

Labor of love



Christiansburg timber framers tackle giant chapel at The Greenbrier.

Sunday, July 26, 2015 By Mike Gangloff mike.gangloff@roanoke.com 381-1669 Photos by Erica Yoon

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. — There's a race going on here below the croquet lawn and the white railings of The Greenbrier resort's cottages.

And Blue Ridge Timberwrights, a 32-year-old Christiansburg-based company that has framed wood structures from Japan to the Bahamas, is in the thick of it.

The scramble is to assemble a 12,000-square-foot wedding chapel on the resort grounds — and to get it done in time for the Sept. 5 wedding of the daughter of Jim Justice, a coal and agriculture tycoon who is the Greenbrier's owner, a West Virginia gubernatorial candidate, and according to Forbes, the richest man in West Virginia.

His daughter, Jill Justice, is a Blacksburg resident who recently finished her doctor of osteopathy residency at LewisGale Hospital Montgomery, and who owns the Gobble Cakes bakery in downtown Blacksburg.

Earlier this month, Blue Ridge president Sandy Bennett, a veteran of the timber-framing world, stood amid a swarm of workers and nodded at the racks of lights that were arriving at the edge of the muddy construction site. Crews that have worked from dawn until dark all summer were about to switch to two shifts, taking construction from 6 a.m. up until midnight each day in an effort to get the job finished.

"It's frankly an ultimate study in teamwork," Bennett said as teams of contractors hurried around the site. "If anybody doesn't carry their weight, it's not going to happen."

He chuckled when asked about the consequences for not meeting the completion deadline.

"Nothing in writing, but the emotional penalty is pretty serious — it was said if this doesn't happen, someone would die," Bennett said.

But more than two months after the early May start of the project, the ribs of the chapel were standing high overhead. Blue Ridge's 15-person crew was in the home stretch of their part of the work.



The chapel consists of nearly 800 pieces of Douglas fir.

Timber-framing is a building technique that traces its history back centuries. It typically uses carefully cut joints to tie together what are often huge pieces of wood into a supportive skeleton for a structure. Usually the wood is left exposed in an artistic display to amaze whoever lives in or uses the structure.

Blue Ridge Timberwrights has had no shortage of high-profile projects over the years. It built the main structure at Chateau Morrisette in Floyd County, the Blacksburg Farmers Market and the clubhouse at Virginia Tech's Pete Dye Rivercourse.

The company built houses and a school dormitory in Japan and resort homes in the Bahamas.

But the high-speed construction of the Greenbrier chapel stands out, said Bennett and John Mumaw, a designer with the company.

Beyond the project's size, and speed, and a design that has developed as construction went along, "it has the opportunity to be here hundreds of years. ... That's pretty rewarding in its own right," Bennett said.

Other contractors on the job agreed.



Sandy Bennett, owner of Blue Ridge Timberwrights, reviews the rendering of the new chapel at The Greenbrier. Crews are racing to assemble a 12,000-square-foot wedding chapel on the resort grounds — and to get it done in time for a Sept. 5 wedding.



Timber-framing is a building technique that traces its history back centuries.

Joe Kaminsky, whose Solid Masonry, based in Sweet Springs, West Virginia, had the job of cutting 47 tons of limestone into slabs to lay along the outside of the chapel’s concrete foundation, called it “an unbelievable honor to work on this.”

Carl Agsten, whose Charleston, West Virginia-based Agsten Construction helped coordinate the work, said, “It’s prestigious, just by what it is and where it is. It is a signature project, definitely.”

Agsten, who has worked on an array of Greenbrier projects over the years, said that when the idea of building a chapel came up, he immediately wanted Blue Ridge Timberwrights to be involved. “I didn’t even consider calling anyone else,” Agsten said.

Blue Ridge Timberwrights is getting just over \$1 million to put up the frame and sheath the exterior in Structural Insulated Panels — sandwiches of oriented strand board and styrofoam, custom-made for the job with windows, doors and channels for wiring already cut out, Bennett said.

Nearly 800 pieces of Douglas fir went into the chapel — “probably six, seven huge houses’ worth,” Bennett said. The largest pieces were 12-inch by 12-inch by 35-foot pillars that surround the chapel’s sanctuary.

The firs came from West Coast suppliers because, “unfortunately, you just can’t find sticks of wood that size here on the East Coast anymore,” Mumaw said.

Other contractors will install stained-glass windows and wooden, clapboard siding; a standing-seam copper roof; and a copper-sheathed steeple whose tip will stand about 100 feet from the ground. Inside, there are to be rows of pews, some with the Greenbrier’s curly-scripted “G” carved on the end. There are to be curving wrought-iron railings, also featuring the G, on the balcony that surrounds three sides of the sanctuary. The balcony’s ceiling is being painted in “Haint Blue,” a mainstay of the Greenbrier’s decorative palette.



There are over 200 knee brace arches in the new chapel at The Greenbrier.



“It’s prestigious, just by what it is and where it is.” Carl Agsten, of Agsten Construction Co., on the project.



Blue Ridge Timberwrights based out of Christiansburg, Va., builds The Greenbrier’s Chapel at The Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs, W. Va. The timber frame structure consists of Douglas Fir wood.



The site of the new chapel is near the croquet lawn.

And at every angle, there will be the rich wood grain of the timber frame, standing out from the interior walls. This week, Bennett said, the Blue Ridge crew should be tackling its final task: wiping down all the woodwork with a mix of tung oil and beeswax.

The details are aimed at making the chapel seem as old as some of the other structures around the resort, said Jeff Kmiec, the Greenbrier's president and managing director.

Justice, the owner, "wanted it to look like it was always here," he said.

The total cost of the chapel is expected to run to about \$6.1 million, Kmiec said. The Greenbrier's managers plan to begin recouping that almost immediately. After Jill Justice's wedding to Adam Long, an attorney from Lewisburg, West Virginia, a succession of other ceremonies are already booked, Kmiec said.

An average of 30 to 50 weddings have been celebrated at the Greenbrier each year, Kmiec continued, but the resort's goal is to greatly expand that number with the chapel — at prices that start at \$250 per person attending the ceremony. The chapel's capacity will be more than 400 people.

The new chapel "will quickly be a popular destination for weddings," Kmiec predicted.

Last week, the race was continuing. Jill Justice was reached by email, but said she was too busy to answer questions.

Bennett said Tuesday that he was still running, too. While rain continued to complicate the job, workers were plowing ahead. "The miracle will happen," he said.

Wedding schedules aside, Bennett said that he has another reason to finish the chapel before Sept. 5: It's his own daughter's birthday and he plans to celebrate with her.

Toward that end, Bennett was keeping a close eye on the work as Blue Ridge's part of the project wound down. The company has had seven or eight other projects of at least moderate size going during the chapel's construction, he said. But for now, others would supervise those.

"I'm parked here," Bennett said, "and I haven't been home in three weeks."



Ashley Cannon of Christiansburg-based Blue Ridge Timberwrights saws down the oak dowels for The Greenbrier's Chapel at The Greenbrier.



Work continues on the steeple.



A belfry is under construction.



Sandy Bennett, owner of Blue Ridge Timberwrights in Christiansburg, right, and Carl Agsten, president of Agsten Construction Company out of Charleston and White Sulphur Springs, W. Va., chat together during construction of the new chapel at The Greenbrier on July 15.