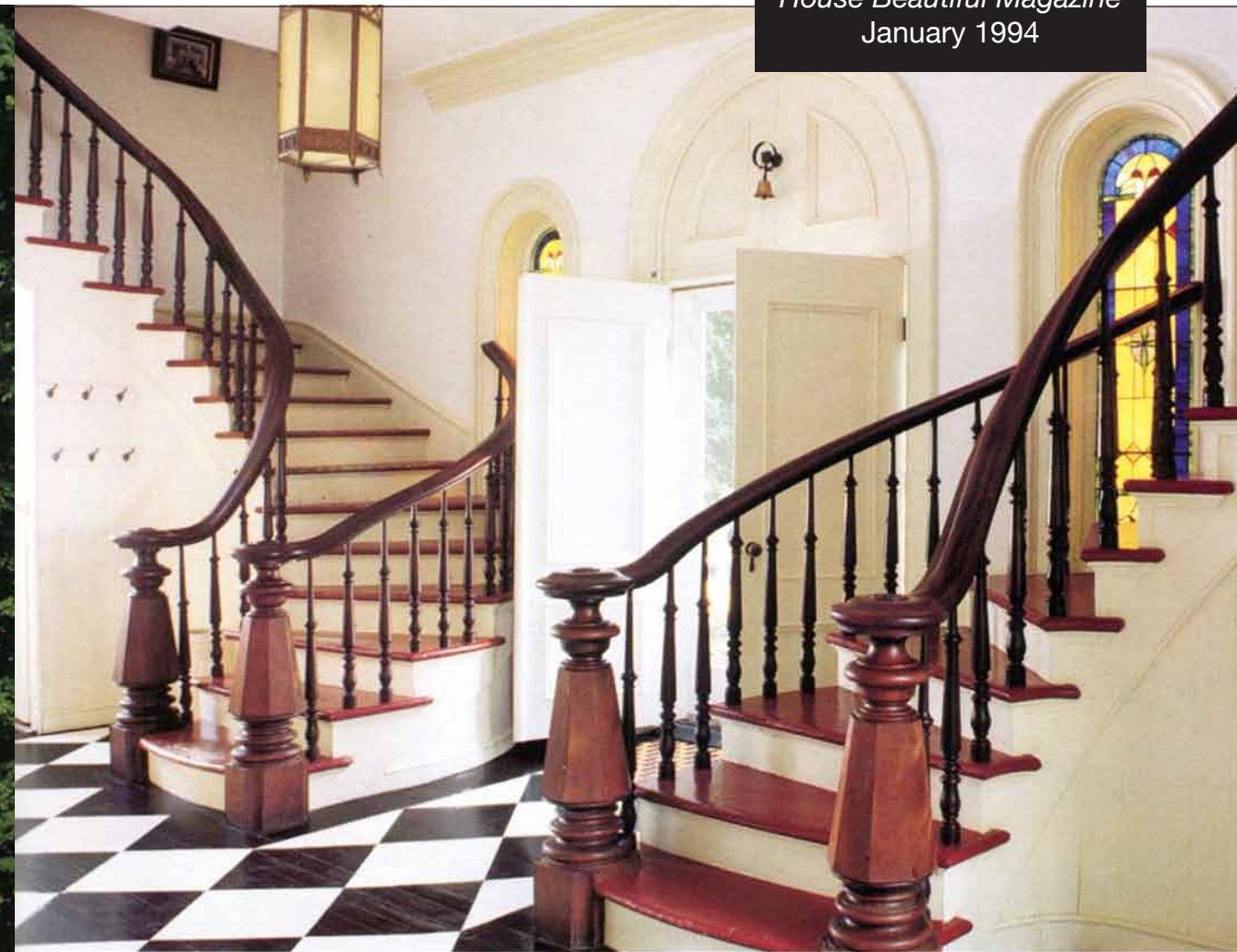


# Well schooled

*Two New Yorkers from the theater have surprised themselves by adapting wholeheartedly to life in a former academy building in a small Hudson River town*



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**They never sat** in the classrooms, the cupola bell never summoned them to chapel, but Michael Belanger and Gary DiMauro were nonetheless captivated by the brick Italianate-style Trinity Church and School just off Broadway in the Hudson River town of Tivoli.

