

STORIED PAST, *bright future*

BY LAURA PORTER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICK CINCLAIR



The 1790 House on Route 9 in Westborough has housed a number of businesses and families. Penta Communications bought the building in 2013 and completely renovated it. Today the entrance to the historic building is bright and airy.



LEFT: For nearly 40 years, the 1790 House was the headquarters of Bergson's Ice Cream and Food Shops, Inc., as well as a restaurant. Deborah Penta's renovation project included a facelift for the exterior, with a new portico, English landscape gardens and an outside private courtyard. [PENTA COMMUNICATIONS PHOTO] **RIGHT:** Deborah Penta, CEO of PENTA Communications, says, "The property has meaning in that it not only represents the old-world character of Westborough but it also has meaning and significance to the history of our country."

Renovation brings new chapter for 1790 House in Westborough

It has been a tavern and a gentleman's mansion, an antique shop and a popular restaurant: the 1790 House in Westborough has gone through just about the number of iterations one might expect for a structure into its third century.

During that time, adapting to the needs of disparate owners as well as the town, the house has been repeatedly redecorated, renovated and even physically shifted from one spot to another along the present-day Route 9.

For the past four years, the building at 208 Turnpike Road has been owned and occupied by PENTA Communications, Inc., a nearly 30-year-old marketing, advertising and public relations firm. Before moving her business in, CEO Deborah Penta undertook a full-scale renovation to accommodate the needs of a highly technological company while celebrating the many historical elements of the new location.

The project entailed updating every system as well as refinishing the original wide pine floors, creating a sleek contemporary design scheme in rooms that feature millwork and fireplaces dating from the 18th century.

Today, past and present exist side by side, with PENTA's signature blue and white blending with original lines and detail.

One crosses the threshold through the front door, bracketed by leaded sidelights and topped by an intricately detailed transom, to a concierge where music plays softly. White walls and a white tile floor sparkle, with several green topiaries in white containers the only touches of color.

"It's clean, it's happy, it's beautiful, it's meticulous," says Deborah Penta, describing the first impression she wants to create.

The structure, on the National Register of Historic Places since 1980, is one of the oldest still standing in Westborough. Research by the Westborough Historical Commission and the Westborough Planning Board indicates that it began its life as a stopover on the way to Boston.

During its first years, according to Town Planner Jim Robbins, the land held a conglomerate of buildings: the Wesson Tavern, a store for travelers, a carriage house, and small outbuildings for store supplies. Several rooms on the second floor of the main house, used by PENTA as offices, were clearly bedrooms, with fireplaces that "kept guests warm." Several of the travelers were noteworthy: George Washington, Paul Revere and the Marquis de Lafayette stopped at the tavern as they traveled past on Turnpike Road.

In 1832, Joseph Lothrop, who identified himself as a “gentleman,” bought the property, joined the carriage house and the main house, and remodeled the home as a private residence - a gentleman’s mansion - for his new wife, Eliza Fiske Lothrop.

“It became noted for its architectural integrity after Lothrop,” says Mr. Robbins. “He restored it to its Federal style.”

Lothrop’s residency didn’t last long - nor did his marriage. For the next century and a half, the 1790 House passed from hand to hand, serving purposes both residential and commercial.

In the name of progress, structures on the property were moved a number of times. In 1902, when the Boston and Worcester Trolley Railroad was built, the carriage house was shifted from the right to the left side of the manor, farther away from the tracks.

A more substantial change came in the 1930s when a new highway replaced the century-old Turnpike of 1810. The original dirt road had been 21 feet at its widest and less so in other spots. The new Turnpike was an entirely different entity: paved in concrete, it was 70 feet wide with four 10-foot lanes, a grass median and breakdown lanes. It also required a 120-foot right of way.

In response, the Lothrop house was raised and moved 50 feet south and west of the edge of the right of way. It remains in that spot today. Moreover, according to Jim Robbins, the state-owned right of way is much wider than the paved areas of the highway; it extends onto the front lawn.

In 1973, the owners of Bergson’s Ice Cream and Food Shops, Inc., Eric Pearson and Ralph Swedberg, bought the property. The partners undertook a full-scale renovation to restore “the historical integrity of the Federal period,” according to Westborough Historical Commission documents. An addition at the back, several steps down from the main house, became a pub room - a tavern in homage to the house’s beginnings - and a new kitchen. Restrooms were added in the carriage house, where the servants’ quarters on the second floor became offices. The Westborough location was the headquarters for the Bergson corporation.

