

BY ELIOT LOTHROP



The author tops out a restored barn's frame with an evergreen bough or "wetting bush" in Northern Vermont (1). Here, a wetting bush is placed on the ridge of an old barn timber frame (2) that was dismantled and moved to a new location to be converted into a residence.

Topping Out the Frame

In the summer of 2001, I took a one-week intensive timber-framing class at the Heartwood School, in Becket, Mass. There, my classmates and I learned how to lay out timbers and cut joinery. By the end of the week, we raised a small timber-framed pavilion and held a "topping out" ceremony where we placed an evergreen bough (more commonly known as a "wetting bush") atop the pavilion's ridge. Our instructors noted this tradition was to give thanks for a safe structure raising and to thank the forest for providing the timber. Now, some 17 years later into my timber-frame restoration career, my crew and I make it a point to celebrate a job well done with a topping out ceremony whenever we finish a frame (typically, one we've dismantled, restored, and then put back together).

Appeasing the trees. Clients often wonder why we go to the trouble of tacking a branch to the top of their frame. As with most traditions that span hundreds of years, the custom's true origins are murky, but what is generally agreed on is that the placement of a wetting bush dates back to 8th-century Scandinavia.

Prior to the adoption of Christianity, trees were commonly worshipped as deities by early Europeans. In Scandinavian mythology, each tree had a spirit of its own; people originated from trees, and returned to trees after death. So, before constructing a home, the builders would formally ask permission from the forest to allow them to harvest a tree for building material. When the home was finished, the tree's highest branch was placed on the highest peak of a newly completed frame in a gesture of appreciation from those who built the home, while also assuring the tree spirit still had a place to live. Over time, these individual tree spirits came to be represented by a single forest god. Evergreen boughs were no longer placed atop a home's ridge to appease many spirits, but rather to elicit the blessings of the forest god.

Wetting bush. The origin of the phrase "wetting bush" (sometimes referred to as "whetting bush") is more apocryphal than "topping out." The phrase is likely derived from the German tradition of "watering a bush" as a rite of passage for the home's first nourishment. The placement of a pine bough symbolized the establishment of the home's roots, which would then nourish and promote a long and prosperous life in the home. I've also been told that pinning the wetting bush to the building meant that it was time for the hearty drinking to begin.

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Photos by Eliot Lothrop