

Carving A Future From History

Preserving history does matter. Thankfully, that point is not lost on elders at First Church of Christ Congregational, commonly known as Center Church, in Hartford.

And a Middletown restoration firm has been a guiding hand.

Officials of the church, established by Hartford's founding father, Thomas Hooker, astutely chose the more challenging and, ultimately, more meaningful method of replacing its steeple.

Like several of the city's most venerable houses of worship, Center Church is undergoing major building renovations. The story of its new spire, however, is rather unusual, showing that the job done correctly is often the one hardest to accomplish.

There was no debating that the top portion of the 150-year-old spire was in need of replacing. The original, of hand-carved wood, was severely rotted. Instead of opting to replace the entire spire or the deteriorated part with a modern material — fiberglass

— church officials decided to stay true to the original design.

Kronenberger & Sons Inc. of Middletown was hired to oversee the project. The firm's restoration handiwork includes the Armory in Middletown and the Mark Twain House in Hartford.

Finding an Eastern white pine similar to the wood of the antiquated spire was no easy feat. It was some time before a close match was found, following calls to lumber subcontractors around the state.

The church hit pay dirt in Barkhamsted, where it found a 125-year-old tree with the right dimensions to replace the top half of the 40-foot spire. The raw wood was skillfully sized by hand at Moore's Sawmill, which has been in Bloomfield for five generations. Luckily, the sawmill has craftsmen with woodcarving skills who use some of the same tools that were around more than a century ago.

The new tower's significance is more than meets the eyes of casual passersby. The wisdom of the church elders' decision will be appreciated, for generations to come.

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