

IT'S BACK!



A delicate operation.

PHOTOS BILL O'BRIEN

Academy bell tower finally returned to its perch

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6/13/15

BRANFORD » Back in October came the news that a crew of skilled workers from M.N. Reale Construction of Branford had painstakingly removed the creaky 194-year-old bell tower from The Academy, the oldest structure on the Branford Green, for restoration.

It would be re-introduced to its perch in approximately 30 days, well in time for its 200th anniversary party in 2020, it was reported.

If, that is, all went well, said Bill O'Brien of the venerable Academy on the Green Commission.

Months went by. Finally, on the morning of Friday, May 29, a crane, guided by Reale's crew, raised the cupola onto eight 16-foot columns.

A number of factors conspired in the delay. First was the woeful shape of the building. It was water-damaged, according to builder Matt Reale, with different parts patched together over the years falling away like a wet carton.

Any dreams of restoration went out the window. At M.N. Reale's Meadow Street shop, the crew scrupulously labored over the damaged areas and cleaned the copper. Master craftsman Jeff Haynes of J&R Haynes LLC milled new columns to replace the decaying ones, chiseling them "to within an eighth of an inch of the original," Reale said.

Then there was Mother Nature, punishing the town with a long winter, then softening and muddying the ground through the spring, forcing Reale and his crew to wait for the



At left, the view from the top of the Academy, while the refurbished bell tower waits below.



View from the new-old tower. Master craftsman Jeff Haynes of J&R Haynes LLC milled new columns to replace the decaying ones, chiseling them to within an eighth of an inch of the original.



Easy does it — construction crew works to place the bell tower just right.



Not quite finished; more work to be done.



Careful, now.

ground to sufficiently firm itself up to bring in the crane.

Fortunately, the project was in the right hands. Three weeks ago, M.N. Reale Construction was awarded Remodeling magazine's prestigious Big50 award for its exacting standards of professionalism, integrity and craftsmanship.

Perhaps that's only fitting, considering the freemasons, believers in high ideals and a brighter future for mankind, occupied The Academy for decades.

And only natural that, having been advised by the Historical Society that neither the bell and the weathervane were parts of the original 1820 bell tower, Reale and his crew hewed to the historically correct



The venerable Academy awaits its newly refurbished bell tower.

nature of the structure with a freemason-like pride in their craft.

While the bell will no

longer sound throughout the Green and town center, the crew will finish the trimming before the beginning of the Branford Festival on June 20.

Weather and circumstances permitting, of course.

Editor's note: Daryl Fraser, owner of DW Fraser & Co. LLC Painting, and his crew did the paint restoration of the Academy building.

They also powerwashed and sealed the roof pro bono before the bell tower was replaced.