

Salvage and Reuse on Nantucket: Saving History and Reducing Waste



Moving houses is a time-honored tradition on Nantucket. – Photo courtesy of Toscana

Britt Bowker

Infrastructure | Nantucket Green Guide

Nantucket

On Nantucket, construction is constant. Turn down nearly any road and you're bound to see something being built, renovated, or torn down. In February, islanders saw the **demolition of the Downyflake**, the iconic year-round restaurant on Sparks Avenue, along with several neighboring structures, all cleared to make way for an 18,000 square-foot mixed-use complex. A month earlier, a house on **Sheep Pond Road was leveled**, condemned just six months after it sold for \$200,000, a price that factored in the encroaching erosion. Last fall, a nearly century-old **downtown storefront on Cambridge Street** was razed to make room for a two-story addition.

These projects — and many more that don't make headlines — generate a staggering amount of waste. Since 2022, at least 17,000 tons of construction and demolition debris are shipped off the island to landfills each year, usually in Maine or Ohio. That's according to **a study** by Remain Nantucket and the Nantucket Preservation Trust (NPT), conducted with Boston-based consulting firm EBP.

This steady stream of debris doesn't just take up space in distant landfills — it also contributes to climate change. As discarded materials decompose, they emit greenhouse gases like methane, a potent driver of global warming. But there's a more sustainable way forward: The same study estimates that at least 4,500 tons of this material could be salvaged and reused instead of thrown away.



To help make that shift, Remain, the NPT, and other local leaders are working together to raise awareness and promote practical solutions for reuse — from encouraging deconstruction to envisioning an island architectural salvage yard. Goals are to create a more centralized system and circular economy that reduces emissions, cuts down on costly waste transport, and helps ease the housing crisis by supporting more affordable housing.

And already, there are signs of progress.

Stay connected to powerful stories about people making a difference in our world.

Sign up for our newsletter, The Hub, and keep up with the latest uplifting climate action news, sustainable living advice, and Earth-conscious recipes. [Sign Up Now.](#)

One recent win was the **demolition delay bylaw** passed at last September's town meeting without debate. Sponsored by the NPT, the bylaw extends the required waiting period before a building can be torn down from two months to six. The extra time allows for exploring alternatives to demolition, encouraging the reuse of buildings, and salvaging valuable materials. It also requires property owners to advertise the structure in a local paper, offering the building to anyone willing to move or reuse it.

More than six months in, Mary Bergman, executive director of the NPT, says the effects are already being felt. "We're seeing more time spent on demolition applications at the Historic District Commission, and more of them being denied — things that would have been approved years ago, like outbuildings, garages, and historic additions," she told Bluedot. "I think there's been more public attention drawn to this. People are just kind of waking up to how much waste there is."

People tear down homes on Nantucket for many reasons, but it has a lot to do with how valuable land is. "They're not making more of it," Mary said. "It's eroding. So it's like, 'I want this house. I want this property on this road in this spot. I don't want the house that's there,'— which is a hard thing for me to wrap my mind around. But if it's going to happen, I'd rather see things reused than smashed."

While the bylaw buys time to consider alternatives, many on Nantucket also take the literal approach to preservation: they move the entire house. It's a strategy that serves multiple purposes. Not only does it prevent demolition, but it helps provide housing for year-round residents — and increasingly, it's part of the island's broader resiliency strategy.

“ There's not a demolition permit that's issued that someone doesn't call and ask, 'Can this be moved to this place? Can I have it? Who's got it?' The town has definitely come a long way in trying to save homes and relocate them instead of demolish them.

— Tris Gauvin, Toscana

”

In a place where erosion and flooding are intensifying, relocating structures is also a way to adapt. "When you look at Nantucket's coastal resilience plan, part of the plan is to reduce density in areas. Okay, so what does that mean? It means removing houses," Mary said.

Moving houses away from vulnerable shorelines has become an increasingly common tactic in response to sea level rise and changing topography. "Any sort of isolated community where natural resources like lumber are at a premium, you're going to see houses moving," she said.

And Nantucket **leads the state in house moves**. Last year, the town relocated 84 structures; in 2023, it moved 79 structures; and in 2022 the number was 114 structures. As of April this year, nine structures had been moved.





Nantucket's narrow streets make for difficult house-moving. - Photo courtesy of Toscana

Toscana Corporation is one of a few island businesses equipped for that kind of work. Norman "Tris" Gauvin, Toscana's senior house-moving crew member and a Nantucket native, has worked in the field for 24 years. He estimates 65% of the houses his team moves are due to coastal erosion or flooding. He also regularly fields calls from residents or real estate agents who hear about a house slated for demolition — sometimes through the required newspaper ad, sometimes through word of mouth — and wonder if it can be saved.

"There's not a demolition permit that's issued that someone doesn't call and ask, 'Can this be moved to this place? Can I have it? Who's got it?'" Tris said. "The town has definitely come a long way in trying to save homes and relocate them instead of demolish them."

