

# PRINCETON

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## HOME IS WHERE THE GALAS ARE

MELANIE AND JOHN CLARKE WELCOME COMMUNITY NON-PROFITS TO THEIR RESTORED COLONIAL REVIVAL HOME

PRINCETON POLICE • WILLARD BROTHERS WOODWORKERS  
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# HOME IS WHERE THE GALAS ARE

**Melanie and John Clarke further their  
caretaking of the non-profit community  
in a restored colonial revival**

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**IT** would be fun to play hide-and-seek at 200 Mercer Street—its many staircases, landings, mudroom and even cherry-paneled elevator make ideal hiding spots. But rather than let their guests get lost, owners Melanie and John Clarke open up those spaces for musicales and galas to benefit Princeton arts and cultural organizations.

“There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for Princeton Symphony Orchestra,” says Melanie Clarke, its executive director. “Having this house enables us to execute our dreams of taking care of family and the family of not-for-profits we’re interested in.”

Although she never thought of herself as a chandelier person, now that she is sharing her home with five wired fixtures dripping illuminating prisms, Melanie says she likes them. They are fitting for a structure with fluted ionic columns and scrolling capitals towering two stories at the front entrance.

About halfway between Einstein’s house and Battlefield Park, the Colonial Revival is at the heart of Princeton’s historic district. The chandeliers keep company with eight fireplaces, pocket doors, and a grandfather clock.

The Clarks—John is a venture capitalist in the healthcare industry—bought the house five years ago from the estate of Douglas Bushnell, a former American Express executive and second husband to Betty Wold Johnson. Bushnell raised three children from an earlier marriage at 200 Mercer, but when he married Johnson they lived on a farm in Hopewell. He kept 200 Mercer as a sort of museum of his collections: *Titanic* memorabilia, grandfather

clocks, Fabergé eggs, statues and chandeliers.

Bushnell died in 2007 at age 87. Johnson, a philanthropist and widow to Robert Wood Johnson III, continues to live in Hopewell. Among the many musical organizations she supports is Princeton Symphony Orchestra, and she and Melanie have shared a long friendship. The Clarks met Bushnell once or twice, and Johnson was delighted when they bought the property.

Built in 1896 for John Howell Westcott, a classics professor at Princeton University, 200 Mercer required substantial structural repair. “We knew we had a project, though not the extent of it,” says Melanie.

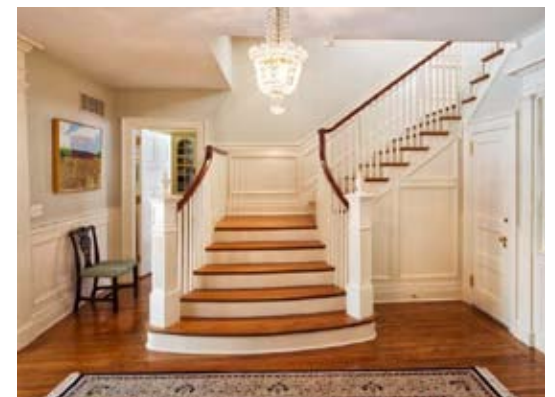
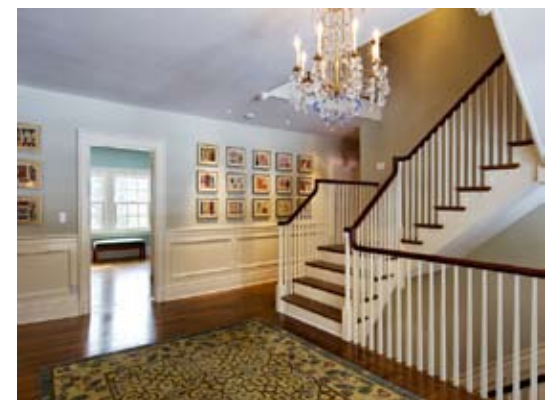
The Clarks have correspondence between the original architect, William E. Stone of New York City, and Westcott, about Westcott’s fascination with the columns and capitals. Indeed the entire house is like a pattern book of Greek and Roman architectural elements, and all have been restored by Princeton architect Cathy Knight.

