



## Developer, Spare That House!

by John D. Wagner

First, get to the office, call your blacksmith and check on the handmade nails you've ordered. Next, check to see if your custom-made leaded casements are going to be done on time. Then, drive to the site and make sure your hand-scarfed clapboards are being installed right. But before you take lunch, see if you've gotten any calls on that 17th-century saltbox you've got packed in a truck in your backyard. These are just some of the tasks that fill the average day of Brian Cooper. He is the founder of Early New England Restoration, now in its thirteenth year. Early New England Restoration specializes in dismantling antique homes that are slated for demolition, and assembling them where they are wanted. It ain't easy street, by any means, but Cooper loves the work.

Cooper left a job building new housing in 1977 to look for more challenging work. "Doing new construction, I couldn't really fulfill my passion for woodworking. So I started in this line of work. It's very satisfying. I gather a number of highly skilled tradespeople — blacksmiths, woodworkers, plasterers, masons — and we work to bring otherwise uninhabitable antique structures back into the economy," says Cooper.

Here is Cooper's approach: The first thing he has to do is locate a worthy antique house that's about to be leveled or burned. For a house to be considered, much of it must be salvageable. Usually, these houses are on property that has been bought for commercial development. This is easier than it sounds, once you get your name around. In fact, Cooper knows of 15 houses that need attention over the next 12 months or they will be lost to the bulldozer.

Typically, the commercial developers prefer a low-publicity demolition. But Cooper offers them a different solution. He buys an option on the house and suggests that the developer help him remove the house. "I come in," Cooper explains, "and say, Hey, let's turn this into a positive scenario. Let's save the house. I tell them I will even publicize the part they played when we put the house back up."

Once the deal is set, Cooper begins by painstakingly documenting the house with photos (as many as 200), architectural renderings, and a floor plan. Then it is dismantled piece-by-piece. The pieces are numbered or lettered with a system that Cooper has developed for just this purpose. Components are lettered from left to right, numbered from front to back. Cooper makes this grid system simple, so anyone assembling the house can figure it out. The beams, trim, floorboards, door, windows — including the old-fashioned glass — and any other salvageable items are saved. The sheathing, roof, and rotted parts of the house are thrown out. The house is stored inside a tractor trailer, which



Cooper's crew prepares to dismantle the 1660 Park Homestead. The house's individual pieces are numbered and lettered so the crew can reconstruct the house exactly as it stands now.



The Park Homestead is here being reconstructed in Shelter Island, N.Y. Cooper has added new framing members between the original timbers as part of the overall effort to upgrade the house to code.



The Park Homestead, fully restored. The restoration used antique glass in all the windows, and blacksmith-made nails were used in all visible woodwork.

costs Cooper about \$3,500 each.

"A typical house fits in a tractor trailer," Cooper claims, "with room to spare. We then seal it up, and we have a complete structure, sealed off from the weather. All we have to do is drive it to the site where it will be erected." And that can be anywhere. In fact, Cooper is working on a plan to erect a 17th-century American village in Japan, and in turn, the Japanese would erect a 17th-century village of theirs over here.

Cooper can have any number of houses "frozen" at any one time. But once he finds a buyer, his crew of 15 workers sets to work reassembling the house.

"When putting the houses back up, we are rarely able to save the first-floor posts and beams because of the beating they've taken over the years," Cooper says. But in all cases, the house's design is copied, stick for stick, when it is rebuilt. "I really don't like to sell off the parts of a house," Cooper says, "and I do get calls from people looking for just certain parts, like floorboards or windows. I can help them look elsewhere, but I don't break up the house packages I have stored away waiting for buyers."

The houses are updated for code, and if there is a modern addition put on, that's where the bath and kitchen go. Wiring can be a problem, but Cooper uses a relay system where low-voltage switches connect to a panel in the basement which is directly wired to the fixtures. This avoids the need to run heavy-gauge wires to and from in-wall switches. (It also costs 50% more to wire the house.)

A code upgrade might include changing the slope of a stairway or upgrading exits for fire code, but restoration is always foremost on Cooper's mind.

New foundations are always poured for the houses. If there was a stone foundation, a shelf is poured into the foundation, and stone is used as a veneer, rather than for support. If possible, electrical boxes and plumbing are always run through the basement and kept out of sight.

What's all of this cost? Cooper says his prices run \$125 to \$175 a square foot; never under \$100 a square foot. It depends on what the client wants and how much they want to participate. Some clients want to redo part of the interior themselves, others want a turnkey situation.

Now and then, when Cooper is restoring one of these houses, his restoration principles are questioned. He does claim to have the historical aspects of the house in mind at all times, but as Cooper points out, "The alternative for most of the houses that I get hold of is demo. These places are on the way out, and if it were not for our work, they simply wouldn't exist." ■

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