

BY LOU DUPONT

Basket Weaving a Wall

Even though our architectural woodworking shop has worked on plenty of unique projects, I'd never seen anything quite like the basket-weave wall detail that we were asked to duplicate in the Pinnacle, a historic summer camp on Lake Champlain built in 1896 by William J. Van Patten, a wealthy businessman and former mayor of Burlington, Vt. (see "New Railings for the Pinnacle" by Nate Plasha, *Professional Deck Builder*, May/21). I had been contacted by Bush Holstein, who worked for the general contractor restoring the home and transforming it into a year-round residence; our job would be to reconstruct a woven covering on a water-damaged parlor wall.

When I arrived on site, Bush and the owner showed me around this remarkable "camp" with woven wall paneling and other fun and idiosyncratic detailing (1). Though the section of original basket weave that we'd be replacing had been removed, Bush and the owner had saved a few pieces, one of which I brought to my shop to serve as a guide. I also snipped off a few samples and sent them to Paul Frederick at Vermont's Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation to nail down the species. He in turn forwarded them to the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Products Lab in Madison, Wis., which identified the samples as black or white ash. We were 98% certain that the samples were white ash, a light-colored hardwood with straight grain that grows abundantly in Vermont.

To duplicate the weaver's 3/64-inch-thick by 1 3/8-inch-wide warp (vertical) and weft (horizontal) elements, I sourced plainsawn white-ash veneer, which I straightlined, then ripped into 1 1/2-inch-wide strips. To clean up the edges and bring the rippings down to finish width, I packed them in a 3-inch-wide box that I made and ran them through a wide-belt sander. Then, to bring the rippings down to their final thickness, I used double-sided tape to fasten about 32 strips at a time to a 10-foot sheet of plywood and made a couple of passes through the sander.

For help installing the wall covering, I contacted an old friend, Tim Sienkiewicz, a talented carpenter and furniture maker with some basket-making experience. In my shop, we mocked up a wall

section to work out details and techniques. Before transporting the 2,400 lineal feet of milled material that I estimated we'd need, we finalized the color with the client and applied a quick-drying wiping stain called Woodsong II from M.L. Campbell (mlcampbell.com). For the warp, we used a golden oak stain; for the weft, we applied a darker, mission-oak mixture.

Back at the Pinnacle, we started by stapling the tops of the vertical strips to the substrate (mostly tongue-and-groove pine) (2). Then we wove horizontal strips through the verticals, tapping them into place with small blocks and checking every third course or so with a string line to make sure that the strips were straight. As we wove, we were careful to hide splices behind the verticals, and stapled the verticals at every fourth or fifth course. Occasionally, a strip would break or splinter, in which case we'd snip out the damaged section and splice in a new strip. This was at least a two-person job, and for the parlor wall, Tim enlisted his son, Lee, to help out (3). Small trim strips at the top and just above the baseboard, along with a 1/2-inch quarter round on each side, concealed the fasteners and helped secure the work to the wall.

A few months after finishing the parlor wall, we returned to address a smaller section of wall in the main stairwell. In some ways, this part of the restoration was trickier, because the weft strips had been originally finished with a green stain that had faded over the years. We theorized that the color was created with an aniline dye manufactured by one of the original owner's businesses (among other interests, Van Patten had become an expert in aniline dyes, and the company he worked for made a fortune for itself—and Van Patten—producing them). Here, we removed the original basket weave and replaced it. This time, instead of using veneer, I sawed the strips from 3/4 white ash, then used a wide-belt sander to bring the strips to finish size, as before.

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Woven wall panels are one of the unique architectural details at the Pinnacle (1). New ash strips were milled in the shop and woven on site to replicate the basket-weave panels found in the rest of the house (2, 3).

Photos: 1, Tim Healey; 2 and 3, Tim Sienkiewicz