John Clarke first began talking to Knight about 200 Mercer on the soccer field, where their daughters competed. He’d worked with contractor Tom Pinneo on the renovation of a stone house on Nassau Street for his business, Cardinal Partners.

The house had to be taken back to the studs, reports John. Parts of the house were no longer on solid foundation, and so the foundation and some chimneys were rebuilt. This meant all the flooring and trim work had to be replicated. It took two years before the house could be made habitable.

Knight and Pinneo employed Diamond Woodwork of Trenton to do the mill work—everything from

custom cabinets in the kitchen and master bedroom, columns throughout the house, to wainscoting in the dining room. There are 80 doors, with 80 sets of hinges and knobs, and all had to be refinished and squared by a door specialist.







## IDEAL FOR WEDDINGS

Standing in front of the house, there is so much to take in, from the stately maples and poplars that have watched centuries turn. The main house—painted in what can only be described as Princeton yellow—is flanked by two wings. Within the portico is a balcony over the front door, and dentil molding, pediments and Palladian windows articulate the structure. There is a playhouse, modeled after the main house, that has been converted to a pool house; a three-car garage has been built to look like an English cottage on the side that faces the garden; and at back is a landscaped stone terrace and grotto that, says Melanie — the mother of four daughters—would make an ideal setting for a wedding.

A pool stretches the width of the yard, set off by a woodland at back and a long expanse of lawn at the front. One thinks of the John Cheever story in which the main character sets out to swim home through all the pools in the neighborhood — if he started here, he would cover a great distance.

Melanie does daily laps from May to October. Alongside the pool is a tall red perforated metal sculpture by Bruce White, whose red “Crustacean” can be seen at Grounds For Sculpture. White’s large-scale commissions are in public spaces throughout the country. “I saw this sculpture in a gallery in Stowe and couldn’t stop thinking about it,” says John. “He goes after fractal patterns using laser cuttings.”

“My favorite room is the sun room,” Melanie says. Formerly a closed-in porch, it has been opened up with two doors for circulation during those large parties. Light fixtures with pressed wildflowers embedded were custom made by an artist the Clarkes discovered near their summer

home in Vermont. Speaking of art, the walls are galleries of works they’ve collected from Vermont to New York’s Swann Galleries, where a daughter once worked. Eight prints by Sol Lewitt evoke an Amish quilt pattern.

## LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

The Clarkes are serial home rehabbers, beginning with their very first abode in Mobile, Alabama, in the late 1970s, shortly after Melanie received her master’s degree in health policy and management from Harvard (as an undergraduate she’d studied at Oberlin and Wellesley). John — whom she’d met in high school — had earned his bachelor’s degree in economics and biology at Harvard. In Mobile, Melanie was working for a government planning agency and John, working for General Electric, was the general contractor for the 1920s cottage they’d bought. “John did everything himself,” she says. “The night we moved in, the only toilet in the house fell through and John refitted it. His father was an engineer and always loved old houses so John learned to be handy. He loves projects.”

Melanie, too, has construction in her family. Her stepfather was construction manager for Yale University.

Two years later, the couple moved to Philadelphia where John went on to earn an MBA from Wharton. First they lived in a row house in Narbeth, Pa., but the only work it needed was refinishing the wood floors and painting — not much to keep the Clarkes busy, so they soon moved to a brick row house in the Society Hill neighborhood.

“The house was livable but very large, with a deep lot, and needed a lot of work,” says Melanie. John built a garage and renovated everything but the kitchen. The Clarkes began growing their

family to fill the rooms. “Every time I went to the hospital, there’d be a huge push to finish another room. We were cash poor but invested blood, sweat and tears.”

## FROM PHILADELPHIA TO PRINCETON

The Clarkes lived in Philadelphia for eight years, where Melanie worked for a planning firm for hospitals. After finishing his degree, John commuted to Princeton to work for DSV Partners, a venture fund. Julia, 30, Noelle, 27, and Ellen, 25, were all born while the family lived in Philadelphia.

After three children, Melanie left her job, and the family moved to Princeton, building a house on Foulet Drive. Isabelle, 22, was born in Princeton. It was while living on Foulet Drive that they bought the Steinway grand piano that takes center stage in the living/music room at 200 Mercer.