He pointed to a current project on Dukes Road where a homeowner hoped to demolish a historic structure on his property, but the town wouldn't allow it. Though several people tried to claim and move the building, its width made that difficult for Nantucket's narrow roads.

"So now he's relocated it on his property," Tris said. "He paid to get it jacked up and put on dollies because he knew the town was going to make him move it. But then everyone that wanted it had it going to properties that it couldn't get to. So it's still sitting on dollies waiting for someone to move it."

Beyond private efforts, nonprofits like Housing Nantucket also play a key role. The organization's House Recycling program encourages homeowners to donate structurally sound homes to be relocated as affordable year-round housing.

"The majority of our Nantucket rental units were moved from private property to our land, which is in scattered sites around the island," the nonprofit's [website states](#). "Your Nantucket dwelling could be next in providing island families with a year-round, affordable place to live."

The program prioritizes small homes — less than 22 feet wide and under two stories — that are in good condition and accessible by paved road.

Last spring, the same property owners on Dukes Road donated another one of their structures to the House Recycling program. It was successfully moved across the island to Pochick Avenue.

Of course, not every structure can be moved. But that doesn't mean it's destined for the dump. An alternative is gaining traction: deconstruction, the careful dismantling of buildings piece by piece, to preserve and reuse everything from beams and floorboards to hardware and trim.



House moves on Nantucket since 2012. – Courtesy of Nantucket Preservation Trust

Chris Carey, owner of Carey Company Inc., has been building custom homes on the island for 20 years. Now, he's launching a nonprofit focused on deconstruction.

"I just realized looking around that my industry is terribly wasteful, especially on Nantucket where we have such restrictive space," Chris told *Bluedot*. "Every contractor I know has got a space filled to the brim with everything they could possibly save, but there's nowhere else to go with everything, so a lot of it just ends up in the landfill and it's a problem. I just feel bad about it."

Chris teamed up with Remain's Virna Gonzalez, a longtime advocate for salvage and reuse efforts on Nantucket. She helped usher along the [first feasibility study with EBP](#), and last year she brought a Nantucket cohort to a sustainability conference in Georgia, where she met deconstruction consultant Dave Bennink, known for his work with salvage operations around the world. Chris connected with Dave, and with the help of a state microgrant, Chris hired him as a consultant, and brought him to Nantucket last summer to explore how a deconstruction model could work here.

Chris and his team recently moved forward with a "test pilot" deconstruction project on a 4,000-square-foot home built in the 1990s. They salvaged what they could: flooring, cabinetry, countertops, lighting, bluestone, hardware, doors, and appliances. Some materials, like the shingles, were harder to save due to being stapled rather than nailed. "If we can find a way to bundle those up and maybe even sell them as kindling, that's better than throwing it in the dump," he said.

Roughly 20 to 30 percent of the materials from the house were reclaimed and redistributed through local channels like Facebook Marketplace and Nantucket Consignments. The rest was demolished — but for a first project, Chris called it a success.



Sometimes a house move just means lifting it up. – Photo courtesy of Toscana

“We learned a lot,” he said. “It wasn’t a home run, but we tested the model.”

Chris is still in the process of formalizing the nonprofit, and said one of the biggest hurdles is storage space. A salvage storefront could make a major difference, and he’s hoping to coordinate with the town on a location. In the meantime, he’s eyeing other potential deconstruction projects.

“As a contractor on the island, I know most of the people,” Chris said. “I can reach out to designers or the people that are working on the permits, designs, or whatever for the new place and see if the homeowners are willing to participate in this.”

He added that homeowners get a “nice tax write off” when they do deconstruction. “It’s a donation for them, so they can save money on their taxes,” Chris said. “When it comes down to the checks and balances or the cost benefit of doing a deconstruction versus just demolishing a house, from the homeowners perspective, it makes a lot of sense.”

Through another connection through Virna and Remain, a recent salvage effort took place on Pocomo Road, a \$19.2 million spec house that was purchased mid-construction, and then **slated for demolition** to make way for a redesigned mansion. The builder, Josh Brown of Brown Design and Construction, hosted a salvage event and a truckload of materials was sent to the Boston Building Resource Reuse Center — the closest salvage center to Nantucket.

“ These strategies — housing moving, salvage, and deconstruction — aren’t just a sustainable way forward, they’re also nods to the past. There was a time where the island had to be self-sufficient and reuse things, unable to easily ship waste off-island or import materials. ”



"The amount of stuff that got taken out of there was unbelievable," Tris said. "That was one of those houses that couldn't go anywhere. It wouldn't fit." He said a similar salvaging opportunity also took place at a neighboring home on Pocomo Road.

"There was a piece of paper with a link that people could scan on the door, and they would have to donate to a fundraiser, but they could take what they wanted out of the house," Tris said.

