



Belden Morse pictured here is the owner of Steeple People, the contractor hired to do the continuing renovations on St. Anne's Episcopal Church in Calais.

STEEPLES

Steeple appeared in Europe on many kinds of buildings as far back as the 11th century. According to Christian Fasoldt of Belfast who offered some history regarding steeples, the lofty spires and towers were used to mark the center European villages; they were designed to be seen from far away. Thus the tall spire became a symbol, pointing out the focal point of the town. In lowland areas, a bell was added to the structure which was used to call farmers in from the fields. Clocks in steeples date back to the 12th century.

Steeple were first built as a method of getting up high. The cross atop the steeple pointed the way to God. Man has always been wanting to build something tall, to perhaps get closer to God, Fasoldt suggested.

Here in America the European design was carried over by local carpenters who copied from architect books, adding their own little flourishes, thus giving the Church that homespun look.

Belden Morse, owner of Steeple People, has been working restoring Churches and their steeples for about eight years. Currently he and his crew of seven men are working on St. Ann's Episcopal Church in Calais.

The structure was built in 1853 and was designed by the well-known architect James Renwick whose work does not normally appear this far northeast; it's an unusual event that he happened to design St. Ann's.

"Restoration work on this historic structure is

funded by a matching grant provided through the Historic Preservation Bond Issue approved by the people of Maine on November 5, 1985," reads the sign erected at the site.

Steeple are sort of a side line for Morse. He does renovations, builds new homes, and he does a certain amount of consultant work. Morse got into the work of restoring steeples after he had worked on projects involving scaffolding and heights. Because of his reliability he was recommended for other jobs. He then got the idea for Steeple People. He wanted to get into something different than other people; Morse decided to get a truck, paint it white, and call his business Steeple People. Morse admits that in the beginning he didn't get enough response to make a full time living, but he found himself looking at all interesting structures—the roof, the paint, etc.—he did a couple of cupolas (those little beanie like things you used to see on top of barns). It gave Morse a "good feeling to have participated in the restoration of historic landmarks, preserving our heritage, so to speak." "It's a rather risky profession, but there isn't a lot of competition; it pays well and you get a lot of on the job experience," he says.

The work Steeple People does, Morse says, is different than conventional construction. The buildings he works on were built by craftsmen who put a tremendous amount of work into what they did, such as the gingerbread type trim, stained glass, and the use of different types of wood. They went all out in their work. In modern buildings, Morse says, you're lucky to get brick; you just couldn't afford to have wood.

Morse says that no matter whether it is a community group or Church, it's hard to take care of the maintenance on a building that is 150-200 years old. They do well to keep a pastor and keep the building heated all winter.

The inevitable question must be asked: whether it is necessary to tear down the steeple to keep the building. Some of the buildings have problems with leakage and with plaster falling inside the building as the result of the steeple. Of course, the steeple gets the least maintenance of any part of the building; nobody goes up there. Steeples are constructed in such a way that water will run off. Morse says, "the average carpenter/roofer, though skilled in many areas, will find that some skills just don't apply to steeples."

Most steeples are like a boat turned upside down. They are designed to shed water. A certain amount of sheathing has to be done and in a way that will let the water out.

Belfries are open to the weather and usually have sheathing which is usually made of copper. Often there are vents and louvers to let the air in and the sound of the bell out. The roof must be shaped to let the water in, but so that it will flow out. The steeple itself has a roof and has to be sheathed. Unless the carpenter knows how, he might sheath in an area not meant to be sheathed. A belfry is meant to be open to let air circulate so the wood doesn't rot.

Morse carefully restores as close to the original as possible. That means having custom lumber sawed, such as 8 by 8 or 12 by 12 inch beams. Much of the original work was done with mortise and tenon or with hardwood dowels. The original builders invested a "tremendous amount of work," Morse said.

They drilled by hand and pegged by hand, using hand shaped dowels. Morse tries to do original, but sometimes it isn't feasible to do so. The price of custom work as opposed to commercial work is often prohibitive. Time and money sometimes rule over quality.

Usually Morse doesn't scrape the paint down to bare wood, but at St. Ann's, the architect recommended to do so because of the many layers of paint that had accumulated year after year. A variety of different kinds of paint and caulking had been applied. The architect felt that the wood just couldn't hold any more. It was the process of burning and scraping which resulted in a fire at St. Ann's this summer.

Steeple People invested 2000 man hours last year on St. Ann's, not counting expenses and material. Morse said that scraping old paint is "not the funnest part of renovation."

The renovations at St. Ann's were expected to take two years. Well into the second year, Morse has found that sometimes he has had to rearrange equipment and supplies so that regular activities can continue. While working on staging inside the Congregational Church in Machias, Morse had to dismantle his staging twice, once for a wedding and once for a funeral. He says you learn to incorporate that into the overall price.

Morse says you have to "respect what's going on and participate as much as you can." He works with a lot of people and he tries to keep the site as nice and clean as possible, though he admits he has to give his workers extra space to be who they are. "Some men are animals," Morse says. "When a man is working seventy feet in the air, you're not working with people anymore. It takes an animal to do it; they're rough," adds Morse.

Morse works with women as well as men. He says women have a different kind of energy and it sort of balances out. Women have endurance; they're more even keeled. Men have a quick burst of energy then they're done. So, he says, men and women working together tend to compliment each other. He goes on to say that women have had to use their head more than men, in order to overcome their handicap of less brute strength. Morse has found that women develop useful approaches that have helped men as well as themselves. He said it works both ways. Men have often designed easier ways of doing things as well. There is a difference between women and men, but they are both just as valuable, according to Morse.

Morse was brought up as a Baptist. Now he says his farm is his church, with his animals and his wife's flower gardens. Morse says his wife, Jane Hart, is an incredible gardener. Morse and his wife have two children, Wynona 15, and Chloe Dowling 12.