

By Melinda Leader Standard-Times staff writer

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## A new home for old houses

MATTAPOISETT -- The wrecking ball was about to swing into a Dighton home when developer Richard Mecke came to the rescue.

To the owners of the home, it was an eyesore, an inconvenience, a home they had let go into disrepair.

But to Mr. Mecke, this historically significant house was a gem.

"I arrived in Dighton at 10 a.m. and by 1005, I told the demolition workers I would take it down for them," said Mr. Mecke, owner of RJM Corp., a 25-year-old construction company. "I made this split-second decision because I immediately noticed the home's unique features."



Mr. Mecke salvages antique homes about to be demolished by deconstructing them and then reconstructing them in a new location before putting them up for sale.

His latest venture, the Nathaniel Fisher House, built in 1715 for the reverend in Dighton, was constructed with elements dating as far back as 1660.

"It is very rare to find a first-period home (1625-1725) in the Plymouth Bay Colony. There are only a couple of thousand in all of the nation," said Mr. Mecke, who lives in an antique home in Rochester.

In fact, several historical preservation agencies, including the Massachusetts Historical Commission, have certified the dates of many elements in the house. They will continue to work with Mr. Mecke as he reconstructs it on a 23-acre lot in .

In total, six homes will be reconstructed on 7- to 23-acre subdivisions on a lot owned by Mr. Mecke.

He anticipates they will sell for anywhere from \$400,000 to almost a million dollars.

"It is absolutely amazing to see what Mr. Mecke is doing with these homes," said Ralph Grassia, real estate agent for Realtor Jack Conway. "They are stirring up quite an interest."

For antique lovers nationwide, the homes' draw is the preservation of the historical authenticity.

"Our goal is to be completely authentic. We numbered every item, including each stone from the seven fireplaces in the Dighton home," said Mr. Mecke, who added that the original nails and beams are used in the reconstruction.

When an original beam is rotted, or the nails are bent, Mr. Mecke has a blacksmith duplicate the nails at 43 cents a piece, and buys an old beam to match the house.

Before reconstructing the homes, a concrete foundation is put down, with the original stone foundation on top.

There is one antique home in particular that has caught the attention of antique lovers from both coasts.

A replica of the original Jonathan Fairbanks home, constructed in Dedham in 1636, was built by the city of Boston and placed in Boston Common for the city's 350th anniversary.

After the celebration, it was displayed in the Museum of Fine Arts, and then dismantled and eventually sold to Mr. Mecke.

"It is the most fabulous home. It is the oldest house in the country to be constructed with post and beam," Mr. Mecke said. "We have seen the most interest in this home because of its significance."

It usually takes Mr. Mecke, his two full-time employees and several part-time workers six to eight months to rebuild a home.

These homes typically cost significantly more than brand-new homes, require greater attention to keep up, and generally require more time to construct.

With all the hassle, why buy an antique home?

For the love of it, of course, said Mr. Mecke.

"I have yet to meet someone who does not love an old home. Most of the people who will buy these homes will be true antique lovers and collectors," said Mr. Mecke, adding other buyers may be just learning about antiques.

For Mr. Mecke, who has been in the construction business since he was 13 years old, there is a similar thrill.

"I have a passion for antiques. Every day is a new adventure, a new discovery," he said. "It is like writing history ... and the more you learn, the more you want to know."

The antique homes are being marketed by Jack Conway, using nation-wide advertisements in antique journals.

There is one home, partially constructed in , that will likely be finished in a few weeks. The list price on the 5,600-square-foot home, which came from North Stonington, Conn., is \$859,000.

A list price was not available for the Dighton home, expected to be completed in six to eight months, but Mr. Grassia said it will be in the same price range as the first home.

As for the Jonathan Fairbanks Home, there is already a waiting list. The price is set at \$394,500.

"We have already heard from prospective buyers from all over the nation," said Mr. Grassia. "The buyers have a love and passion for antiques."

Staff photos by Mike Couto

Top Richard Mecke, in front of his Rochester home, an antique that was moved from Connecticut and rebuilt. Middle His current project, the Nathaniel Fisher House, built in 1715 with elements dating as far back as 1660, is being rebuilt in . Bottom When rebuilding an antique house, Richard Mecke always puts down a concrete foundation first, and the original foundation is laid on top.

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