

Backfill

Simple Math for a Slow Economy

Earlier this year, timber-framer Paul Freeman, owner of Brooks Post & Beam in Lyndeborough, N.H., realized he had a problem. The dismal economy had slowed the flow of incoming projects to a trickle, leaving his tight-knit four-person crew facing the possibility of going to a

short work week if things didn't turn around. But then he learned that the local historical society in the nearby town of Greenfield had a problem, too: It desperately needed a barn to store some of the larger artifacts in its collection but could just barely afford to pay for the materials.

Putting one and one together, Freeman got on the phone and offered to build the barn at no cost as a community service. Then the administrators of the building trades program attended by two area high schools — who had been looking for a suitable real-world job for the coming school year — learned of the project and promptly signed on as well. Throughout the fall, a group of about 15 students worked with Freeman and his crew for several hours each day, first milling timbers in the company's shop, then fitting and assembling the frame at the building site.

For Freeman — who has taught at the college level — watching his crew members become teachers themselves was rewarding. “Communication is the name of the game in this business,” he says. “You're always teaching on any building site, so it came naturally to them. The kids were

so respectful — you could see how they looked up to these guys with calluses and muscles and beards, picturing themselves in that role someday.”

He also notes that soon after the job began, other work began to crop up. “Things had been really slow for the last year,” he says. “Now all of a sudden, in the last six weeks, we are slam busy.

We've got about as much this winter as we can handle.”

Whether that surge of business resulted from an overall rebound in the economy or the attention his company gained from the barn project, Freeman can't say. “Maybe that Brooks Post & Beam sign on the barn influenced some people,” he says. “Maybe things were going to pick up anyway. Or maybe it's just that what goes around comes around.” — *Jon Vara*



The 42-by-26-foot storage barn was framed with eastern hemlock and white-pine timbers from a local sawmill (A). Major joints were shaped with computer-controlled machinery in the contractor's shop, but plenty of traditional chisel work remained to be done (B) before the frame could be assembled and fastened with white-oak pegs (C). Did the project produce a few new timber-framers (D) as well as a barn? Time will tell.

