

Re-Inventing Bingham Lumber

In Brookline, New Hampshire, a new generation guides this 62-year-old family business in a sustainable yet tradition-rich direction.

Bingham Lumber was founded as a white pine sawmill in 1946, but this family-owned business is now turning heads for how well it shapes and finishes wood that was first milled many decades, or even centuries, before.

Credit Tom and Rebekka Bingham for the transition. Despite his relative youth, Tom Bingham appreciates wood as only a veteran lumberman can. The family business, Bingham Lumber, started out catering to the post World War II building boom, and at one point churned out over 10 million board feet a year. “We never were a really big production mill,” said Tom. “Our specialty was wide plank paneling, flooring, wainscot, and the historical or traditional pattern work.”

That focus became the company’s primary niche after Tom and his wife Rebekka bought the business 7 years ago. “We moved away from the production end of the white pine industry – which has become ultra-competitive,” said Tom. And Bingham Lumber also began establishing itself as a go-to source for finished reclaimed lumber as well.

Homeowners and architects here would like their homes and offices to reflect traditional New England design, but





worry about the carbon footprint of the fresh sawn wood that might require. “Over the last 7 or 8 years we’ve seen a heightened awareness of where these materials are coming from – even responsibly harvested material,” said Bingham. “People are interested in an alternative to wood that has to be harvested today.”

Reclaimed wood is a perfect fit for Bingham Lumber’s capabilities, Tom reports. “When we harvest and manufacture the salvage material, we’re drawing on 3 generations of sawmill know-how to maximize the yield from it,” he said. “When we saw or re-saw and remanufacture antique wood, we’re making flooring and a lot of it. But we do just as well with paneling, and we have some very handsome patterns that go into wainscot, ceiling material, and exterior siding. We do everything from 1/4 inch right up to 12/4.” Tom Bingham expects that within the next 18 months, a majority of his company’s sales will come from reclaimed wood.

To showcase those products, Tom and Rebekka converted about 10,000 square feet of the original sawmill

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into their new showroom. The showroom has become a must-see resource for designers who are part of the New England Revival movement. It features different display rooms which recreate the flooring, wainscoting, wall sheathing, and millwork unique to seven distinct historical eras.

Visitors will see history writ large. “We realize how difficult it is for people to make decisions based on 1 by 1 samples, so in our showroom you can look down at floors that are 5 foot by 5 foot, and you can see 8 lineal feet of wall paneling full-length,” Tom explained. “Not everything is that big; we have some smaller samples hanging on the walls. But if you want to see our top 20 to 30 species and grades you’ll find a 5 by 5 or 6 by 6 sample.”

The large samples have served their purpose. “We see people step right up to one and say, ‘That’s what I’ve been looking for, that’s the look that I want!’” said Bing-



Norm Abrams visits with Rebekka and Tom Bingham while filming at the Bingham Lumber showroom (opposite); large-sized product displays help customers make informed choices (left and above).

ham. “It’s not just the floors. We have a lot of interest in reclaimed for cathedral ceilings and post and beams, and paneling for professional offices.”

The showroom has generated plenty of interest from designers. “A lot of architects and design/build firms schedule appointments to meet their clients right in our showroom, and look at exterior options, interior options, flooring, paneling, trim, moulding, coloring,” Bingham stated. “Plus, we’re able to put different colors together in our sample shop for people to take with them so they can see the coloring in their own place and get a better feel for it.”

Color is a strength here. “Whether it’s using an aged painting technique or a simple wiping stain and oil, we are often able to create a pretty cool finish to match an antique interior area,” said Tom. “That’s a service that is gaining a lot of popularity with designers. Our finish shop seems to be very busy, and we see a lot of momentum moving in that direction.”

