



Belden Morse – The Steepleman – Reaching New Heights

By Shelagh Gordon Talbot

All photos courtesy of Belden Morse

Belden Morse, owner of The Steeple People in Machias, Maine, never expected to become a Steeplejack or a restorer of historic buildings. In fact, he wasn't sure what the future would hold for him.

Belden has Dyslexia, a neurological disorder which interferes with the acquisition and processing of language. He was essentially pushed through school because teachers years ago in small rural schools didn't have the time or training to deal with this special problem. Most kids like Belden were not considered very smart, when in fact, the opposite was usually true.

People with dyslexia have a larger right-hemisphere in their brains, and often have significant strengths in areas controlled by the right-side of the brain, such as athletic, artistic, and mechan-

ical gifts, also the ability to visualize in 3-D, creative problem solving skills, musical talent, and highly intuitive people skills.

Living in a coastal area, he dug clams for a living, and occasionally helped his dad, who was a lobster fisherman. Belden was very industrious, but unsure of what the future would hold for him, until one day a local painter asked him for help with the Mormon Church in Jonesport, Maine.

"Apparently, he was scared of heights," said Belden. "So I didn't think too much of it - it seemed easy and took only about 20 hours to complete the job, working with him after clam tides." When the job was finished the painter handed Belden \$1,000 for his time. In those days, clams were fetching only \$4.25 for a bush-

el, and that was very good pay. "I saw right then and there that this was a big chance for me," Belden grinned, "and it's been an ace in the hole for me for about 30 years now."

Belden began learning his craft from various interesting old timers. Victor Kilton, from Whitneyville, Maine, a retired Merchant Seaman, taught Belden the art and craft of the painting business.

"He kind of took me under his wing and taught me a lot," said Belden. "He mixed his own paints, taught me how to price out a job, and taught me that preparation is about 75 percent of the work, prior to applying the paint."

After about three or four years, Belden borrowed a little money from his folks and bought ladders and painting supplies. He outfitted an old truck with racks, painted it white, and had a friend paint his logo - *The Steeple People* - "no job too high" on the door of the vehicle.

Pretty soon, one thing led to another, and Belden found himself not only painting houses, but repairing and building them as well, in addition to his new business of repairing and painting church steeples.

"There's something really special about working on these old structures," Belden said. He observed that steeples were similar to boats, only they were up in the sky, and designed to take heavy weather and shed water like a boat does. He found that many of New England's churches had steeples that were





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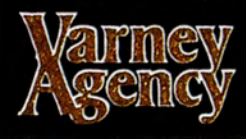
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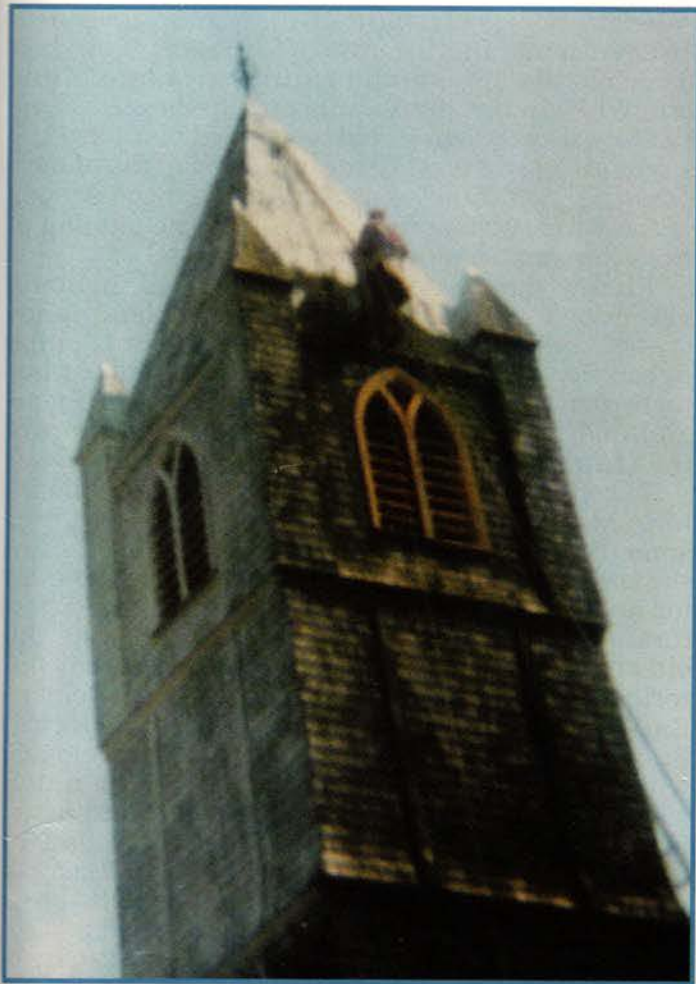




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Above: Mormon Church in Jonesport, Maine.
 At right and left and on the two previous pages:
 Centre Street Congregational Church in
 Machias, Maine. (photos - Belden Morse)



built by shipwrights, and standing on top of a steeple and looking out upon the ocean is much like riding on a ship in the sky.


