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Great Barrington contractor reconstructs, restores historic buildings





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These joints are from a 1693 West Newberry barn that is being restored by David Lanoue. The Roman numerals are markings from the original construction.



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By Clarence Fanto, Special to The Eagle

GREAT BARRINGTON

On a bucolic spread in the Van Deusenville section of Great Barrington near the Guthrie Center, lies a preservation-oriented building and design contracting company that reassembles and restores historic barns and houses from as far back as the 17th century.

David E. Lanoue Inc. Building and Design -- devoted to the preservation and restoration of traditional architecture -- is opening its expansive workshop to the public this Saturday to show off two of its prized restorations-in-progress. The company motto could well be "back to the future."

On display at Lanoue's five-acre site two miles south of Housatonic village will be the frameworks of the Bardeen-Culver English barn from West Newbury. It's believed to be the nation's oldest timber-frame barn -- dating from 1693 with re-framing modifications in 1715. Also, there's a Connecticut River Valley English barn from Whately, built in 1789.

Lanoue, 61, opened his firm in 1978, and while he still handles general home design and construction projects, he is passionate about the meticulous, painstaking re-creation of structures built to stand the test of time over four centuries.

During a preview for Eagle visitors on Tuesday, Lanoue explained how the barns had to be reassembled and with full-size custom pieces, not through pre-cut parts. He and his staff of 15 specially trained craftsmen took over the Whately barn restoration project from the Historic Deerfield living history museum. He acquired the West Newbury barn from a private owner after learning about it through the preservationists' grapevine.

Scientific labs determined the exact years the barns were built, using the process known as dendrochronology -- dating the timber through tree-ring growth.

"There's more to reading a piece of wood than meets the eye," Lanoue said. He pointed out Roman numerals that were etched into the old timber by craftsmen until about 1800.

Lanoue expects the barn restorations will be completed this summer. Work began last November and each barn has required more than 2,000 hours of labor so far. He uses dry oak, white pine or hard pine to make repairs and to match the original construction.

Eventually, the barns may be sold to private collectors, Lanoue said.

"Private individuals seem to step up for these kinds of things," he said. "But it's uncharted territory because there have been no offerings like this."

Pricing remains to be determined.

"How to do you compare it with anything?" Lanoue said.

Lanoue expects at least 125 preservation-minded visitors will attend Saturday's free exhibition, with many coming from Boston, the North Shore, the Pioneer Valley and New York's Hudson Valley, as well as the Berkshires.

The open house from 1 to 4 p.m. will include two presentations. One will be by architect, timber-frame specialist and author Jack Sobon of Windsor, who will discuss the "restoration philosophy," how to date old buildings, and Lanoue's restoration methods. William Flynt, the architectural conservator of Historic Deerfield, will explain the art and science of precisely dating old timber.

The firm's regular remodeling projects so far this year include an addition to a Stockbridge house, replicas of two early timber-frame barns, and the restoration of the Brethren's Shop at Mount Lebanon, which is part of Hancock Shaker Village, in collaboration with several students from Boston's North Bennet Street Trade School. North Bennet is among the nation's oldest and best-known craft and trade schools, dating back to 1885.

"We're into bringing as many old buildings to Berkshire County as possible and saving as many as possible," Lanoue said.

Recalling his work on old buildings with his late father, Joseph, a master carpenter, Lanoue explained that a preference for handcrafted construction stems from having "a sense of history, liking old things and being able to tell the difference between something of quality and something machine-made."

Built-in obsolescence is among today's problems, according to Lanoue. "We're forced to fund all sorts of efforts that are short-lived," he said.

He added, "The work agrees with me. It's not a bad way to spend the day."

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If you go

What: Free exhibition of artifacts and assembled sections of two restored English barns from West Newbury and Whately, dating from 1693-1715 and 1789, respectively.

When: Saturday, 1 to 4 p.m.

Where: David E. Lanoue Inc. Building and Design workshop, 2 Nolan Drive, Great Barrington (off Van Deusenville Road, near Division Street).

Why: To share with preservation-minded people the restoration and design firm's research, knowledge and preservation efforts concerning two unique, early timber frame barns important to Massachusetts history.

Speakers: Architect, timber frame specialist and author Jack Sobon of Windsor on preservation and restoration philosophy and methodology; William Flynt, architectural conservator of Historic Deerfield on the science of dendrochronology (the study of tree ring growth patterns to determine the age of archaeological timbers).

Information: www.lanoueinc.com (http://www.lanoueinc.com), (413) 298-4621, or email: lanoueinc@aol.com (mailto:lanoueinc@aol.com).

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