

Timber framers

By TIM WHITE

LAURA Saeger and Rudy Christian can tell you some stories — like how they spent three weekends in upper New York living in a Winnebago, while friends helped them disassemble a church, load it on a truck and haul it to Ohio to make into a house.

But if their home could talk, it would really have a tale to trump all.

You see, the home is that church. It was first built in 1815 in Oxford, N.Y., by a Presbyterian congregation. It was constructed from virgin white pine timbers, including a pair of 44-foot-long beams that made up the eve plates. Those beams had deteriorated by the time it was taken down.

“One of the unusual features of the church is that the entire eve is timber framed. We were lucky to be able to find two poplar logs that size to replace the beams when we rebuilt the church,” says Christian.

That rebuilding didn’t take place until 2001, so back to the church’s tale.

Sometime around 1820, it changed locations. Back then,

Key Points

- Church undergoes a history of change before coming to Ohio.
- Markings on beams help building and reconstruction.
- Recycling a building is part of the owners’ lifestyle.

there were no concerns about power lines or stoplights. Presumably, parishioners just jacked it up, put it on peeled logs and rolled it down the road.

New bell tower

Along the way, it may have lost a bell tower. Christian says he found etchings on one of the old beams that shows a totally different design of the bell tower than was on the church when they deconstructed it.

“A portion of the bell tower now is made of hemlock,” he says. “And some of the timbers have empty mortises. That would indicate that it was rebuilt.”

Most likely, that rebuilding came in 1858 when the church again changed venues. This time, it was disassembled and barged some 20 miles down the

Chenango River to Chenango Forks. In its new location, the church found itself home to a Methodist congregation.

The original construction and the rebuilding were made easier by markings on the beams, Christian says. He can show you the south-facing beam where a six-point star, or daisy wheel, in a circle indicates the sign of the sun. Beside it are three interlocking circles etched by the framer’s divider as his personal signature. Other beams also had markings.

The church served its congregation well into the 1980s when the group found a reason to move on to a new church and left it to stand empty. A restaurant owner from New York City bought the place around 1990 with the intention of moving it to a location where customers would appreciate it. He paid to have the siding and moldings removed, but the church owner died before he could finish the job.

The building was put in probate and the deal fell through. In 1992, Christian and Saeger were attending a meeting of the Timber Guild when one of the members asked around if anyone wanted to buy a church.

“We thought he was pulling our leg,” says Christian.

Turned inside out

When they saw the standing structure stripped down to its timber frame, they decided it was too good to pass up. “It was in good shape and had some very unique features,” he says.

With the help of their timber-framing friends and a crane, they disassembled the church in about three weekends and moved it to their farm near Burbank. The bell tower was



NEW STEEPLE: The witch’s hat steeple Rudy Christian built on the bell tower better resembles the original than a dome put on the church around 1858.

Barn event comes to Bluffton

THE Friends of Ohio Barns will celebrate their 10th annual meeting in the village of Bluffton, April 24-25. The area was settled by Swiss Mennonites and features many unique barns. Friday’s barn tour will give participants a rare view of some of the regions barn structures and a chance to play barn detective. Saturday’s program will be at the Bluffton College and will feature presentations, demonstrations, displays and a silent auction. Fan favorites, the Barn Detectives & the Barn Repair Panel, will highlight the event.

There will be a Friday evening meal get-together after the bus tour. Hotel rooms are reserved at the Comfort Inn with a group rate discount. Early-bird registration discounts are available. Check ohiobarns.osu.edu to register for the conference.



HISTORY BUFFS: Rudy Christian and Laura Saeger keep shelves of barn books handy and still use many antique timber-framing tools in their work.



READY TO RECYCLE: Beams from a barn deconstructed by Christian await a new use.

lowered, and the original bell tower was left with the local historical society.

The timber frames sat in a pile under a tarp until 1995 when Christian moved a barn from Curtis to the property.

“As serendipity would have it, the barn was 2½ feet longer than the church timbers,” he says. “So we were able to move them into the barn.”

In the summer of 2001, they began restoration of the church, again with the help of a lot of friends, Christian

says. Reconstruction involved a number of changes, not the least of which was essentially turning the church inside out so the best-preserved hand-hewn beams now face the inside of the building.

While the original structure had side balconies for the church’s wealthiest members, the new construction has a pair of lofts at either end. To the west, you can climb up and look at the inside of the bell tower.

Christian replaced the domed steeple that had been put on after the church was first built with a witch’s hat that suits the structure. In the other loft is an upstairs bedroom, a large office area and a bathroom. Saeger filled in the walls between beams with an adobe-like plaster.

“It’s tough to live in a place while you are building it, but it’s coming along,” she says.

The couple relishes the recycled nature of their lifestyle, which includes a three-stage wetland for water treatment and recreation. “We enjoy seeing the birds and other wildlife the wetland attracts,” she says.

“To be able to put a historic building like this to a useful life gives you some satisfaction,” Christian adds.

Imagine what the church would say about that.