

CHURCH REVIVAL

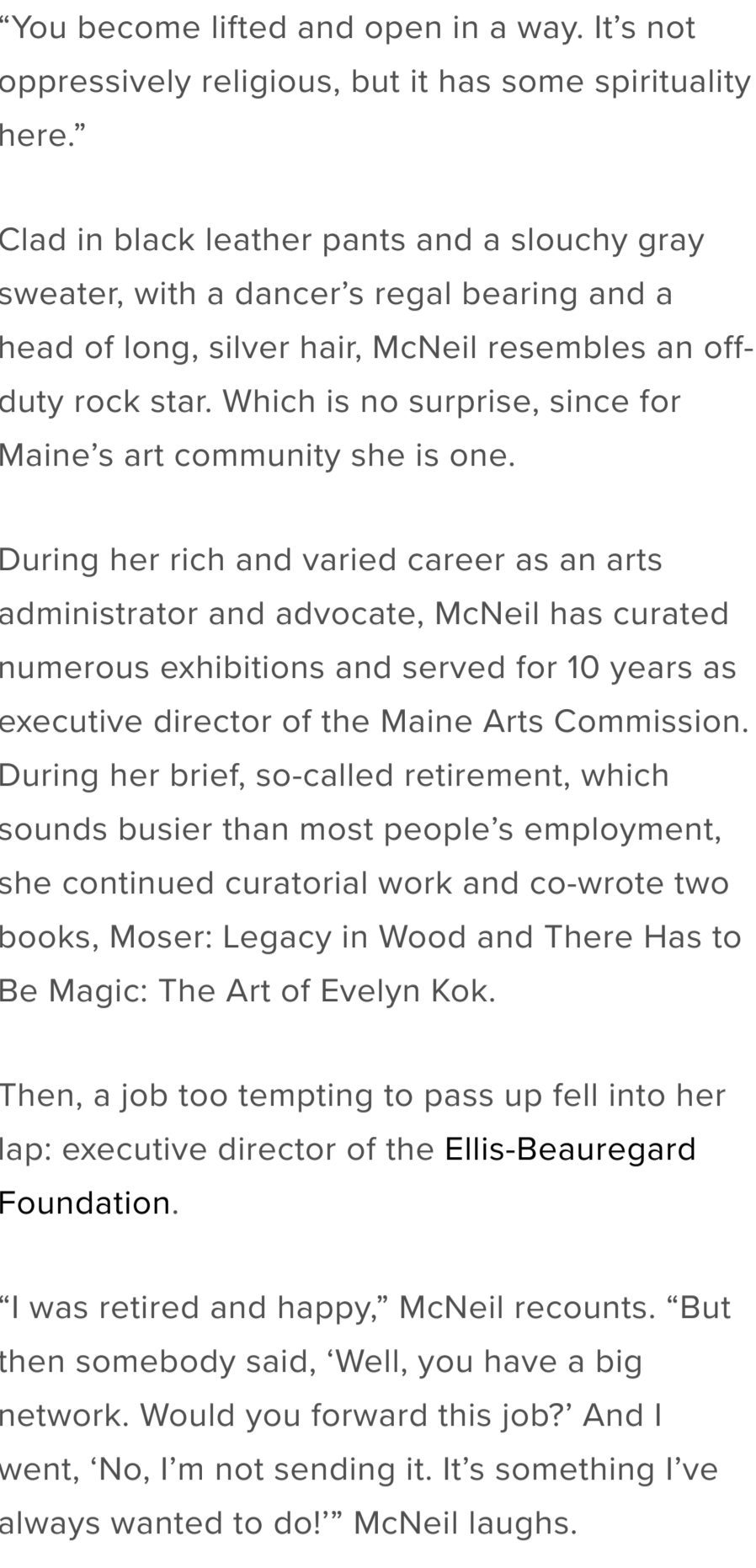
December 19, 2018

Words by Allison Paige | Photos by Myriam Babin

In a historic church in Rockland, Donna McNeil makes a home worth singing about.



The 3,669-square-foot building retains its original wood floors and 40-foot-high ceilings. Three sets of 18-foot windows line two walls and flood the room with light.



