



Chris Angileri / Record-Journal

Thomas Kronenberger, co-owner of Kronenberger and Associates, climbs the scaffolding of the First Church of Christ in Hartford. Kronenberger is working on restoring the old church, which is near the Travelers Insurance building.

Firm building another reputation

Kronenberger & Sons Inc. is now performing historic preservation

By Richard Lee
Record-Journal business editor

The Kronenberger family has made its mark in Meriden through its home construction, and now it is becoming known throughout the Northeast for another type of construction work.

Since its establishment in 1988, the company has made a name in the field of building restoration and is now among the first called to minister to a structure of need of historic preservation.

Thomas Kronenberger Jr. of Meriden, co-owner of Kronenberger & Sons Inc. of Middletown, credited his father, Thomas, for giving him and his brother, Brian, the interest and inspiration to start their business.

The elder Kronenberger, a Meriden native, was a local contractor who constructed a number of area housing developments, including one on Valley View Drive in the city.

"My brother and I grew up in the business. My father later went to work for Ray Schmitt and built Johnsonville," said Thomas Kronenberger, referring to the Meriden entrepreneur who recreated a 19th-century factory village in Moodus through the elder Kronenberger's assistance. "That's where my brother and I cut our teeth."

Despite his background, Thomas Kronenberger Jr., 50, went into advertising, eventually

opening an agency in the city after honing his skills as an illustrator in the Navy. Brian studied architecture and got a job with a Connecticut construction company.

Both brothers, however, grew disillusioned with their careers and decided to establish a partnership focusing on restorations.

"I was in advertising and didn't enjoy it anymore because everything was getting computerized, and I'm tactile," said Thomas Kronenberger Jr., who had a staff of seven. "My avocation was historical tools. It wanted to take it a step further."

Brian Kronenberger, 42, said they were fortunate to have accumulated some savings to help them over the initial period.

"We started off in probably the worst time of building since the Depression. It was Tommy and I and a \$1,000 investment each. We didn't take pay for a year. We kept plowing it back into the business," said Brian Kronenberger, who has acquired the knack of dealing with contracts and bidding for jobs.

Thomas, on the other hand, spends most of his time overseeing construction at the company's various work sites where most of its 48 employees are assigned.

For the past three months, he and his crew have been working at the First Church of Christ Congregational in Hartford, restoring the exterior, the steeple and the meetinghouse floor. They expect to be there until late fall.

Known as the Center Church, the 191-year-old, white clapboard edifice is an historic land-

mark of downtown Hartford, and its parishioners and the company have worked closely together to ensure that the project does not alter the appearance of the building.

The 300-plus congregation, which can date its origins to Thomas Hooker, founder of the city, takes pride in the building, which was the fourth in a series built to serve the early residents of Hartford.

"For us, they've done a great job. They've been willing to listen to our concerns. They're creative in addressing problems," said the Rev. J. Richard Sherlock, pastor of Center Church. He said the congregation has been worshipping in its nearby parish house since Aug. 1, with the hope of returning to the meetinghouse on Sept. 12.

Because of the historical significance of the building, Sherlock said the congregation has an obligation to maintain it. "This congregation is purposely diverse. It's the reason why it's so much alive in downtown Hartford. That's why there's so much of a commitment."

Church leaders contacted Kronenberger & Sons after the weathervane atop the 165-foot steeple broke in a heavy windstorm in October 1998. It dangled from the steeple until lowered to the sidewalk on Main Street.

Bruce Bidwell, facilities manager at the

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church, said the congregation was fortunate that no one was injured and that no serious damage to the church occurred because the iron weathervane and attachments weighed nearly 500 pounds.

-As a result of the incident, however, Kronenberger & Sons discovered that the support spire had suffered much dry rot, and a large section had to be replaced. They also realized that the roof had to be repaired in several areas, and the exterior and interior needed restoration.

Now, metal scaffolding with ladders going from level to level, surround the steeple towering over Main Street. Thomas Kronenberger estimates the cost of the project at \$700,000.

, Bidwell said the church needs continual maintenance, and the project is necessary to preserve the integrity of the building. "You're holding your breath. You never know what you're going to discover."

Not all has been bad news. Thomas Kronenberger said he and parishioners were excited about discovering a plaque on the weathervane referring to the Wadsworth family and the installation of the weathervane in August 1808. "Finding the plaque was like a time machine. When this was built in 1808, it was the highest structure around," said Thomas Kronenberger, taking a break in the church basement where he has set up an office.

