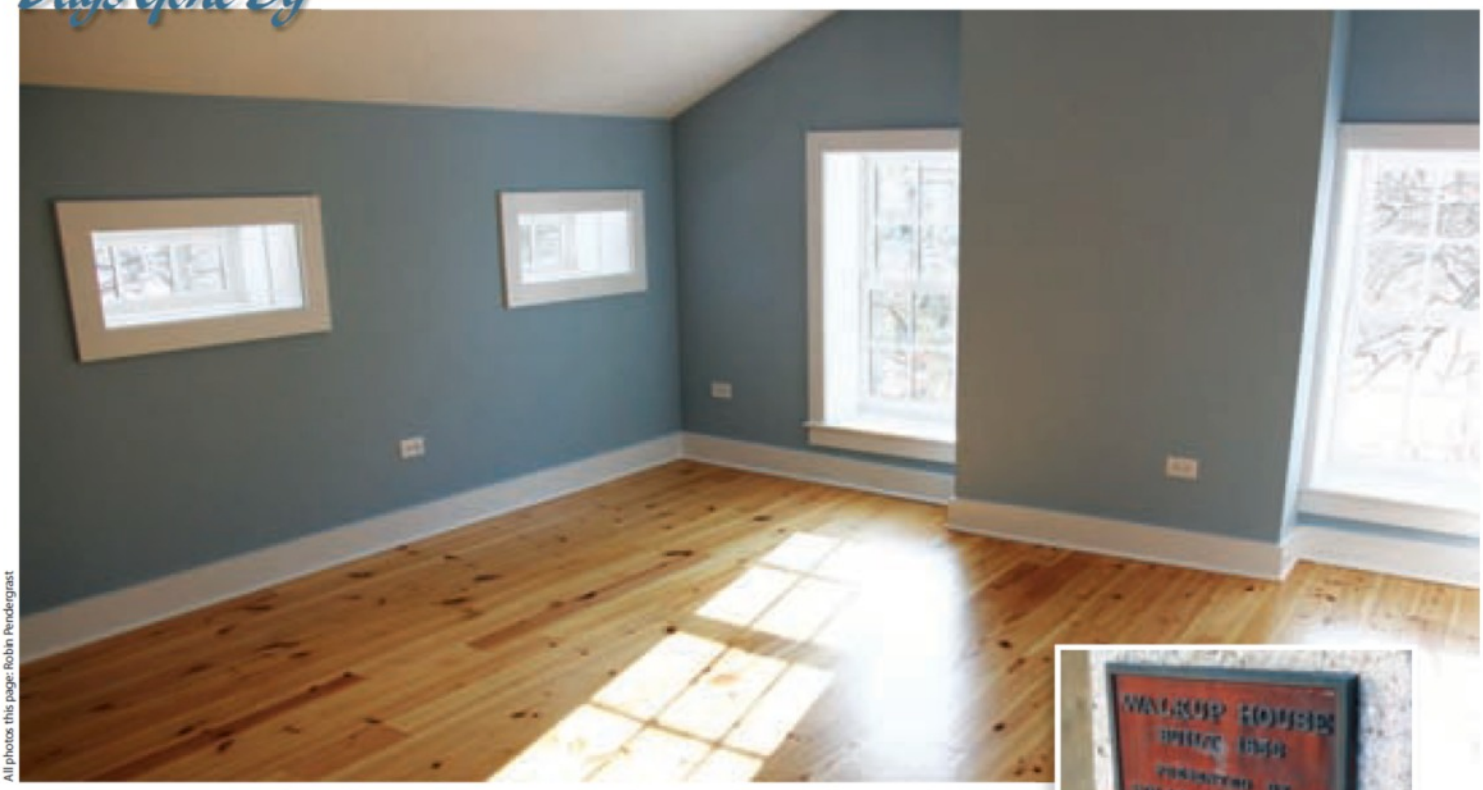
Built for a Bargain

Each stone of the Walkup House was shaped by nature. Sitting on the shores of Lake Michigan, waiting to be picked up by a resourceful hand, they provided Walkup and his partner, the renowned architect Andrew Simons, a perfect building material. And the price — free for the taking — was certainly right. Using more than 70,000 of these water-smoothed stones, the Walkup House was constructed for a mere $75, a bargain even by 19th-century standards.