Donna McNeil before the former church podium, enjoying the room's copious light.

Step through the lofty doors of the pre-Civil War era church-turned-home of Donna McNeil in Rockland, and the first thing you notice is a sense of openness and beauty, and the accompanying feelings of serenity and graciousness—all words that could be used to describe McNeil herself.

“There’s something that happens when you walk in here, in terms of expansiveness,” she says. “You become lifted and open in a way. It’s not oppressively religious, but it has some spirituality here.”

Clad in black leather pants and a slouchy gray sweater, with a dancer’s regal bearing and a head of long, silver hair, McNeil resembles an off-duty rock star. Which is no surprise, since for Maine’s art community she is one.

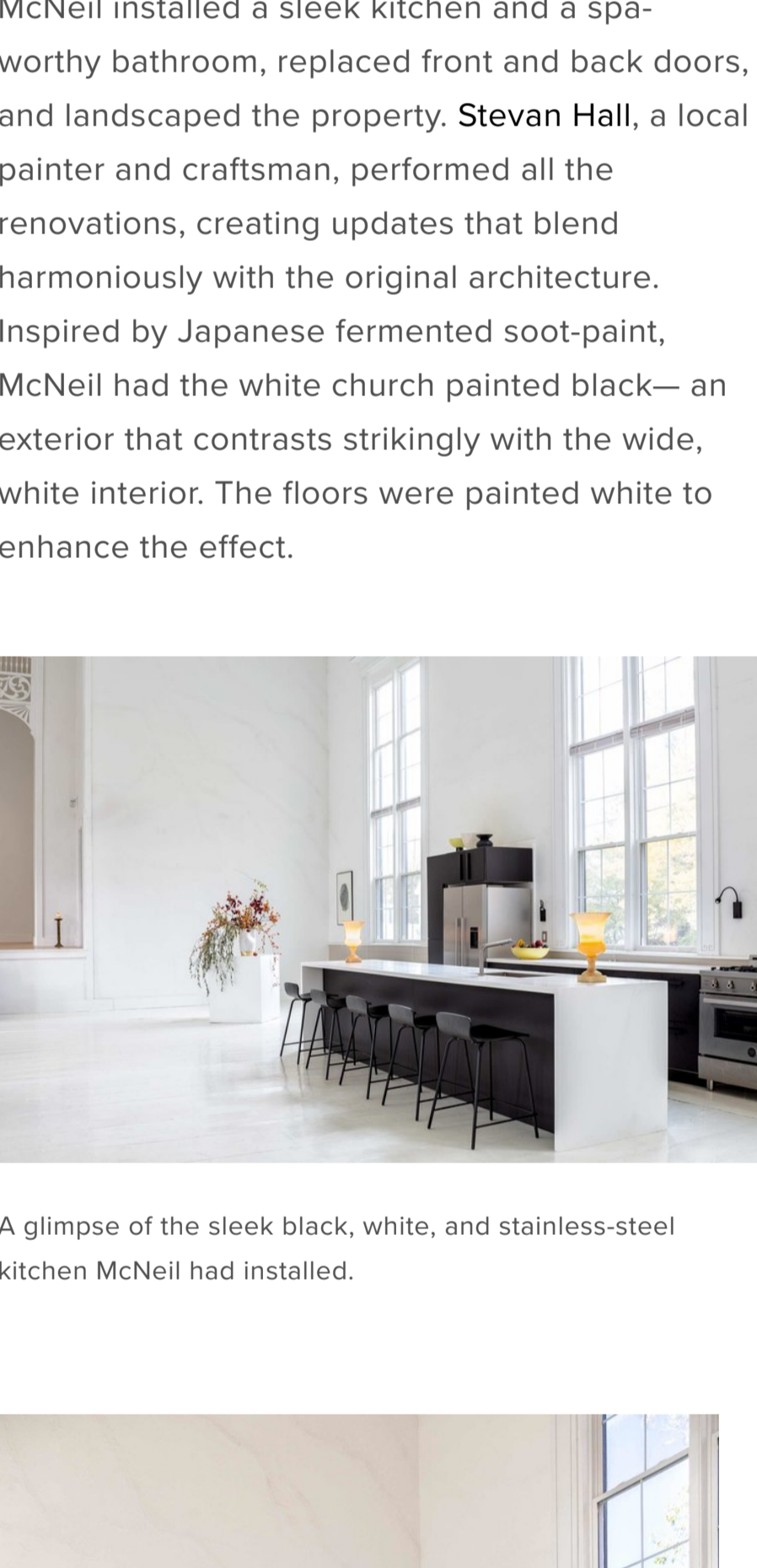
During her rich and varied career as an arts administrator and advocate, McNeil has curated numerous exhibitions and served for 10 years as executive director of the Maine Arts Commission. During her brief, so-called retirement, which sounds busier than most people’s employment, she continued curatorial work and co-wrote two books, *Moser: Legacy in Wood* and *There Has to Be Magic: The Art of Evelyn Kok*.