Wearing a purple T-shirt reading, "We're remaking history," the contractor said the project is one of many he enjoyed since he had his brother started their business. One of the most important in the beginning was a house restoration on the Wethersfield Green in 1988-89.

"I had to go back and research now the house was built. It opened doors for us. Many home builders don't understand historic work," said Thomas Kronenberger, adding that word got around that the brothers did good work. "We started building larger projects."

Among them have been a three-month project involving disassembling and moving the early 19th-century Cornwall School to Kent, a distance of 17 miles. The three-story building, complete with a widow's walk, was the stimulus for the start of the agriculture program at what was to become the University of Connecticut, said Thomas Kronenberger.

Connecticut, said Thomas Kronenberger.

"Right now, we're running six or seven jobs," he said, rattling a list of restoration projects, including the Wadsworth mansion, an early 20th century estate owned by the city of Middletown; the chapel at Cedar Hill Cemetery in Hartford; the Butler-McCook House, owned by the Antiquarian & Landmark Society; the birthplace of circus magnate P.T. Barnum, a privately owned home in Bethel; and Gillette's Castle State Park in Hadlyme, where it is restoring the exterior and repairing interior water damage. It also is recreating the station which once served actor William Gillette's reduced-scale train that once ran on rails through the woods of his estate.

The company also completed a 43.8 million restoration last year of Eolia, the 42-room mansion at Harkness Memorial State Park in Waterford. Built in the early 20th century, the Italianate-style mansion was in desperate need of repair.

Work included restoration of porches, called prebolas, facing Long Island Sound. Also accomplished was the upgrading of the mechanical, electrical and heating systems and installation of a first-floor bathroom accessible to the handicapped.

The most impressive feat was the raising of a vaulted ceiling and roof over the tea room to repair supporting walls and the ceiling.

Patrick Nolan, a spokesman for the state Department of Public Works, which is overseeing the \$2 million Gillette's Castle project for the state Department of Environmental Protection, said he was impressed by the company's abilities and was confident that it could have the same success it had at Harkness Memorial.

Built by actor William Gillette between 1914 and 1919 on a cliff on the east side of the Connecticut River, the castle is known for its unique architecture and interior design.

Scheduled for completion in June 2000, the project includes reconstruction of parapet walls, roof replacement, elimination of water infiltration around windows, electrical

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wiring improvements and installation of an emergency generator.

Architect Roger Clarke of Hartford, who designed improvements to Gillette's Castle, also has designed the alterations to Center Church.

The Gillette's Castle project is on schedule and is about 40 percent complete, said Linda Levine, a DEP program specialist.

"There's scaffolding around everything. The building is closed, but the park is open," said Levine. "They run a good project. They've been responsive to our needs. They're respective of what they're working on."

Kronenberger & Sons also spent seven months last year doing exterior renovations at the Mark Twain house and its carriage house in Hartford. The project revealed a surprise for Thomas Kronenberger and his workers.

"We took down their chimneys, and we found out they weren't the original chimneys," said Thomas Kronenberger, who from his research was able to determine the original configuration of the bricks. "We rebuilt the chimneys the way they originally were. To me, it's like a time machine. I get real insight into who did the work and who lived there."

To compete for many jobs, the company has to be certain that its workers are well-trained in various types of restoration techniques.

As an example, Thomas Kronenberger said the company sent several employees to a masonry training session in Maryland where they learned a new technique of brownstone restoration.

He also is proud of efforts the company takes in training its employees in cardiopulmonary resuscitation and safety issues. A safety officer also is on staff.

"We treat our employees like a family with things like profit sharing. They take pride in working for us. I like to take young people and train them," said Thomas Kronenberger, who is on the board of Restoration 2000, a national program to be held in the spring in Boston. "We've been very fortunate. You make your own luck. The work speaks for itself."

With the success it has had in the past 11 years, the company is considering branching out to other areas of the country, said Brian Kronenberger. "I'm toying with the idea of restoring the façade of the National Museum of National History in Washington D.C."

He said the company might bid on the \$10 million federal contract.

"We do a lot of government buildings. We have good bonding capability for a \$15 to \$20 million project," said Brian Kronenberger. "We're continuing to branch out. We're in three states now. I'd say the sky's the limit."