Even before building the showroom, the company has long served as a stopping point for people interested in the restoration or reproduction of historical homes. “We see people bring in wood from their 17th century home and ask if we can match it,” said Tom. “Well, we can match it out of the same eastern material – white pine, spruce, hemlock, or oak – that has been recently harvested. We know that exact historic pattern and all the odd sizes and odd thicknesses. Now that we’re able to offer all those services with a recycled antique board from the same time period or thereabouts... well, that is pretty special for us,” he added. “And people do appreciate it.”

Of course, the New England Revival movement means wood siding on a home’s exterior – not vinyl. “It’s funny how styles cycle around. People ask if we still sell bond board siding or lap siding, and yes, we do,” Tom told us. And that, too, can involve reclaimed materials. Bingham is able to supply white pine siding sourced from vintage buildings and prime or finish both sides of the boards before installation, so the wood can continue providing historic character for structures old and new.

That product mix has drawn favorable attention to Bingham Lumber, and not only from their principal customer base across New England. Norm Abrams of *This Old House* has used their materials in already-aired seg-

ments, and will feature the showroom to a national audience in a show scheduled for Thanksgiving night.

Processing reclaimed lumber requires a special combination of skills and equipment, especially when it comes to wide plank and unusual sizes. “We certainly have the Weinig Moulders and the high-speed modern stuff, but we’ve actually taken some of the older machines and had them rebuilt with modern components in them,” said Bingham. “I’d like to take credit for the idea, but it was one of our guys. We’d been looking at new equipment for the wide material before someone asked, ‘Why can’t we put the better spindles and the higher speed motors and the higher speed heads into the old machine? It’s big enough, rugged enough, and it’s built to handle thick materials. But man, if the new heads do such a better job...’ And then it dawned on us: hey, maybe we can.”



“It’s pretty neat to pull in to the parking lot on a Saturday morning and see license plates from Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire, and then find those people in the showroom.”

cial, but you will never be able to replicate that coloring and the tones that you get out of the antique wood.”

The company has 30 employees spread across its 19 acre facility, and Tom Bingham appreciates the know-how of his veteran staff. Jim Couture manages the yard, Mark Evans is the head finish grader, and Todd Reynolds is in charge of the setups on the moulders. Together, those 3 have 83 years of experience at Bingham Lumber among them. The second generation owners – including Tom’s parents, his uncle Don, and aunt Carol – still contribute their know-how as well.

Any of this knowledgeable staff is prepared to help customers in the showroom. DIY customers can learn from the pros in Saturday morning workshops. It’s not uncommon to see 10 to 18 people in a class where they might learn how to install flooring or how to produce different aging effects on wood.

Going FSC is the next logical step for an organization that’s becoming ever more sustainable. Bingham Lumber is currently going through the Chain of Custody certification process, and Tom has found the adjustments to be rather easy. “We’ve had to tweak and change some things we do, but it hasn’t been that rough,” he noted. “We’ve always had inventory from logs, to rough green, to the dry kilned, to the rough dry, to finished product. We have an existing inventory management structure in place from a tracking and yield standpoint, and basically all we’ve had to do is draw a line that says we’re now tracking a parallel inventory system.”

Since reclaimed lumber already qualifies for LEED credits, FSC product will expand Bingham’s appeal to the green building and remodeling marketplace. Although most of its clients are in the Northeast, the company has shipped material as far west as California and as far south as Florida.

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That also gives Bingham some extra design flexibility. “We grind our own knives at the plant, so we’re able to work with an architect who comes up with an interesting request. If someone tells us they want an antique white oak floor for a great room, we can use that same material in a trim or millwork package, for some built-ins, for a base, the windows, and the crowns.”

From a sustainability perspective, Bingham believes that his mill is able to reclaim more usable wood from salvaged material than other companies. “On the flip side, it’s really cool from a design standpoint,” he says. “That antique wood has hues that developed over time, and you just can’t recreate that, although a lot of people are pretty clever with distressing techniques. We’re pretty good at doing that, too. In some instances you can half-way create something spe-

Photos: Bingham’s showroom offers vignettes of historic styles.