Then, a job too tempting to pass up fell into her lap: executive director of the **Ellis-Beauregard Foundation**.

“I was retired and happy,” McNeil recounts. “But then somebody said, ‘Well, you have a big network. Would you forward this job?’ And I went, ‘No, I’m not sending it. It’s something I’ve always wanted to do!’” McNeil laughs.

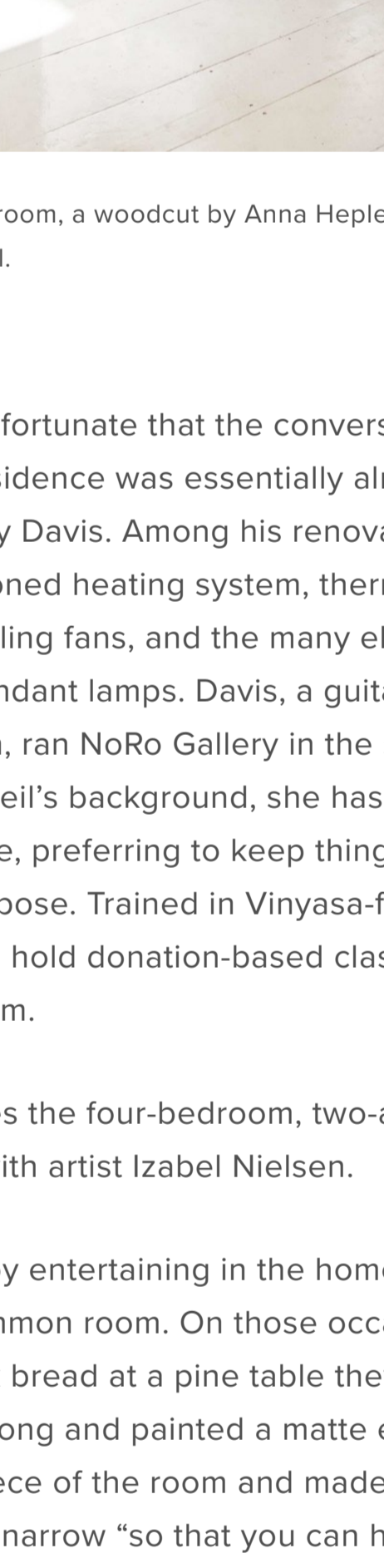
The Ellis-Beauregard Foundation, a philanthropic organization founded by painters John David Ellis and Joan Beauregard, awards residencies and grants to Maine-based visual artists and writers. “It’s tough to be a philanthropist when you don’t have any money,” says McNeil. “But now I run a philanthropic organization, so the generosity comes through my work.”

McNeil became the founding executive director of the foundation and soon began house-hunting on the midcoast. She sought an unconventional space, and when she heard of a church for sale, it seemed fated.



In the living area, a womb chair by Eero Saarinen McNeil had reupholstered in vintage Knoll fabric. The blue chair is midcentury Danish. The lamp by Vetri, from the 1970s, has a Murano glass shade. The rug is by Angela Adams.