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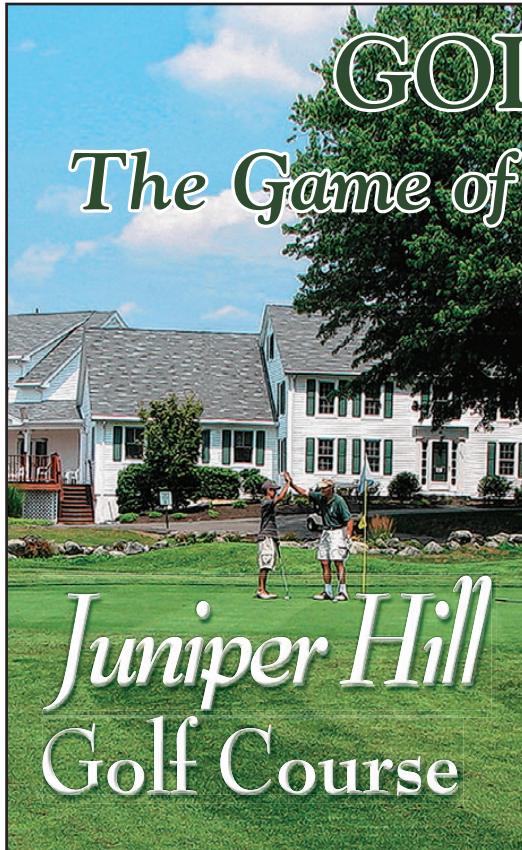
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For nearly 40 years, Bergson's 1790 House was a town landmark, a spot for both casual and upscale dining as well as special events, from office Christmas parties to wedding receptions. Both menu and decor reflected the building's early New England origins. In 1980, the Westborough Historical Commission helped to secure its listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

For much of that period, Deborah Penta was establishing her own business, first in Worcester and then, for short periods, in Westborough at Downtown Crossing and in Southborough. In 1996, she moved to 182 Turnpike Road, not far from the 1790 House, where she remained for 17 years.

In 2011, when Bergson's closed and the house went on the market, she began to think about it as a location for PENTA.

"I'd drive by every day on the way to the office and think, the building has so much potential ...," she says.

In 2013, she bought the property.

"I really wanted to have a space that was just our company: to control the personality of the interior design, control the quality of the brand."

During the inspection, which took place in the pouring rain, "I was able to see everything that needed to be done with my very eyes," she says. "I knew what I was getting into."

Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that every inch of the 1790 House was renovated, from roof to foundation and from one edge of the property to another.

Moreover, the first phase, though comprehensive, took only six months. Penta herself served as general manager.

"I spent a couple of hours every day set up here with my laptop to make sure it was going smoothly, from taking all the trees out of the front, to landscaping, to painting, to making sure the floor people showed up," she says.



LEFT: The restored wide pine board floors on the second floor landing contrast with the white tile of the first floor entryway. **RIGHT:** There are eight fireplaces in the main house, three on the first floor and five upstairs, where guests must have stayed in the early days. Each is numbered and recorded in the Smithsonian Institution.

All of the basic mechanical systems - heat, electrical, plumbing - were upgraded for productivity and green efficiency. The heating system is now radiant heat by forced hot water, with electric heat available if necessary. The building was reinsulated and has new windows.

As contractors stripped away the layers of decades past, they embraced what they could and replaced or rebuilt whatever couldn't be saved. With the exception of the front door, which had to be replaced, the original doors remain, along with their hinges and handles. The woodwork and millwork, too, have been preserved, with any additional millwork handcrafted to match the original.

There are eight fireplaces in the main house, three on the first floor and five upstairs. Each is numbered and recorded in the Smithsonian Institution.

Bergson's Colonial American theme "was perfect for the restaurant, but didn't work for us," Penta says. "We had to bring in modern contemporary lines. The result is very streamlined, very spatially minimalistic. I believe that to take in the true beauty of the past, you cannot over clutter the architecture."

Design decisions were both pragmatic and respectful of the home's historical integrity.

Beneath multiple generations of carpet were the wide pine boards of the original floors, and most have been repaired and refinished.

"They're too beautiful to cover; they give it character," says Penta, tapping her shoe against gleaming pine. "They make noise; they make an echo."

Not all of the hardwood could be resurrected: the lobby is now tiled in white, and a small dining room is carpeted in blue and white squares.

In that room, at the center of the building, the size of the fireplace suggests that it may once have been the hearth, used for cooking for tavern guests or, at different points, the household. The surround and mantel are made of pumpkin wood, and Penta recalls that the fireplace had been painted orange when she bought the house.

The tavern area, at the back of the house, has been transformed into the Creative Department. Here, team members work at standing desks beneath European light fixtures that resemble mobiles, squares of different colored metal drifting slowly with the airflow.

Certainly PENTA's technological needs are far different from those of any previous resident of the 1790 House, and 50 stable data ports were added to meet communication requirements.

The restaurant kitchen, at the back of the house, was taken down to the studs. Now painted light blue with sparkling white trim and windows that let in the sun, the room is the Marketing Innovation and Customer Insight Center. The area is also flexible and can be adapted to myriad uses, including guest speakers.

"That room, one of the biggest hurdles, became a room filled with light and energy and filled with momentum," Penta says.

The carriage house, connected to the main house at ground level, houses the firm's printing center as well as a technology center for clients. A long ramp was added for handicapped access.

On the second floor, the original servants' quarters and one-time offices for Bergson's have been turned into a team clubhouse, with a kitchen, a small conference room and a gameroom with pool, ping pong and foosball tables.

