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Preserving Vermont's symbols

By Adele Holoch

For Eliot Lothrop, the process of building a business isn't just about finding and developing relationships with clients.

It's literally about building — swinging hammers, erecting timber and laying bricks.

A historic preservationist, Lothrop has translated a love of old buildings into a business, Building Heritage LLC, which works to renovate a wide range of Vermont's historic structures such as corncribs, homes and barns.

A 2002 graduate of the University of Vermont's historic preservation graduate program, Lothrop, 27, earned timber framing experience as he worked toward his master's degree by serving with other timber framers around the state.

The hands-on nature of working on old barns and other historic timber structures appealed to him, he said.

"I always knew that I wanted to be doing hands-on stuff. I had an appreciation for going out and seeing buildings and going into them, getting that exposure versus being in an office setting," Lothrop said.

His experience taught him there was a demand for a historic preservation business specializing in timber frame repairs. A year and a half ago, he launched Building Heritage.

"I saw that little window and I went for it," he said.

One of a few

Since he started the business, he has relied largely on referrals and word-of-mouth to find work. One source of referrals has been Liberty Head Post and Beam, a Huntington company that once salvaged, dismantled and rebuilt old timber frame structures and now specializes entirely in building new timber frame structures.

"We get calls all the time about old barns that have sat neglected for many years, and people want to restore them or stabilize them," said Duncan Keir, owner of Liberty Head Post and Beam.

Keir professes an affinity for restoration work, though his business is no longer able to do it.

"There are not too many people like Eliot in his business doing this," he said.

Lothrop's preservation projects take between two weeks and a month for smaller projects, and about three months for larger projects that involve lifting an entire building off its foundation.

He has worked on projects that include the Calkins corncrib at the Intervale, a timber frame house in

Montpelier, a carriage barn in Hinesburg, a schoolhouse in Huntington, and the East Monitor Barn in Richmond.

The method

When Lothrop begins a project, he gathers information about the building, both from the client and the building itself.

If a client has historic photographs, "we work off those photos as much as we can, but we can also get a ton of information from just reading the building," Lothrop said. "We can tell what age different materials are. If a timber is hewn by hand, we know it's of a certain age, versus a timber with vertical saw marks versus a timber with circular saw marks," he said.

"Most often, what we run into are contemporary additions that detract from the building -- a lot of concrete additions. Very often, it's easy to read what isn't historic or what needs to be removed or replaced."

Once he has analyzed the building, Lothrop starts its restoration.

"We do just about anything that's required of a historic building," he said, including "timber repairs, a lot of stone repair, dry- and mortar-laid stone foundations, some brick work, and a fair amount of interior carpentry as well."

Although Lothrop is a specialist in timber framing, he exchanges services with a few classmates from his historic preservation program at UVM -- a specialist in window restoration and a specialist in masonry -- when he needs help with his projects.

"We trade off from time to time and find ways to bring in each other's talents," he said.

Skills and degrees

"In this work, I think the future belongs to skilled craftspeople with advanced degrees who are out there working on buildings and able to impart their theoretical knowledge," said Doug Porter, a member of the research faculty at UVM and a field service representative at the Preservation Trust of Vermont.

"I love it that (Lothrop's) business is growing," added Porter, who expressed concern about what he sees as increasing pressures on the traditional Vermont landscape. "We have a unique environment here and a unique opportunity to preserve it, and I think the pressure to do otherwise has never been greater."

Keir agreed Lothrop's work through Building Heritage is important. Preservation is "advantageous, not only to the owner of a building, but to the state as a whole," he said.

In 30 years of timber frame restoration and building, Keir said he has seen hundreds of old barns destroyed -- victims of fires, weather and disrepair. The Vermont barn "is a symbol of Vermont's agricultural roots and the pastoral landscape," he said.

Lothrop acknowledges that his work "is a very small niche," and that he has been fortunate to be as successful as he has.

"I was incredibly lucky to time it right and get a chance to make a couple of impressions and get things rolling," he said.

BOX: Company profile

BUSINESS: Building Heritage LLC

PRINCIPAL: Eliot Lothrop

WHAT: Historic preservation company specializing in stabilization and repair of timber frame buildings.

WHERE: Huntington and Norwich

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ON THE WEB: visit www.buildingheritage.com