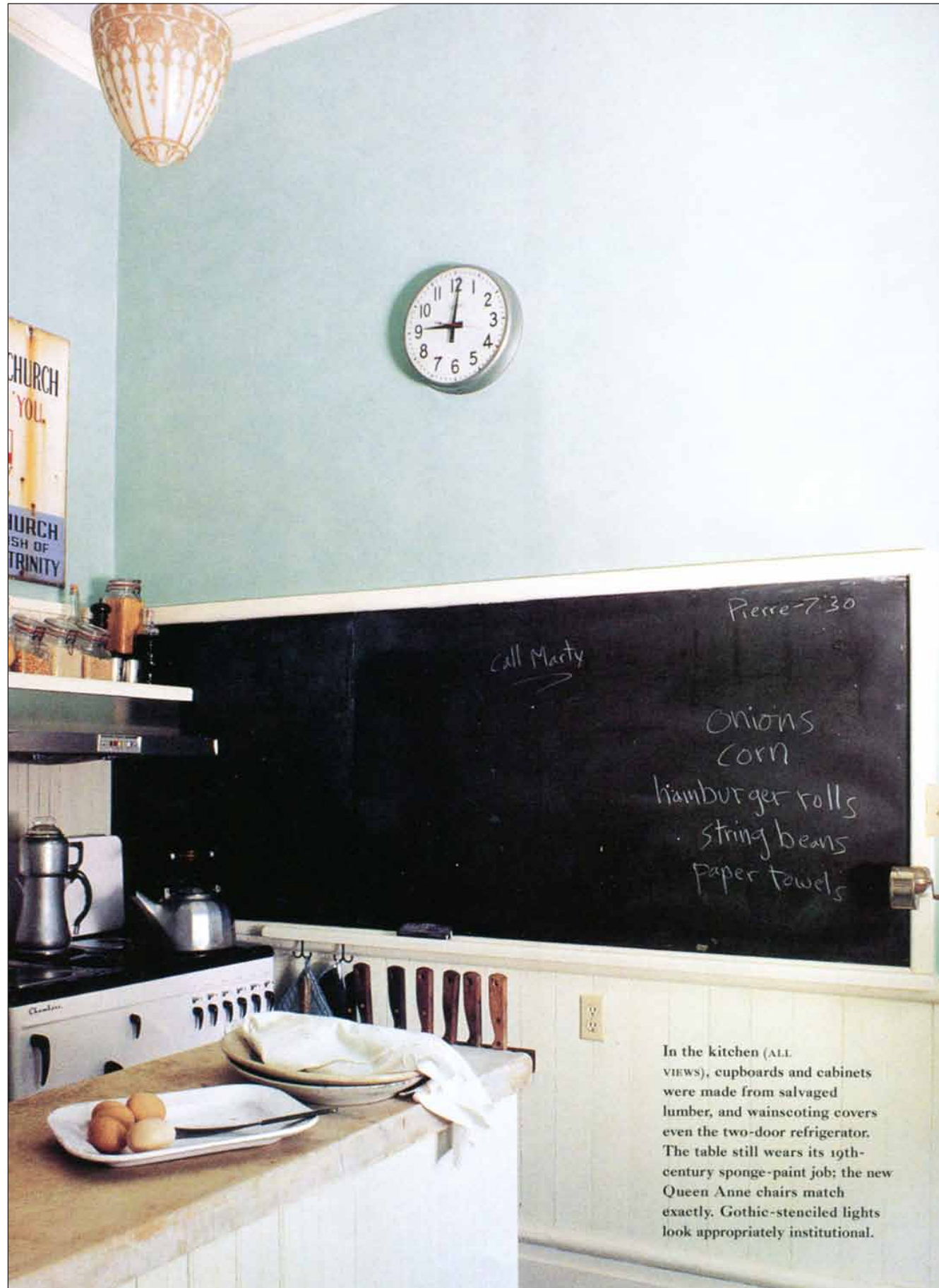
They were two fellows from quite another Off-Broadway. Belanger had performed in such robust New York offerings as *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom* and *Psycho Beach Party* and then became an antiques dealer and decorator. DiMauro had done summer stock and radio jingles. But rural pleasures beckoned, and in 1988, after months of browsing through an assortment of casual cottages, they pulled up to the academy. Built in 1854 as part of a campus that included a dormitory, laundry, windmill and stables, this was the only building still standing.

They were enchanted by the space, the history, the Civil War monument on the front lawn, and the quaint reality of Tivoli. "It's not all cutesified and boutiquefied, not like a Disney river town," says Belanger. "It has a funky, rough edge about it." They made a quick decision. "We had jobs in New

Trinity Church and School (OPPOSITE) is no longer a sanctum sanctorum, but the country house of two New Yorkers. A century ago the lawn was a parade ground. ABOVE: The foyer pew comes from the chapel, the church directory from outside. Michael Belanger painted the mural of the view from the cupola. TOP: The symmetrical staircases.

The living room is a nonsectarian mix of oversize furniture, Victorian travel photos, and architectural elements. On the bluestone dining table are church candlesticks from Montreal. The tole-and-silvered-glass chandelier originally hung above the chapel altar. All fabrics are by Waverly.





In the kitchen (ALL VIEWS), cupboards and cabinets were made from salvaged lumber, and wainscoting covers even the two-door refrigerator. The table still wears its 19th-century sponge-paint job; the new Queen Anne chairs match exactly. Gothic-stenciled lights look appropriately institutional.