Climbing high amongst these old spires is awe inspiring, and like on the old sailing ships, much of the equipment he uses is reminiscent of the Boson's chairs used when schooners plied the coastal waterways, and sailors needed to get high up into the rigging and on top of the masts.

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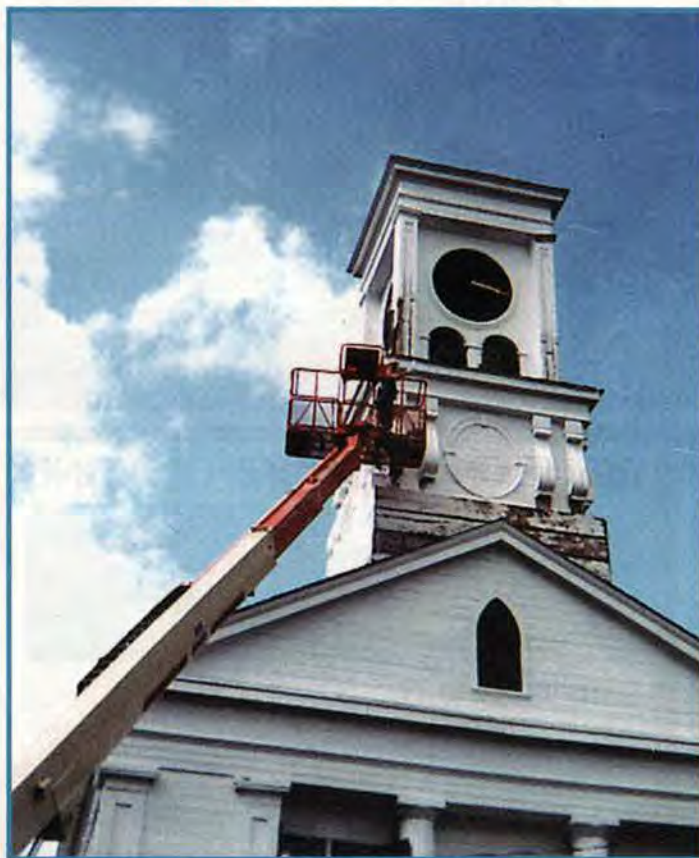
Most people who attend churches have never seen what the interior of the steeple or belfry looks like. The architectural structure of the hand hewn beams is amazing to behold. One can smell the scent of old wood and visualize the sweat gleaming on the well-muscled arms of men laboring with hand tools, and hear in the echoes of the wind, whispering voices and the singing of work songs and old hymns.

"I know that history is alive and well, bobbing like buoys in the sea of the New England landscape", Belden says of these magnificent "ships in the sky". Belden is always careful to take photographs to document his work for future generations, and to share with the congregation of the churches he works on.

He repaired and returned the cupola to the historic Machias courthouse a few years back. For some reason the cupola had been removed from the building and had languished in a parking lot for about 15 years. When local attorney and historian Lyman Holmes saw someone trucking the old cupola away, he immediately alerted the Historical Society. They in turn, contacted Belden. Earle G. Shuttleworth of the Maine Historical Preservation Commission also worked closely with the Steeple People crew. They had much work to do replacing rotting woodwork and making the cupola sound again. Then they had to place it back on the roof of the courthouse, no easy feat as the octagonal cupola had eight large wooden six-by-eights to seat it in the roof.

"We had to cut into the copper roof of the court-

Columbia Falls, Maine - Town Hall





Replacing the restored Cupola to the Whitneyville School roof in Whitneyville, Maine.

house to reset the cupola," Belden said. "It took a lot of figuring because everything had to fit just perfectly. There was no room for any mistakes." Fortunately, everything went smoothly, and the cupola, which was picked up by a large crane, went back nicely to its original home atop the

The tower at the Town Hall



courthouse. The exposure from doing such a successful job led to more work for the Steeple People.