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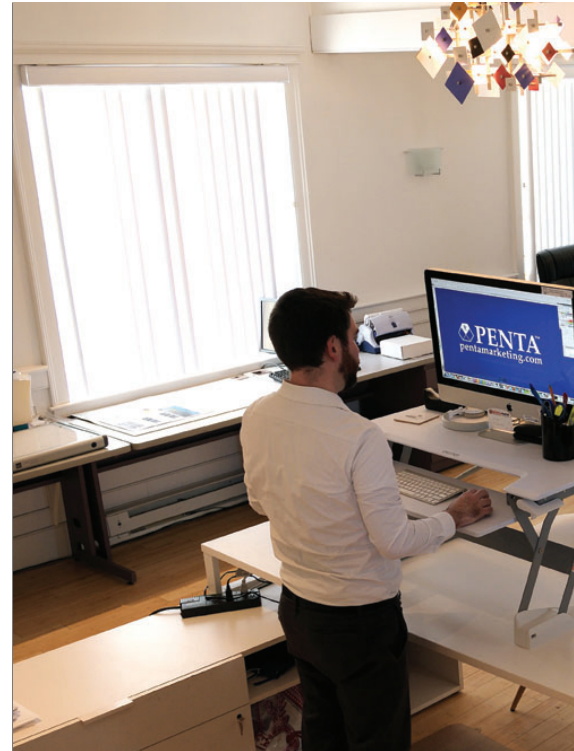


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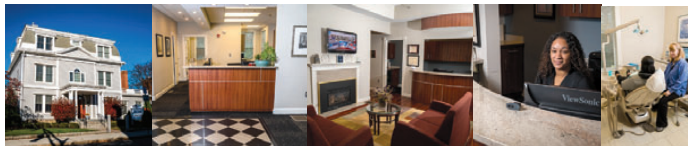
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"Especially in our cold winters, when you need a break but don't want to leave, you can play games and have fun or chill out," she says. "It's a positive, healthy way of stress release and the encouragement of more creative thinking. You can stop for a minute and fire up your juices and then go back."

The exterior of the manor received a facelift, including a restoration and repair of the clapboards as well as the hip roof. The outside light fixtures, all original, were refurbished, though new posts were "handcrafted to match the theme of the building," Penta says. A new portico at the entrance has complementary square columns. The property features English landscape gardens and an outside private courtyard.

Of special note is a stone wall that divides lawn from parking lot. Though it is newly constructed, it was built entirely of old stones found on the property during the renovation. The first stones were discovered beneath the front steps, which had been covered with concrete.

"We dug it all up and preserved whatever stones we could," Penta says. "Many had been here for 200 years."



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The PENTA Communications Creative Department works in the former tavern area.

They integrated many in the rebuilt stoop; the remainder, with other stones from the property, were used for the stone wall.

“We revitalized the old,” she says of the wall. “It looks brand new.”

PENTA’s full renovation was completed in 2014. That year, the company received the Silver Hammer Award from the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, an annual honor given “to acknowledge construction or rehabilitation projects that have an extraordinary visual and aesthetic impact on our physical landscape and that have brought new life to some of the region’s most historic assets,” according to the WRCC website. Qualifying nominees are typically extensively renovated buildings in Central Massachusetts that are more than 100 years old.

The 1790 House/PENTA Building also has been nominated this year for the Massachusetts Historical Commission’s annual Preservation Award in three categories: Rehabilitation and Restoration, Adaptive Reuse and Local Preservations.

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Deborah Penta remains deeply aware of the cultural significance of the 1790 House.

“The property has meaning in that it not only represents the old-world character of Westborough, but it also has meaning and significance to the history of our country,” she says.

PENTA’s annual flag raising ceremony recognizes the historical import of the 1790 House in Westborough, bringing members of the community together to celebrate veterans.

Four years ago, when the ribbon cutting for the newly renovated building was set for late May, Military Appreciation Month, Deborah Penta contacted veterans in the community to ask them to raise the flag.

“I wanted the flag to be raised for the first time in honor of our history, our veterans who served our country and especially for our local veterans,” she says. “It turned into a special celebration of our veteran community.”

The number of people attending has grown from 40 to 100, and Penta describes the event as “a beautiful tradition that honors the nobility of what our vets do and commit to every day. It’s just lovely and meaningful.”

This year’s flag raising will take place at 8 a.m. May 24. The Westborough High School Band will play patriotic songs, and a breakfast will be served.

Speakers will include Secretary of Veterans’ Affairs Francisco A. Urena as well as state Reps. Hannah Kane, Carolyn Dykema and Danielle Gregoire, and state Sens. Michael Moore, Jamie Eldridge and Harriette Chandler.

A brand new project, scheduled for completion by the end of 2018, brings PENTA’s professional expertise directly to bear on the history of the 1790 House. The team is creating a documentary on the building as well as the area, conducting extensive research as well as personal interviews.

“If someone is interested in the property, they can learn about it,” says Deborah Penta. “It is so rich in history.”