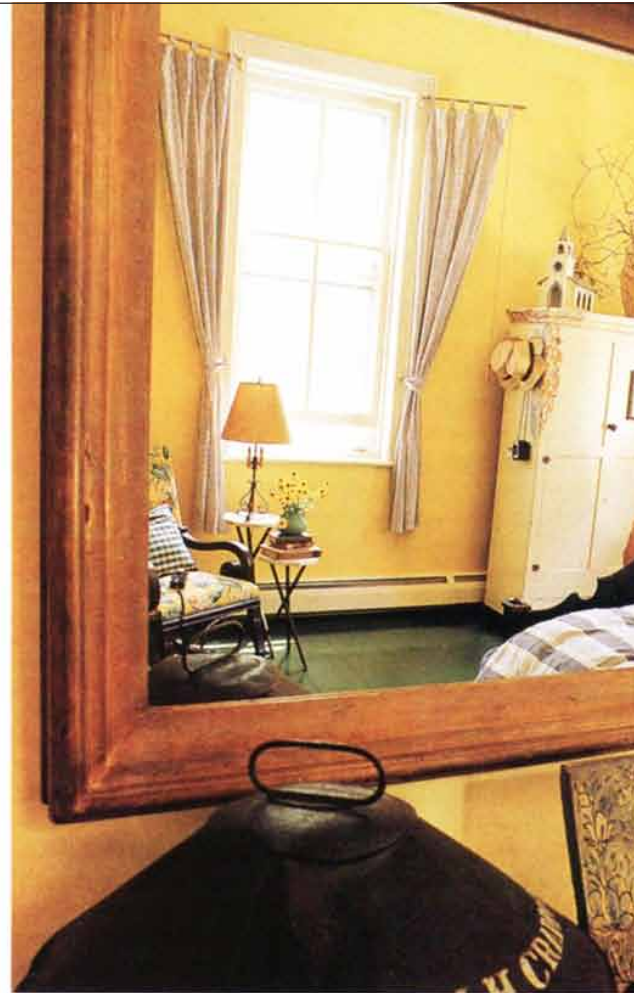


*When they moved in, the kitchen was a festival of plastic laminate. Now it is smartly outfitted with white wainscoting*



York," he says, "but we couldn't pass it up." So they took their jobs with them. Belanger began selling antiques and seeing clients by appointment in a downstairs room; DiMauro got his real estate license and began dealing deeds from the robing room above. The weekend retreat became their mainstay, the city apartment a pied-à-terre, and the two former actors were soon trustees and committeemen of the town.

The uniformed pupils, who for over fifty years read Virgil in these rooms, played marbles against the stone foundation, and performed military drills on the parade ground out front, would have no trouble recognizing the place. Nor would Tivoli's blue-collar citizens; after the school closed in 1896 they attended Sunday services here rather than down the road at St. Paul's, where the blue-blood Astors and Livingstons worshipped. Architecturally, little has changed. Symmetry still reigns. Staircases and alcoves, grillwork heating vents and ample windowsills remain as they were. The original dreariness does not. The once gloomy walls are now sponge-painted rose pink, sunflower yellow and mint green. The austere rows of oaken desks have been replaced by Victorian armchairs, American Empire sleigh beds, cabinets of blue-and-white crockery, and—the boys would have giggled—a bare-breasted, turn-of-the-century Venus de Milo from a Syracuse library. And the air is blessedly free of chalk dust, filled instead with the fragrance of thyme and oregano



The bedroom (ABOVE, TOP RIGHT AND OPPOSITE) is particularly cheerful with yellow walls and hunter-green floor, a hodgepodge of baskets, 1920s torchère, and antlers that replace a missing crest aboard the Victorian bed. The curtains are dime-store mattress ticking; the bed linens are "everything from Grandma's castoffs to Ralph Lauren." TOP LEFT: Family photos in bedroom hallway.

For more details, see Reader Information

snipped from the herb garden and tossed into peasantry stews.

When they moved in, the kitchen was a festival of plastic laminate. Now it is smartly outfitted with white wainscoting and cabinets built from salvaged lumber. The marble on the island counter comes from a 19th-century butcher shop in a neighboring town. The stove is old but new—an unsold 1946 Chambers discovered in the rear of an appliance store, with a pristine *Idle Hour Cookbook* still sitting in the oven and offering a Club Day Dinner, Gadabout Dinner, Yankee Saturday Supper. For grocery lists and telephone messages there is a school blackboard on the wall.

The foyer, graced by a pair of winding stairways with mahogany railings, is very much as it always was. The boys' coat hooks are in place, as is the anguished "Physics Physics" etched on a windowpane. One of the stained-glass windows was found in a local barn and the other was made to match.

And now it's time to take business out of the house and around the corner to Broadway. Belanger's antiques shop, known as J.S. Clark & Co. after the first rector of the church and first mayor of Tivoli, as well as DiMauro's real estate office will open in adjoining shops this winter. Then the place will be totally theirs. Or almost. "People still march in thinking it's a church," Belanger sighs. "They'll say to Gary, 'Are you the pastor?' even if he's in a bathrobe. We've got to remember to lock the door."