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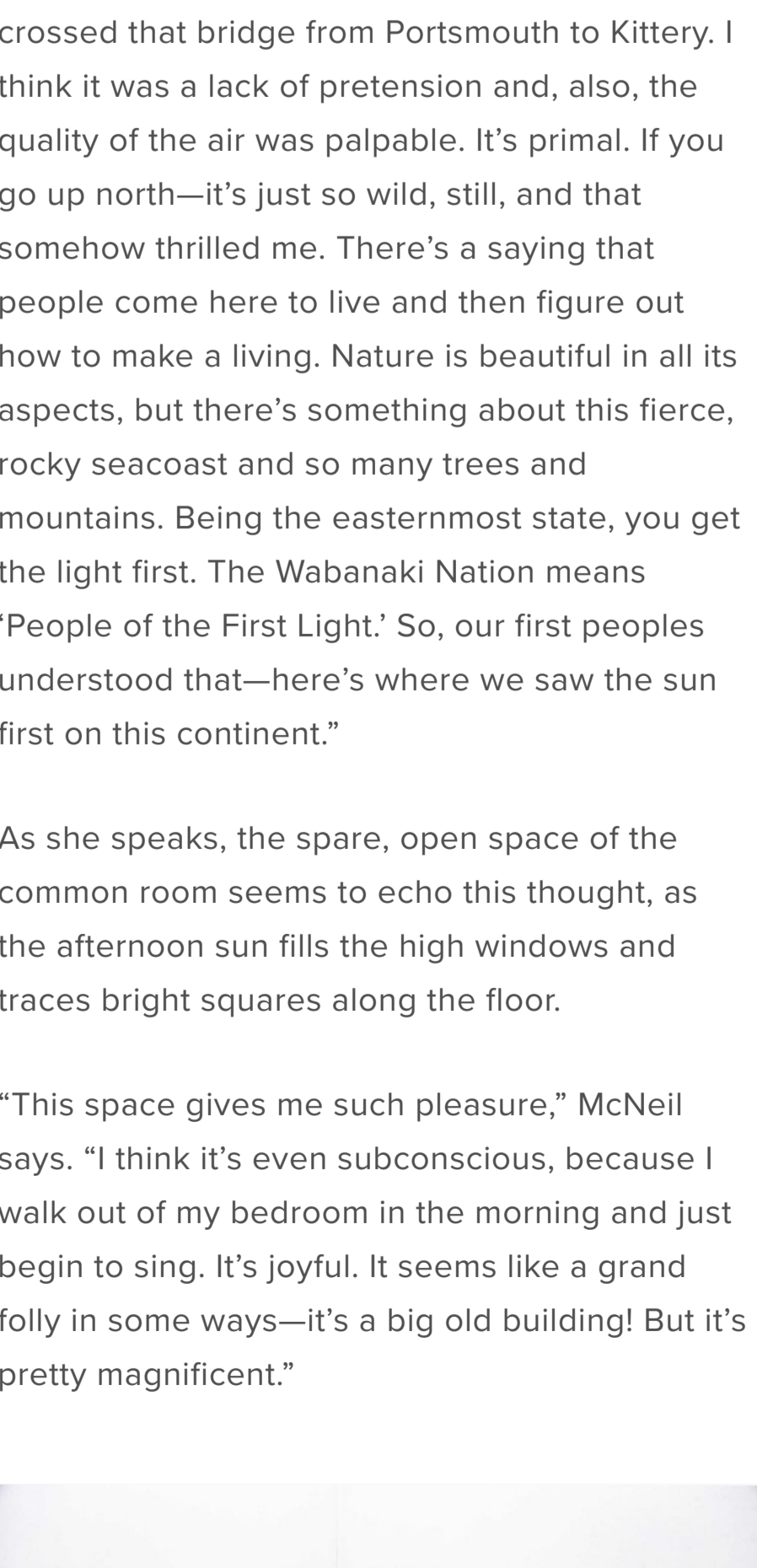
The Federalist-era building was erected in 1851 for the Second Baptist Church congregation by General Hiram G. Berry. A master carpenter and lumber merchant, Berry served as mayor of Rockland before fighting in the Civil War, eventually achieving the rank of major general before perishing in the Battle of Chancellorsville. Later used by Christian Scientists and the Salvation Army, the church was converted into a residence by the previous owner Peter Davis, who purchased the building in 2007 and spent the next ten years renovating it.