For people who love fixing up old houses, living in a new house for 20 years was quite a hiatus, so as the daughters went on to independence, the Clarkes knew their time to move had come. “The Foulet Drive neighbors were delightful and wonderful, and it was an ideal place for a young family, but we’d always been looking for an old house,” says Melanie.

Meanwhile, John had gone on to become managing partner at DSV, heading up healthcare and life sciences efforts, and in 1997 went on to found Cardinal Partners, one of the leading venture capital partnerships focused exclusively on healthcare investing. In addition to chairing numerous boards and panels, he has various “side projects” renovating small houses and farms.

When 200 Mercer came along, “it was a great opportunity. It gave us a chance to exercise our renovation dreams and do it the way grownups do,









Musical Director Rossen Milanov and Melanie Clarke preparing an auction dinner. Courtesy of Princeton Symphony Orchestra.





Rossen Milanov directing the Princeton Symphony Orchestra at Richardson Auditorium in Alexander Hall, Princeton University. Courtesy of Princeton Symphony Orchestra.

with an architect and builder and project manager,” says Melanie. And, like grownups, they had the luxury of living in their Foulet Drive home for the duration of the construction.

The kitchen, with granite and soapstone counters and vaulted ceiling, was added on to the house, designed by Knight to replicate the layout of the family’s Vermont house so that finding the sinks, oven and dishwasher is not confusing when going from one house to another. The kitchen opens to the backyard with a large bowed window connecting to the porch.

The new porch runs the entire width of the back of the house, with a curved roof forming a bay over silvery wood decking—it feels like the porch of a grand hotel. A balustrade was repaired and matched to the original. The porch leads to a bluestone terrace, which extends onto a great lawn, a perfect party setting.

Landscape designer Holly Nelson, also a friend, worked with Kale’s Nursery for the late-blooming plantings. On an early fall day, sheep’s-head size hydrangeas were tinged pink. A poplar tree, with enormous ground-grazing branches like arms stretching out in supplication, forms a focal point. Jasper, a Yorkypoo, and Oliver, a Standard Poodle, enjoy the run of the yard.

With three daughters living in New York City, there’s usually one home every weekend. Daughter Isabelle, recently graduated from Harvard with a degree in East Asian studies, was visiting while Melanie led a tour through the house. Two of the daughters believe the house to be haunted and

claim to have seen a child in a hoody at their bedside, according to Melanie. “When the sheetrock was down we found places where there’d been a fire,” she says. “Maybe someone perished.”

### GUESTS ENJOY PRIVACY

And while the Clarkes do enjoy privacy, they find themselves changing sheets frequently between guests. Musicians and guest artists with the orchestra often stay, as might a string quartet in the area. Melanie likes the layout of the rooms, which affords privacy. The third floor landing includes a sort of aerie, with leather sofas, a sea chest, a large screen TV and a view out the large Palladian window. When U.S. Rowing Team members were hosted here they could relax in that space.

Besides overnight guests, there are the parties. Two butler pantries, behind leaded glass doors inspired by similar doors in the Woodrow Wilson house on Library Place, contain 150 wineglasses and service for 50. In the mudroom’s farmhouse sink, Melanie arranges flowers for centerpieces.

A month after the family moved in, a musicale for 100 was held. The annual meeting dinner for the PSO board is held here, and four times a year there is a dinner related to a concert. There was a CASA benefit, and a cocktail party for the Friends of the Princeton University Art Museum, as well as a cookbook author night for the Princeton Public Library. Melanie, who loves to cook—especially desserts—wound up preparing a meal for the authors.

There have been board meetings and a dinner



PSO BRAVO! Instrument Petting Zoo. The “zoo” was open at the Princeton Public Library’s Children’s Book Festival on Saturday, September 20, 2014. Courtesy of Princeton Symphony Orchestra.

for Hands Together, a non-profit organization that provides health care and education support to the needy in Haiti—John is a trustee. The house was featured on the Historical Society Princeton’s house tour two years ago, and the Clarkes have even offered it in a house swap—giving their own share of the swap to the orchestra for an auction item.

But most of all, the house is a place to have fun. An auction item for the symphony’s benefit is a dinner for 12 prepared by Conductor Rossen Milanov and Melanie. “I learned he loves chopping. Since then we do a lot of chopping together. Even in the kitchen, Rossen is a maestro.” **17**