

# New England Woodcraft takes woodworkers on a tour

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BY STEVEN JUPITER



INSIDE NEW ENGLAND Woodcraft in Forestdale. Photo by Steve Jupiter

FORESTDALE—To a certain kind of person—someone as fascinated with woodworking as kids are with candy—the machine shop at New England Woodcraft (NEW) must seem like Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory: a place of endless bustle and wonder. The building, on North Street in Forest Dale, is a veritable village unto itself, humming with activity, both human and machine.

On Friday, January 20, the company opened its doors to about 30 members of the Vermont Wood Works Council (VWWC), an industry organization that promotes “communication, prosperity, and visibility” for woodworkers throughout Vermont, according to its current board president, Charlie Shackleton of Shackleton Thomas. NEW offered a tour of its facilities, the largest of their kind in Vermont, to members of VWWC who were interested in seeing how a company of this size operates.

“I came to see how other shops do things,” said Jon Natkin of Stark Mountain Woodworking in New Haven, a 22-person outfit specializing in architectural millwork. “New England Woodcraft is the largest shop in the state.”

Jared Williams and Catharine Emil, directors of the Vermont Woodworking School (VWS) in Fairfax, were there to “connect with the broader woodworking community.” VSW offers training in traditional and contemporary woodworking techniques to roughly 30 students. “A lot of our students end up looking for work at places like New England Woodcraft,” said Emil.

The members of VWWC were greeted by Shackleton and Gary Marini, president of NEW, and then broken into smaller groups for tours of the immense shop floor. My group was led by production manager Jordan Bresette, a 12-year veteran of NEW whose father recently retired from the company after 40 years.



JORDAN BRESSETTE, OPERATIONS Manager at New England Woodcraft.

Bresette led a group of 10 people through the various shop departments, explaining along the way how the company works. Most of what NEW produces is for large orders: military bases, college dormitories, and hotels. “We do some onesie-twosies,” said Bresette, referring to requests for just one or two items, “but a lot of our orders are for hundreds of pieces.” Some of their work will end up overseas; some as close as Middlebury College and Castleton University.

As we worked our way among the various stations—sawing, trim, assembly, staining, sanding, finishing, upholstery, packing—we saw the myriad components of a large purchase of bedsteads for a casino in Illinois. It was a custom order, designed in-house specifically for the client rather than picked out of the company’s catalog, and worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. “We’ve been working on this order for months,” said Bresette.

Last August, NEW did \$3.6 million in sales, an especially busy month in which the shop had to make a big multi-shift effort to fulfill its many orders. Bresette explained that even as NEW’s volume of business waxes and wanes over the course of the year, they try to keep their employees busy, to avoid having to lay anyone off. If orders have dwindled a bit, they’ll make popular catalog items and warehouse them.

“A lot of local families work here,” said Bresette. “We try to retain everyone. When you lay good people off, they find other work and don’t come back.”

Despite all the hustle and bustle, with people and machines going at full tilt everywhere, there was an impressive orderliness to the operation. Components that completed their time at one station were wheeled over to the next.



MACHINERY DOMINATES THE shop floor at New England Woodcraft in Forestdale. The company is Vermont’s largest woodshop. Photo by Steven Jupiter

“How do you keep track of workflow?” asked a member of our tour group. “It’s hard!” laughed Bresette.

Though a good chunk of the work is still done by hand, the manufacturing process at NEW is heavily automated. In fact, machines take up the bulk of the floor space. The series of machines in the finishing station, for example, is surprisingly long. The entire sequence of spraying, sanding, and baking, all on a single U-shaped conveyor belt, takes about 20 minutes, according to Bresette.

“How do they keep all these machines adjusted?” wondered Bob Gasparetti, an independent fine woodworker from Mt. Tabor. The sheer number of machines made quite an impression on the group, most of whom operated much smaller shops where the bulk of the work is done manually.



GARY MERINI, PRESIDENT of New England Woodcraft.

New England Woodcraft was founded in the early 1960s by Harmon and Maxine Thurston. The company moved to Forest Dale in the early 70s and is still owned by Harmon and Maxine's son, Charlie. It's one of the area's largest employers: 114 employees overall, of whom 80 to 90 work on the shop floor.

NEW offers bi-yearly profit-sharing bonuses, 401K, and health care. "If we make money, they have no trouble giving it back [to employees]," said Bresette.

"They give you the opportunity to grow," said Bresette, who worked his way up from assembly line to management. "Sometimes young guys come in and want to make a lot of money right away, but that's not how it works. Keep your head down and keep going, you can grow here."

The tour ended in the packaging department, where completed orders get wrapped and boxed in anticipation of shipment to clients or company warehouses. Chairs, desks, dressers, headboards were all stacked and awaiting protective wrap. The group thanked Mr. Bresette and found the other members of VWWC who were finishing up as well.

The next stop of most of the members was the Brandon Inn for VWWC's annual meeting. For me, stepping outside into the cold snowfall was like leaving a hidden realm and re-entering the gray reality of a winter's day.