One of their biggest jobs was the restoration of St. Anne's Church in Calais, Maine. Architect James Renwick, who also designed St. Patrick's cathedral in New York, as well as the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., furnished the plans. Owing both to the fame of its architect and to its prominence among churches in



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St. Anne's in Calais, Maine

the Down East area, St. Anne's has been listed in the National Registry of Historical Landmarks. The church, built in the classic Gothic style, was consecrated on May 11, 1854 and has been in continuous service since then.

"It amazed me that Mr. Renwick would come all the way to Calais, Maine, to furnish plans for a little church in the country," Belden mused. It took the Steeple People crew two summers to get all the work done. There were about ten layers of "Battleship Gray" paint on the structure and each layer had to be painstakingly burned off. The last thing anyone wanted was to start a fire

on very old dry wood.

For Belden, it was a spiritual as well as physical experience. "I found myself spending a lot of time in these places where most people would come and spend only about an hour once a week," he said. "For example, we'd be there at St. Anne's every day all summer long. Sometimes I would go inside and take a nap on one of the pews when it was really hot outside."

Belden would wake to the light filtering through the beautiful stained glass windows. It moved him to think about religion and spirituality and what it meant to him. Belden noticed that the suffused light passing through the translucent jewel tones of the stained glass affected his mood. He surmised that the artisans who created those windows must have known how the power of color and light could create awe, and touch members of the congregation.



According to 1 John 1:5, "God is light", and within the colors of that divine light shining through visually pleasing windows is the power to change the beholder, or in Belden's, case the napper.

"It really fascinated me, and inspired me to study color theory" Belden said. "It was amazing to be working on these structures built so many years ago. I have a lot of re-

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spect for those architects and engineers. I am a deeply spiritual person, and the privilege of spending time in places that have been crafted for the spiritual enrichment of the community is a great honor.”

One of the things Belden became aware of early on as The Steepleman was how stressful it can be working from great heights.

“You always have to be aware of gravity,” he said. “You have to do your job and really pay attention to where you are at all times. One misstep could essentially kill you!”

He said that four hours of working high up is equivalent to six or seven hours on the ground. He and his crew would be exhausted after an eight-hour day. “If I am emotionally stressed for any reason, I won’t go up there,” Belden said. “You need to have complete focus to do the job right.”

The Steeple People also worked to repair the Centre Street Congregational Church in Machias. With its soaring spires and views of the Machias River, it was almost like being on a ship. Belden was amazed to discover an original Paul Revere bell in the tower. “It was a privilege to work on that structure,” he said.

Much of the restoration work done by Belden and his crew has come from referrals from historical societies around the state. They replaced timbers and rebuilt the cupola on the old Hamden Academy building - a structure that was erected in the early 1800’s. “We often find writings recorded on the walls of these old towers and spires,” Belden



said. “Even in those days, the original carpenters wanted to leave a mark saying they were there. It is really something to be surrounded by so much history.” Belden always leaves his mark too, in the form of a plaque, or sometimes a few coins, or a newspaper clipping tucked into the woodwork somewhere.



In addition to working on historic buildings, Belden and his crew build houses. Not too long ago, they finished a 10,000 square-foot summer home on YoHo Head in Machiasport, Maine. “It was beautiful when we got done,” Belden said. “The three layers of trim was all constructed of redwood and carefully painted, and the roof was redwood as well.”

Belden has built himself a house on Martins’ Mountain, a high sweep of land that has been in his family for many years.

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Endless scraping at St. Anne's in Calais, Maine

Of course, his home is unique - it perches like a medieval tower on the hill top, with a commanding view of the bay and islands. After all, steeple people shouldn't they? He has decorated it with old items that were going to be thrown away during restoration. The hands of a large clock embellish one wall of the tower, suggesting the time is nigh, and some of the woodwork on the roofing trim has come from old churches.

"When I was a little kid, I would come up here with my family during blueberry season. While they raked blueberries, I'd build myself towers and tunnels out of the old wooden blueberry boxes. I never imagined my life would come full circle and I would build myself a house here," he smiled.

The Steeple Man is available for general contracting as well as special historic projects. You can check

out his web site and visit his photo gallery to see many of the pictures that have been included in this article. He is considering a coffee table book reflecting his work and spiritual growth called *Ships in the Sky*. We look forward to seeing it!

Write to him at The Steeple People, Blueberry Mountain, Box 70, Machias, Maine 04654. If you would like his help as consultant for steeple or historic building renovations, he is more than willing to travel. Call 207-271-1381 or visit his web site: www.thesteepleman.com 🍀

Belden's Tower