Remain has also recently partnered with the Nantucket Land Bank to advance a deconstruction initiative at the 19 East Creek Road property along the creeks behind Our Island Home. Virna presented a two-part proposal that would gift the Land Bank a deconstruction building assessment by "the vetted and trusted team" at Boston Building Resources (BBR), Virna said. If deconstruction moves forward, Remain proposed to expand the opportunity by offering a workforce deconstruction training workshop, potentially in August 2025, hosted by the Nantucket Community school and BBR through a curriculum developed by the **ReUse People**. Additionally, thanks to Remain, about 40 pieces of gently used office furniture made their way from Boston to a dozen Nantucket nonprofits as a way of showing the benefits and cost savings of reusable workspaces.

These strategies — housing moving, salvage, and deconstruction — aren't just a sustainable way forward, they're also nods to the past. There was a time where the island had to be self-sufficient and reuse things, unable to easily ship waste off-island or import materials.

"Things were always circular by nature back then," Chris said. "Things change with the boats bringing everything over now, but traditionally, Nantucket had a circular economy."

Houses that are moved are lowered onto a foundation. – Photo courtesy of Toscana

Mary Bergman pointed out that even the entire town was once moved, noting that the town used to be called Sherburne and was located two to three miles west of where it is now, before the old harbor silted over.

"It closed over with sand, so ships couldn't get in and out, and basically the whole town was deconstructed and moved," she said. "Many timber frame houses — some were moved on rolling logs and some were taken down and reassembled in our current harbor — the Great Harbor, or Nantucket Harbor."

She noted that moving structures has long been part of life in coastal communities — from Billingsgate Island (a now-gone island community in Welfleet); to Provincetown (the entire village of Long Point was moved a mile and a half over the water to the town's west end); to Martha's Vineyard (houses moved all over the island).

"I think in Edgartown there's been one house in **15 years that's been moved**," Mary said. "It's just a practice that has sort of fallen out of recent memory over there. But I just know they had to do it because they were in a similar position that we were in. So it's funny how Nantucket's long tradition of house moving has stayed at the forefront, and in some ways I think is what has



allowed us to strengthen this bylaw and see more houses moved, because it's a history and a kind of culture — a tradition that people feel very proud of."

She added: "In a world where our economy is based on tourism, we are losing a lot of our cultural heritage. I think anything that can encourage us to be more sustainable in our building practice, and remember that this is the way people's grandfathers and great grandfathers lived — it's good."

How Tax Breaks Work for Deconstruction and Reuse

— Photo courtesy of Toscana

Homeowners who choose deconstruction — the careful dismantling of a structure for reuse — may qualify for significant tax deductions. Like any charitable donation, the key is where the salvaged materials go.

If the materials are donated to a nonprofit 501 (c)(3) public charity, (like Housing Nantucket or Boston Building Resources), the donor can claim the value as a charitable deduction:

- Under \$5,000 in value: The homeowner estimates the value themselves and reports it on their tax return.
- Over \$5,000: A qualified, independent appraiser must evaluate the donation. Many use services like The Green Mission, which often assess materials based on photos.

After the donation, the receiving nonprofit typically signs IRS Form 8283 to confirm receipt — but it's the donor's responsibility to claim and substantiate the value.

In the case of full-house donations (such as moving a home to affordable housing), the appraised value of the structure may be deductible. However, costs like moving the building might reduce the overall deduction or be considered separately.

While not many municipalities offer incentives, places like Hennepin County, Minnesota, provide grants to encourage reuse in renovation projects — showing growing interest in both supply and demand for salvaged materials. Kord Jablonski, president and executive director of Boston Building Resources, helped explain all of this to Bluedot Living, but of course, individuals should consult a tax professional for guidance.



Whitney Schrauth's Salvage Mission: The Saltie Museum

Wood materials from SA+C's salvage inventory. – Photo courtesy of SA+C

Whitney Schrauth, a licensed architect and longtime seasonal Nantucket resident, has been quietly practicing sustainable design since founding her firm SA+C (Sustainable Architecture + Consulting) in 2000. Operating both on Nantucket and in California, Whitney has always prioritized historic preservation, adaptive reuse, and environmentally conscious building. Now, she's taking that mission even further.

During a major renovation of her California home in 2020, Whitney committed to a zero-waste approach — documenting the process, rethinking materials, and turning leftover scraps into creative, functional designs. That project sparked what has become a full-scale salvage initiative and an online marketplace where she lists products people can purchase or take for free.

To expand these efforts, Whitney is in the process of launching a nonprofit called The Saltie Museum, envisioned as a hub for education, reuse, and sustainable design on Nantucket. She plans to start with a branded box truck, and eventually grow into a storefront with a collaborative model supporting a circular economy.

"Imagine a curated architectural salvage that happens to have really awesome housewares, music playing, and free coffee," Whitney told Bluedot. "And it's geared to young people, crafty people, visitors, locals — it's an everything sustainability center."

She calls her approach "connecting the dots of everyone's unique shared experience." She hopes to help grow the movement, bring on volunteers, and scale up operations.

"Whether it's a partnership, a private-public collaboration, or support from a benefactor," she said, "I'm ready to get my salty outpost going."

To find out more, visit saandc.com/salvage or saltiemuseum.org. Email whitney@saandc.com to get in touch.

May 22, 2025

