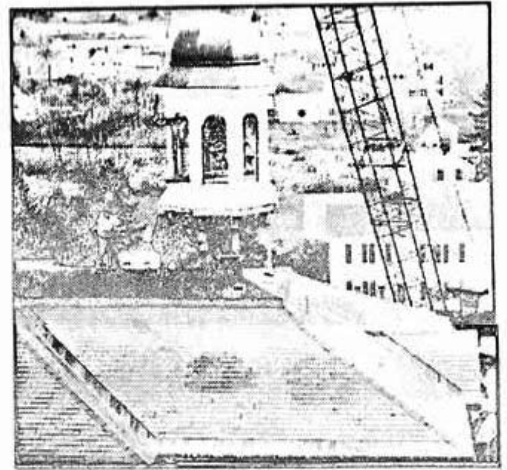




BELDEN MORSE, owner of The Steeple People, considers the \$200,000 restoration in 1989 of St. Anne's Episcopal Church in Calais "one

of the most extensive projects" undertaken by his company. The project took seven workers eight months to complete.



THE STEEPLE PEOPLE restored and returned the cupola to the top of the original Washington County jail building in Machias in 1988. Owner Belden Morse undertook the project as a personal challenge. (NEWS Photo by Clayton Beal)

Some of the rigging used by steeplejacks are called sailor's loops.

It's a technique used by old-time steeplejacks in which the steeplejack climbed as far as possible inside the steeple, then either used an existing hole, or drilled one of his own, to feed the rope through. One end is secured to a strong timber, and the other to the chair.

"I started with myself and a helper," said Morse. He now employs as many as eight workers during the spring-fall season. The workers form two four-man crews, each working at separate job sites. Since beginning the business in 1978, Morse has realized an annual growth of 20 percent to 30 percent.

That changed in 1990, however, when his business earnings dropped to 1986 levels. It wasn't from lack of work, said Morse, but the type of jobs. Morse predicts that 1991 will be a good year, despite a downturn in the general economy.

The Steeple People, despite their attraction to high places, boasts a perfect safety record in which Morse said there have been no falls. "I stress safety," said Morse. Safety lines and related equipment are mandatory for members of his crews. "You depend on each other when you work in a group, said Morse. "There's a lot of communication even before we go up."

It's a job that Morse said demands a lot of concentration. "Being up there for four or six hours is like working eight hours in other jobs," said Morse. He limits the amount of time workers stay aloft without coming down.

Because of the pressure of working an average of 80 to 135 feet off the ground, Morse has a high rate of employee turnover. "I'll go through maybe 14 people a year," explained Morse. His brother Michael Morse, and friend, Earl Anthony, have been Steeple People the longest, working with Morse for three years.

The Steeple People can be contacted by calling Belden Morse at 255-4244.

Steeple People know how to get on top of their work

Restoring belfries, steeples specialty of Maine company

By Paul Sylvain
Down East Bureau

WEST KENNEBEC — Belden Morse would be the first person to admit that his line of work is not only uplifting, but frequently takes him to new heights.

Morse owns and manages The Steeple People, a unique business based in the West Kennebec district of Machias that specializes in restoring old and historic belfries and steeples on churches and town halls in eastern Maine. It's strange work for a man who admits, with a smile, to having a respectful fear of heights.

Morse has done carpentry and remodeling work for 21 years, but got the idea for The Steeple People after being asked to work on his first steeple nearly 12 years ago. He's been focusing on steeple-type work ever since.

"It's specialized work," said Morse recently. "And, the competition wasn't there." He found himself learning as he went. One of his first projects was the Mormon Church in West Jonesport.

Since then The Steeple People have completed several major projects, including the restoration and return of the cupola in 1988 to the top of the original Washington County jail building in Machias, and the \$200,000 restoration of St. Anne's Episcopal Church in Calais in 1989.

Many of the buildings worked on by The Steeple People are between 100 and 200 years old. The jail and its cupola dates back to 1858. Graffiti dating back to the 1800s, and left intact by Morse, attest to its age.

Restoration of St. Anne's Church, which was built in 1853, required Morse and his crew to strip more than eight layers of paint from the structure before returning it to its original finish. That project took seven workers eight months to complete, and required 200 gallons of paint.

Morse said The Steeple People average three restorations a season, with most jobs taking from six weeks to three months to complete. He also does home building and remodeling, and has restored several early, Victorian-style roofs and buildings.

Morse compared steeples with early types of shipbuilding, especially with respect to water drainage. Except for sealed belfries, which normally require more extensive repairs when they are restored, Morse said that most belfries were built with holes in them to allow water to enter as well as drain from the tower. "We frequently find where someone has plugged the holes without knowing what they were there for," said Belden.

Although cranes and other equipment have made their job easier, many jobs still require modern day steeplejacks to revert to earlier methods. Those methods often have a nautical connection.

The Mormon Church steeple, for example, was restored with Morse suspended in a boat-swain chair tied to ropes that were fed through a small drilled hole from inside the steeple.