

Backfill

Reconstructing the Past

by Noah Woodruff



Original barn timbers were re-assembled into bents at the job site. Replacement parts were cut and shaped from locally milled lumber as needed, and surfaced with an adze to remove saw-blade marks (top). After original hand-hewn plates were laid atop the new block foundation, bents were craned into position one at a time. Strategically positioned pipe staging simplified reassembly of the many mortise and tenon joints and installation of the top plates (above). Tenons on each of the four “legs” of the cupola fit into corresponding mortises in the roof framing. Despite the close tolerances, the cupola fit into position on the first try (right).



The materials for this project arrived on the job the usual way — via truck delivery — but that was pretty much where any resemblance to a normal job ended.

We'd been hired to reconstruct a 150-year-old dismantled barn on a new site, while replacing and making repairs to some of the parts along the way. Time, weather, and generations of previous owners had not been kind to the structure. The guys who dismantled the frame didn't help matters much, either: At some point in the process, they'd apparently changed their numbering system. Some parts weren't labeled at all, consigning us to hours of ransacking the pile for missing timbers. The pegs had not made the journey with the barn, so the three rookies on our crew spent several days making new ones.

But despite such headaches, it was a memorable project, and one that served to remind us of how easy life is for today's carpenters. We had power tools and pipe staging. We had a crane to raise the reconstructed bents and rafters — not to mention the 10-foot-by-16-foot cupola that the owner decided, at the last minute, to add to the mix.

The carpenters who built this barn the first time around, by contrast, got the job done with hand tools and muscle power. Evidence of both was all over the work they'd left behind. Everywhere we looked there were traces of plane and chisel blades, symbols denoting square and level, and roman-numeral assembly marks that I'm sure would have been helpful if we'd known how to read them.

All that set us to thinking about the carpenters who'd made them. Those guys faced some of the same challenges and dis-

comforts we did. Did they have to deal with bad weather, the same food for lunch again, complaints about kids and wives, and a boss who wanted it done yesterday? Probably so. I think our whole crew came away with a new appreciation for the original builders — and the feeling that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Noah Woodruff is a lead carpenter for R.J. Doerr Co. in Easton, Pa.