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Caleb Niemela and His Ice House Collection

BY RUSTY BASTEDO

Caleb Niemela has worked with #1 and #2 Eastern White Pine timbers all of his life. A member of the Timber Framers' Guild, he uses 40-ft. timbers to repair and rebuild old barns and buildings, as well as building new ones. He owns Peterborough's Schoolhouse Number 1, built before 1800, and he says the timbers used in that building were 120 years old when cut. He also owns Dublin's Isaac Newton House, built in 1785.

Recently Caleb began to collect New England ice houses, buildings that were once a common feature of the New England landscape before electricity.

For much of New England's history, ice at least 10 inches thick was harvested from New England lakes and ponds during the winter months; horses pulled heavy black iron saws that scored the lake ice. Then teams of men moved onto the ice. They used heavy hand saws to cut it into rows, and then into blocks along the score marks. Next, ice tongs were used to pull and push ice blocks from the water and onto ramps that led to horse-drawn wagons that transported the cut blocks to the ice house.

The ice houses were built with double



walls, with sawdust packed between, to help insulate the ice blocks, and the blocks themselves were coated with sawdust to help prevent their melting together. During the summer months, the ice helped preserve kitchen foods, and home "ice boxes," built of wood and – with a lead-lined bottom drawer to catch melt – were a common feature of American homes for decades before power-generated refrigeration.

New England ice houses and ice proved popular in the West Indies starting shortly after the War of 1812. British North America had been supplying the Sugar Islands with farm animals and supplies for more than a century by then; and somewhat later New England ice houses were built in 19th century British India. The Ameri-

On October 14, 2018, Caleb Niemela, by special permit and with state police escort, moved his New Hampshire ice house past Dublin Town Hall at an early morning hour. On February 11, 2019, another ice house, this one from a Bass Family property in Peterborough, joined the first ice house. Both buildings are now being restored and should be available for viewing some time in 2020.

can writer Henry David Thoreau, living in the early 1850s at Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, watched Irish workers cut the ice for shipment to India, and he waxed rhapsodic about the waters of Walden mixing with the waters of the Ganges. This trade persisted for quite a while.

Meanwhile, Caleb Niemela, honoring this age-old art, is owner of Niemela Design, with his workshop right in Dublin. He can be reached at 563-8895 or Niemela-Design.com.

RUSTY BASTEDO, who recalls as a child in New York City during World War II seeing 'the ice man' with his rubber shoulder wrap and ice tongs carrying 50-pound blocks of ice to his grandmother's kitchen "ice box," is on the staff of the *Advocate*.



Photo Courtesy of Dublin Historical Society