

Notes From the Underground

by Jon Vara

I took particular pleasure in this breaking of ground, for in almost all latitudes men dig into the earth for an equable temperature. The house is but a sort of porch at the entrance of a burrow.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*



Tom Johnson at the entry of the underground home where he lived for ten years.

The island of Nantucket is home to some of the most expensive real estate this side of downtown Manhattan. Buildable land sells for about \$6 million an acre, and a two-room summer rental goes for several thousand a week. A good carpenter commands \$70 an hour or more, but even at that wage scale, few can afford on-island accommodations. Many builders commute by air from nearby Cape Cod — a bargain at \$60 a day — while others roll out sleeping bags at the job site, or curl up on the front seats of their trucks.



Down the hatch. While Johnson's three-room, 150-square-foot dwelling was admittedly on the small side, it featured some surprising amenities, including full 8-foot ceilings, white cedar paneling, and a partial stone floor.

But a resourceful carpenter by the name of Thomas Johnson found a better way to get around the island's shortage of affordable housing. Working in secret, mostly at night, he built a tiny but comfortable underground house beneath an out-of-the-way patch of woods owned by the Boy Scouts of America, and lived there undetected for nearly a decade.

Johnson's clandestine approach to building imposed some serious design limitations. Materials had to be carried in by hand along a 300-yard deer path,



Fire down below. A tiny, handmade wood-stove kept the house warm during the coldest weather. Thanks to its earth-sheltered design and foam insulation, Johnson reports, the indoor temperature never dropped below 50°F even when the stove had been out for days.



No phone, no lights, no motorcars. Like the inhabitants of Gilligan's Island, Johnson did lack certain luxuries. He carried in drinking water, used a chemical toilet, and relied on kerosene lamps for illumination.



With the past rudely buried, Johnson moves on. His Nantucket dwelling is no more, but like the island's wealthier residents, he owns a number of homes elsewhere. Have you checked under those bushes in your side yard?

so he devised a lightweight but surprisingly durable building system, based on conventional 2x4 studs, 2-inch foam board sheathing, and an outer waterproof layer of 6-mil polyethylene. To avoid giving himself away with the sound of hammering, he used drywall screws rather than nails. "You can do a little banging when it's blowing hard or raining," he says. "I've learned a lot from watching the animals. They know how to move around when they won't be observed."

Home audio. The structure was partially above grade — concealed by a low mound of earth covered with dense bushes — to accommodate casement windows in light wells. Among its other distinctions, Johnson's home may have been the only one on the island to feature a built-in acoustic guitar.



A quiet, introspective man, Johnson earned a frugal living by working with local builders for several months each year. A few of his friends knew of his unusual living arrangement, and had even visited him at home. But in November of 1998, the metaphorical roof caved in. A passing hunter stumbled onto a stovepipe sticking out of the ground, found the concealed door to Johnson's abode, and reported it to the local police. A reporter for the *Washington Post* broke in when Johnson

wasn't home, went through his belongings, and wrote a story that was picked up by newspapers worldwide. The local authorities demolished his house with a backhoe.

It was a difficult experience, but Johnson is philosophical about it. "People get upset if you're not spinning your hamster wheel," he says. "But it did bother me that people who'd never seen it kept calling my place a 'bunker,' like I was some kind of crazy survivalist."

His brush with fame behind him, Johnson still lives and works on Nantucket for much of the year. When not on the island, he divides his time between several houses at undisclosed locations around the Northeast — all produced by the unique one-man development company that Johnson calls Underwood Homes. "No one builds like I do," he says, and recites the company slogan: "If you can see it from 10 feet away, it's not an Underwood Home."