The 3,669-square-foot building retains its original wood floors and 40-foot-high ceilings. Three sets of 18-foot windows line two walls and flood the room with light. The one-time nave is now a multipurpose space comprising living and dining areas, of which the balcony, perhaps once a choir loft, grants a sweeping view. While austere, little flourishes of ornamentation delight, like the filigree latticework above the podium and the tin ceiling tiles embossed with fanciful griffins and putti-like faces.

McNeil installed a sleek kitchen and a spa-worthy bathroom, replaced front and back doors, and landscaped the property. **Stevan Hall**, a local painter and craftsman, performed all the renovations, creating updates that blend harmoniously with the original architecture. Inspired by Japanese fermented soot-paint, McNeil had the white church painted black—an exterior that contrasts strikingly with the wide, white interior. The floors were painted white to enhance the effect.



A glimpse of the sleek black, white, and stainless-steel kitchen McNeil had installed.



In the common room, a woodcut by Anna Hepler hangs on the back wall.

McNeil feels fortunate that the conversion from church to residence was essentially already completed by Davis. Among his renovations, he installed a zoned heating system, thermal windows, ceiling fans, and the many elegant deco-like pendant lamps. Davis, a guitar maker and musician, ran NoRo Gallery in the space. Despite McNeil’s background, she has no plans to do likewise, preferring to keep things mutable and multipurpose. Trained in Vinyasa-flow yoga, she hopes to hold donation-based classes on the former podium.

McNeil shares the four-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath home with artist Izabel Nielsen.

The two enjoy entertaining in the home’s gracious common room. On those occasions, guests break bread at a pine table they built. Twelve feet long and painted a matte ebony, it is the centerpiece of the room and made purposefully narrow “so that you can have conversations,” McNeil explains. Two original pews, also painted black, serve as dining benches. “Generosity is one of my favorite qualities, to be generous with your home, your space, and your hospitality,” she says.

Her philosophy of inclusiveness extends to her taste in art and design. While the items in her home are, naturally, carefully considered—with paintings and drawings by some of contemporary art’s best—a blend of fine art and flea market treasures, like the Tramp Art mirror in the guest bedroom, make for a democratic high-low aesthetic that manages to feel both aspirational and attainable. A collection of what, at first glance appear to be antique ivory vessels, is actually early-plastic powder boxes found in a Lincolnville antique shop. “Anything on the table was five dollars each, in with a bunch of junk,” McNeil reveals. “And then I put them here and they started to sing.”

This talent, inherent and mysterious, for selecting just the right piece has clearly served her in good stead, both in her home life and career.

On finding the right objects, McNeil muses, “You sort of know when you fall in love with something. It’s about looking—and not so much on precedent, or scrolling through Pinterest pages, looking at what other people do. Something happens innately. You respond to objects or images or shapes, textures or color. It’s pretty intuitive for me. I don’t think it’s an intellectual exercise at all.”

In Nielsen’s room, an antique painted iron bed McNeil found on Craigslist for seventy-five dollars.

Prior to moving to Maine in 1990, McNeil owned a gallery in Amherst, Massachusetts. After 20 years, she felt well integrated in the community but was nonetheless restless. “I just could see the end of my life. So, in my 40s, I threw it all up in the air. I sold everything and came here.”

For McNeil, the sense of possibility was immediate. “Something happened when I crossed that bridge from Portsmouth to Kittery. I think it was a lack of pretension and, also, the quality of the air was palpable. It’s primal. If you go up north—it’s just so wild, still, and that somehow thrilled me. There’s a saying that people come here to live and then figure out how to make a living. Nature is beautiful in all its aspects, but there’s something about this fierce, rocky seacoast and so many trees and mountains. Being the easternmost state, you get the light first. The Wabanaki Nation means ‘People of the First Light.’ So, our first peoples understood that—here’s where we saw the sun first on this continent.”

As she speaks, the spare, open space of the common room seems to echo this thought, as the afternoon sun fills the high windows and traces bright squares along the floor.

“This space gives me such pleasure,” McNeil says. “I think it’s even subconscious, because I walk out of my bedroom in the morning and just begin to sing. It’s joyful. It seems like a grand folly in some ways—it’s a big old building! But it’s pretty magnificent.”

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