



Tar Heel People

The Log Whisperer

Kevin Thomas of Dobson breathes new life into old homes while honoring their original craftsmen.

BY KATHY NORCROSS WATTS

To say that Kevin Thomas builds new log homes and reconstructs old ones would be inadequate, for the relationships he forms with the families who hire him — and the homes they entrust to him —

to his projects. He thrives both on learning the history of the homes he restores and on the challenges of using old materials in new ways. “I’ve always believed that these old homes had guardian angels,” Thomas says. “I can tell if a house

time. The pair’s project turned out well, and a doctor in Elkin asked them to build his cabin on Green Mountain in Wilkes County. From there, demand for their work snowballed. In 1985, they began working in log home construction full time.

Mount Airy’s Karen Manfredi

remembers when Thomas and his father came to talk with her about building a new log cabin from old logs she’d salvaged.

“It did become clear to me: They were interviewing me,” she says. “You either pass the interview or you don’t.” Several months later, Thomas called to say he could start work.

His method depends on the project: For reconstruction, he often numbers the logs. When he uses old logs to make new homes, some may need to be replaced.

“He has to feel how they go together,” Manfredi says. “He makes his work seem effortless.”

After watching him work, she told him, “You’re the log whisperer: You feel it; you know what goes where.”

She hired him again to reconstruct the historic Carter-Miller House, built in 1834, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and held under the protective covenants



Thomas’s creative ideas achieve both functionality and historic preservation.

become much more than a way to make a living.

“I feel like the house needs me,” says Thomas, 44, in his trademark soft-spoken straight talk.

His straw hat, boar-tooth necklace, and long golden-brown mustache and beard belie the knowledge and creativity he brings

is sort of a happy house. I just feel something.”

From hobby to career

After graduating from Surry Central High School, Thomas worked with his father, Aubrey, in their paint-stripping business. In 1980, they built a log cabin for Aubrey in their spare



of Preservation North Carolina. She studied history books and architecture and showed him her ideas. He even built a beehive oven for her kitchen, the result of field trips and research.

When he'd completed the restoration phase, she asked him to try something new, but her wish to

taught his workers and Manfredi the method, too.

Thomas admires the craftsmen who built the original buildings and tries to reconstruct their work in the way they would have done it. "When you take the love of art and the love of history and mix it all together, this is what you come up with," he says.

"He's humble. You don't know right off the depth of his skill and ability and passion for the projects that he will take on. He doesn't really talk about himself."

build an addition of Mount Airy granite in the early 1900s building style proved to be a challenge. Together they traveled to study foundations and visit quarries. Other builders discouraged them. For one thing, the tools used to make the rope joint that linked the granite blocks no longer existed. But Thomas created his own tool and began making the rope joint. He

Natural ability

Town officials from Bethania, North Carolina's first planned Moravian settlement, hired Thomas to fix a problem. They'd previously paid someone to reconstruct an old log corn crib, but the result was unacceptable. Thomas took it apart, moved it, and rebuilt it, and it now serves as a storage unit for the visitor center that's housed in the old Wolff-

Tobacco barn tier poles form rafters on the porch of Luna Pointer Hollett's Caswell County home.

Moser home. He even incorporated a beam hand carved by one of the Moser ancestors, dated from the 1800s. "He tells you what he's going to do, and he'll get it done," says Bethania commissioner Charlie Wolff.

Thomas balances functionality with historical preservation, Bethania Mayor Deborah Stoltz-Thompson adds. "He's humble," she says. "You don't know right off the depth of his skill and ability and passion for the projects that he will take on. He doesn't really talk about himself."

Historic preservationist Bob Pearl is working with Thomas on the restoration of the 1785 Michael Hauser house in Bethania. They're taking the structure, which was built around 1846, back to its Greek Revival period architecture. "He's just a plain old person," Pearl says.



ABOVE: Using old logs found in Surry and Guilford counties, Thomas built Rebecca Dearmin's cabin, which includes a stone fireplace (above right).

RIGHT: Ellen and Toby Cranfill waited a year for Thomas to restore the Rural Hall home where Ellen grew up.



"The amazing thing I see about him: It doesn't seem to be a job that intimidates him. He just has a natural ability."

Luna Pointer Hollett lives in Alabama but wanted to build a second home on 60 acres she inherited from her family's North Carolina Century Farm in Caswell County. She wanted to hire Thomas, but he had enough projects to keep him busy for five years. She shared a poem she'd written about what the land meant to her. "I could feel the emotion," he says. "I could not tell that woman 'no.'"

In Hollett's home, Thomas used old tobacco sticks for the pickets of

the interior stairwell, and tobacco barn tier poles form rafters on the outside porch, which overlooks a creek branch. The cabin's foundation is built from the farm's fieldstone, and she bought two doors from Dan River Mills when it closed so that Thomas could find a place for them inside.

"He's willing to think out of the box with you," she says. When his opinion differs from hers, he tells her, "Luna, this is your house; it's not my house."

Keeping a low profile

Ellen and Toby Cranfill waited a year for Thomas to restore the Rural

Hall home where Ellen grew up, which was originally part of the Beck Plantation. During the reconstruction, he converted the tobacco barn and pack house into a garage. Although he didn't like the kitchen ceiling texture, he left it at Ellen's request. She remembers her mother created the swirled pattern with a broom, and she says, "We thought we were big stuff."

Thomas gathered rocks from a nearby creek to build the fireplace, which is accessible from two rooms. He used old doors for paneling. "It's the low-profile projects I enjoy the most," he confesses. He pays attention to details that make each

project unique.

Just up the road, Ellen's sister, Rebecca Dearmin, hired Thomas to build a new log cabin from old logs from Surry and Guilford counties. A pig feeding trough holds flowers now because when Thomas saw it, he knew, "We have to do something with this."


"I like using stuff not necessarily for what it was intended," he says. He built cabinets from old flooring and turned an old English bonnet cabinet into a sink base.

He doesn't know how many homes he's built and reconstructed, and he won't pick a favorite. "It's like saying you love one child more than another," Thomas says.

Former customers or "groupies" come to his work sites to see what he's doing now. Manfredi confides that she heard one woman cooked a full sit-down lunch for Thomas and his crew every Friday. "I can't compete with that," she admits.

For 12 years, Thomas has served on the Surry County Board of Elections, and he and his father have so many requests for their work, they now divide the jobs between them.

Thomas, however, seems unfazed by his success. He's simply offering a hard day's work for a day's pay, just as his father taught him to do, and he counts himself lucky to be able to do what he loves.

"I'm so blessed," Thomas says. "I need to get down on my knees every night." 

Kathy Norcross Watts lives in Winston-Salem.

to know more

*Kevin Thomas can be reached at
thelogwhisperer@yahoo.com or
(336) 366-4861.*