Gathering the cobblestones became a bit of a family outing. Not what most might consider a typical day at the beach; the Walkup and Simons families hopped up on their wagons and made the 40-mile trek to Lake Michigan, loaded up with stone, spent the night lakeside and then returned the following day with their take. A wooden plank with pre-cut holes served as a gauge to ensure that they gathered the right number of various-sized cobblestones. ▶

Photo: Robin Pendergrast

INSET: Each of the more than 70,000 stones used to build the Walkup House – hand picked from the Lake Michigan shore – was shaped by nature. **ABOVE:** Michael Walkup (pictured) is the great-great-great grandson of the home's builder and original owner, John B. Walkup.



All photos this page: Robin Pendergrast

ABOVE AND BELOW: As part of the Walkup House restoration, Icon Development made sure the floors were level and the house was structurally sound, brought every aspect of the house up to code and reproduced the original moldings. INSET: This house is the second to ever be so designated by the McHenry County Historic Preservation Commission.

Twists of Fate

The house was completed in 1856. Walkup, who had been living across the road where the picnic shelter now stands at Veterans Acres, only spent about a month in his new family home before passing away at the young age of 44. Some say it was the hard work that killed him. Descendent Michael, however, theorizes that it may have been the "mixing of the lime mortar" and related health hazards that led to his ancestor's untimely demise.

Simons, who arrived in the area in 1848, had built a strong reputation as an expert builder before serving as a private in the 36th Illinois Infantry during the Civil War. His workmanship can still be seen not only at the Walkup House, but at the Columbus Wallace House and in the foundation of the Colonel Palmer House, both also in Crystal Lake. Simons had planned to build a new home for his family, too, eschewing his trademark cobblestone style in favor of the brick construction that had become more fashionable by the 1860s. He purchased the bricks before leaving for duty, in fact, returning from the war only to learn that his stockpile had been looted. And so, this renowned stonemason lived out his years, ironically, in a more conventional, wooden frame house.

A Phoenix Rises

After the 2010 fire, Algonquin's Icon Development Group (www.icon-360.com) took on the task of renovating the water-damaged Walkup House. The painstaking renovation took nearly one full year.

"As a result of the fire and the subsequent inspection," said Icon's Charlie Murphy, "every aspect of the home had to be brought up to code. After the demolition phase, mostly just the old stone exterior walls were left intact. We had to be especially careful raising the house so we could make the floors more level."

Icon inserted steel and laminated veneer lumber into two of the walls to ensure that the house was structurally sound. And then, the firm had to devise the best way to reproduce the original moldings.

"All of the millwork was custom made," Murphy explained. "And the finishing materials were carefully selected in order to try and maintain as many of the architectural elements that were present at the time the home was originally built. The biggest challenge in the renovation of a 19th-century structure is being able to complete the project in such a way that the essence, beauty and charm that can only come with the passage of time, still remain in the end."

A Return Home

Today, Michael and his wife Carolyn maintain the historic home and Walkup Heritage Farm & Gardens (www.walkupheritagefarm.com) on the site. They grow organic foods, as well as preserving native Illinois woodland and wetland plants, working the land much in the way a family of 19th century settlers would have worked it.

The Walkups recently moved back into their family heirloom after being so unkindly evicted by the January 2010 fire. Sitting in one corner of the first floor dining room is an old cherry wood china cabinet, dating to the 1850s and originally owned by John B. Walkup. It had been in Michael's safekeeping for 30 years. "Hopefully," he said, "it'll be here in this place for another 150." ■