

Doing it the old-fashioned way

by Scott Pickard

It was during a spur-of-the-moment drive along Hingham's Gardner Street that Tim Beachus experienced what he calls, "one of those lucky moments."



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Beachus wanted to replace his aging, single-car garage with a new, larger structure that would be more in keeping with the architecture in the historic Hingham area where he and his family live. But he couldn't find anyone he felt was capable of doing the job.

"As I was driving, I noticed a beautiful barn being built behind a house," he recalls. "So I stopped, got out, rang the doorbell, and asked the woman who answered who was building it. She said, 'my husband.'"

For Beachus, that chance encounter was the beginning of a beautiful friendship with The Farm Hills Company, and its proprietor, Huck Handy, who specializes in custom timber frame construction and was more than capable of delivering just what Beachus had in mind.

In relatively short order, Beachus and Handy would agree on a design for a 22-by-30-foot, two-story Greek revival-style barn to be constructed mostly of Eastern white pine (but with a special, single-span support beam made of sturdier Douglas fir). Handy would spend about six weeks in his workshop carefully cutting and chiseling so that the many individual pieces would ultimately fit together by means of mortise and tenon (or slot and tongue) joinery. Later, at the "raising," the beams and rafters would be assembled and the structure erected; in another two months the barn would be "closed in," roofed, finished, and ready for use by Beachus as a storage place for his treasured Alpha Romeo sports car, among other things.

"There isn't a single nail holding anything together," Beachus says with a hint of amazement in his voice. "From an engineering perspective it really is remarkable. People walk in and say, 'wow.' It's something special."

That's a perfect summation of why timber frame construction (sometimes referred to as post and beam construction) is enjoying a revival in the United States. It's a type of craftsmanship that gets attention because its components are on display for all to see. Handy likens it to "sitting inside a giant piece of furniture" because there is no need for interior load-bearing walls and, thus, a lot of open space. The technique, according to New Hampshire author and timber framer Tedd Benson, "is as old as our concept of home: a self-supporting framework of timbers fastened with wooden connections" that he says dates back to around 200 B.C. or perhaps earlier. Although timber framing has been around for centuries (and can be seen prominently in New England locales like Nantucket), it fell out of favor in the 1800s when the development of the so-called cut nail signaled the advent of faster, quicker construction methods like stud framing. Now, it's making a comeback. Its rustic, less formal feel is popular in new home construction as well as in more traditional applications like barns and outbuildings. The Timber Framers Guild, a 1,700-member organization based in Western





Massachusetts, says that's because the style, "unites sound construction techniques with handsome materials to produce a natural yet beautiful result . . . [offering] a feeling of strength, durability, and spaciousness."

People may romanticize about timber framing out of a sense of tradition or preservation, but Handy acknowledges those who also see the practicality. "Probably the most notable part of timber framing is the bracing. It's visually striking but also very strong, which is why these older structures have stood the test of time. Does it cost a little more to do it today? Sure, but it's the strength, the warmth, and the history that makes timber framing attractive to those who are looking for something different in this age of mass-produced 'McMansions.'"

Handy himself is something special. As the principals of The Farm Hills Company, he and his brother, Steve, are the South Shore's lone professional practitioners of timber framing. Huck is both passionate about his vocation and respectful of its legacy. He became fascinated by the technique as a young architectural history student and, later, as a self-employed home restoration/remodeling contractor; a period during which he jokes that he was, "always getting caught up in all the details – I was too fussy."

About five years ago, his interest in timber framing became too strong to ignore. But it was only after the successful completion of a modest 10-foot-by-12-foot timber frame shed in his own backyard that he would be inspired to tackle his first true project: the adjacent 24-by-36-foot barn that caught Beachus' attention while it was under construction and which now serves as Handy's workshop. Modeled after a traditional, double-doored English threshing barn, it is a handsome testimonial to his skill.

Asked to describe his approach to a new assignment, Handy begins where you would expect – at his workbench, with a set of plans. He works closely with the client from the outset to develop specifications, then prepares drawings to scale. "It's like a big math problem," he says with a grin as he pulls out a carefully drawn schematic of a soon-to-begin project annotated with neatly numbered measurements on all sides. "There are hundreds of Pythagorean theorems in every one of these." Next comes the choice of wood. He prefers pine, which is the most affordable and easiest to work with. Then, it's on to the job itself.

"One of the beauties of timber framing is that 90 percent of it is done right here," Handy says, gesturing around his workshop. "But precision is key, from the initial layout on paper to the next phase working with the wood. It's all pre-cut, taken to the site where it's assembled, and then there's a 'raising' day when a crane comes to get the structure up. One day, it's just a bunch of wood and the next day it's like T-Rex standing in the yard," he says with a laugh. And those raisings always generate fanfare,





Handy says. “They’ve all been fun. We usually have an audience of friends and neighbors who come out to watch and celebrate. It’s very traditional and a great way to culminate the project.”

“Our raising was a great event,” agrees Brad Kell of Pembroke, who joined forces with Handy to design and build a 24-by-36-foot barn/garage that Kell says perfectly complements his circa 1750 antique home. “It turned into a community-type of event. And beyond that, Huck was very easy to work with. He maintains a real commitment to detail,” Kell says. “People are so impressed with the barn that they drive up my driveway and ask me about it. It’s something unique that goes beyond just having a garage.”

“Blending the new with the old is what I like to do,” Handy says, “creating something new that’s sympathetic to an older home. It’s real satisfying to build a barn, for example, that goes well with an older house that’s still in its original location. In my mind, that completes a picture.”

Handy has been a skilled tradesman for years, but he admits that one byproduct of his foray into timber framing has been exposure to much that’s new to him. “One of the things I like about timber framing is that it forces me into a lot of different disciplines. For example, I’ve developed a real appreciation for hand tools – hand saws, chisels, planes – you can’t avoid using

them,” he says as he shows off a gleaming array of his favorites. “And I’ve learned about different species of wood. Then there’s the mathematics involved; the rigging related to raising the structures properly. There’s a lifetime of learning involved with all of this, and even though I’ve been doing it a while, I still feel like a beginner.”

Those who know Huck Handy and have worked with The Farm Hills Company all cite Handy’s abilities, but they also praise his personality: forthright, solid, dependable. To his clients, in fact, Handy seems the embodiment of the old-fashioned technique he embraces. “There was no ambiguity. We totally understood from the get-go what was going to happen,” says Tim Beachus. “I felt very comfortable working with Huck throughout. He really is a soup-to-nuts guy.”

From humble beginnings in his Hingham backyard, Huck Handy and his Farm Hills Company have renewed a centuries-old tradition. Long may it prosper. [SSM](#)

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