



# INSide news



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## Restoring Some Hudson Valley History



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**Matti Peltonen** is restoring a small part of history in the Hudson Highlands. Matti, the **Capital Markets Bureau** Chief, is rebuilding a roughly 15X20-foot, two-story barn originally constructed more than a century and a half ago.

The barn is located at Matti's home in Cold Spring, about 50 miles north of New York City. Matti and his wife, Anita, purchased the 1840s-era home and its adjoining barn eight years ago after being attracted to the property by its Hudson Valley scenery and hiking possibilities.

"My wife saw the for sale sign as we were coming back from a hike. My first words were, 'I don't even want to look at it,' not because I didn't like the looks of it, but because I just had an inkling what might happen."

The following is Matti's account of what has happened with his 1850s vintage barn.

### The Barn

The question people invariably ask me is what I'll use the barn for. The question I ask myself is why I am renovating a 1850s barn. The question the two carpenters had -- before they were not hired -- was why I didn't just knock the barn down; they'd be happy to build a new one. I figure I'll figure out what it's going to be used for as soon as it's finished - but "soon" is a term I have stopped using.

The barn is (was) a two-story red building with slate roof, nice old one-foot wide wall planks and a timber frame with tenons, mortises, knee braces, half laps, hanger joints, bird's mouths (it's a rafter joint) and, added by some later carpentry heretic, nails. As slate only lasts for 150 years, the roof was about a decade overdue for repairs, and leaking, an unidentified rodent had been living upstairs, a nation of mice had occupied most nooks and crannies and places in between, one corner was resting on the ground and rotting together with the downstairs





floor, and a giant trumpet vine, pretty as it was, was squeezing part of the structure ajar. Something needed to be done.

Spring last year, I drafted a careful three-part plan: a.) take apart; b.) build foundation; c.) replace rotten wood; d.) put back together; e.) throw a big party. Roof seemed the logical part to start with: once taken off it could no longer fall on me. My toes can attest April 2007 was the coldest one on record: I spent most of it on the roof taking off the slate. A friend spelled out to me what my real motivation was; the project was a feeble excuse to buy cool tools. I'm the only person I know who now owns a slate hammer, slate cutter, and two slate rippers. And every nail-pulling device known to man.

Those tools were used to pull thousands of square nails, to take every piece of wood off, one-by-one. The pieces were labeled and put in the garage, where the car has not lived in a long time. To get 150 years of grime off, every piece was powerwashed - the stage our water-loving cat liked the best. Among interesting items found in the emerging emptiness were 1890s graffiti, a tomahawk which turned out to be a mere 19th century lathing hatchet, a bronze fish, and pages torn off a prayer book used for insulation. But alas, no hidden treasure. By winter, the barn had disappeared - the very last large horizontal beam came off thanks to half a mulberry tree falling on the rope holding it, about 30 seconds before I got to it. Very helpful - thank you, tree. While my wife was burning the mulberry tree in the fireplace during the winter, I spent it (the winter) in the basement, practicing reverence for wood; restoring the parts to their former shape; filling holes, gluing splits, treating rotten parts, painting and staining. Home Depot staff kindly made sure I was aware that exterior paint could not be used at 20-degree temperature, as I kept going back for more barn red paint. The foundation was finished just before the first snow - I did not try to do that by myself. Seeing the number of large rocks the backhoe brought out, I'm glad I did not try.

This year, part d of the plan, was to put the barn together. Prudently, I bought a book, "Building a Timber Frame House" - what else should one need to learn how to build a 19th century structure; no nails, no screws this time? To make things less simple, the architect (engineering plans were needed for the town to prove I was not doing anything more foolish than necessary) had changed a few things, he added a few more posts, so that none of the old beams fit in their old place. In the end, I redrew the whole frame, to comply with how it should have been done (according to me) in the first place. Every beam had between two and 25 joints, to lock the vertical and horizontal beams, floor joists, rafters etc together. During this stage, I got to buy all drill bits and chisels known, perhaps not to man, but at least to Home Depot. No matter how weird the drill bit was, it still would not cut square holes, so that's where the chisels and hammers were needed. In the process, I inadvertently invented a few new joints which have no practical benefit whatsoever; including the reverse half-dovetail (don't ask...), as it's not easy to uncut wood, there was no going back.

After the first floor (sill) beams were assembled on the foundation, there was not much visible progress for a long time, in terms of anything rising up from the ground, even if all those beams with tenons and mortises were accumulating in the garage. Finally it was time for the barnraising - definitely not something to be tried with only two hands and a Black & Decker - and a crowd showed up in early August. What exactly the event would entail none of us knew - except that it was something vaguely Amish. Right at starting time, heavy rain started, so we had early lunch instead, and were able to start an hour later. I had assembled the four bents, sort of large two-dimensional cross-sections of the frame, ready to be raised and fitted into the slots in the horizontal beams forming the frame for the floor. After raising each bent, girts (connecting beams) were put in place, with the diagonal pieces (knee braces). Next bent was raised and somehow



fitted into the next girts, while a dozen people were holding onto the beams and ropes and trying to hold everything in place, without using excessive force.

The raising of the first and the second bent went well, a lot of sweat, no tears. The trouble started with the third one. One of the tenons refused to slide into its appointed slot. I applied the very large mallet freshly manufactured that morning (a snow shovel got sacrificed in the process to make the handle) to try to hammer the beam into place. Right when the beam started to slide in, the tenons started to break, and the whole bent was suddenly coming apart. With advice from wiser and calmer minds, we tightened the structure with a come-along, put soap on the tenon, got a long ladder, made a cap for the top of the beam so we'd not break it, and finally, with sweat and tears, no blood, got the bent into its place. Phew. I figured I could repair the broken parts with very large steel screws (as I did the following morning), and we continued. After about five hours everything was in place, secured. The whole structure looked great, as we had accomplished a lot, so it was time for a few very well deserved beers. It had simply been a great day, with fantastic help.

Now that's the frame is finished, there are just a few details remaining, like the roof, walls, floors, windows, and doors... I'm in the middle of reading the "Slate Roof Bible", a prudent step in building a slate roof.

