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SLATED FOR BUSINESS



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Bill Bregenzer, Jr., center, and his sons Bill III, left, and Mike, stand in front of Princeton University's Whitman College. Their family firm, Bregenzer Brothers, Inc., has custom crafted slate and copper roofs for the university for close to 20 years. Story on page 3

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A feature of: The Princeton Packet, Lawrence Ledger,
Windsor-Hights Herald, The Cranbury Press, Hopewell Valley News and South Brunswick Post

A business made from slate, copper and family

Over three generations, the Bregenzer family has built a thriving specialty roofing business. Their distinctive craftsmanship can be seen at every turn on the Princeton University campus.



Photography
by
Andrew
Wilkinson

One happy, and hardworking, family: Bregenzer Brothers, Inc. patriarch Bill Bregenzer, Jr., center, with his sons, Bill III, left, and Mike, right, in front of Princeton University's Whitman College. The Bregenzer family firm completed the herculean task of making and installing all 110,000 square feet of slate and copper roofing at Whitman College, below, in 15 months.

By Lauren Otis
Business Editor

It is a hot and humid September afternoon on the Princeton University campus. Students mill around Whitman College, only recently moved into the newly completed residential college. Three men wander along the pathways, gazing up with a proprietary air at the massive collegiate Gothic structure. They certainly stand apart from the fresh-faced students that surround them — two have shaved heads and tan, weathered skin while the third sports a head of white hair.

The students may not realize it, but Mike Bregenzer, 42, Bill Bregenzer III, 49, and their father, Bill Bregenzer Jr.,

78, are literally responsible for the roof over their heads. The Bregenzer's nine employee third-generation family business, Ewing-based Bregenzer Brothers, Inc., created and installed every inch of Whitman College's seemingly never-ending 110,000 square foot slate roof, plus custom-crafting all of the exterior copper work for the building, including its 104 dormers, flashings, full network of drainage pipes and leader heads, plus other building details, large and small, from custom-fabricated chimney caps to hand-made brass exterior finishing nuts.

With a team that never numbered much more than 12 workers, he among them, Mike Bregenzer, the firm's president and sole owner/operator, said the

work was completed in 15 months despite numerous changes in the guidelines for the complex structure over the course of its construction. Time overruns were not a possibility, however, with the absolute deadline of student move-in this September.

The slate roof specialists were dwarfed in size by most other contractors on the project, Mike says, adding with obvious pride that his firm's ownership and management worked shoulder to shoulder with employees. "The owners are on the roof working right alongside the guys, it's hard to match that," Mike says.

Even his father, who is retired, pitched in at many a crunch point, doing work on the ground and in the company's shop,

Mike says.

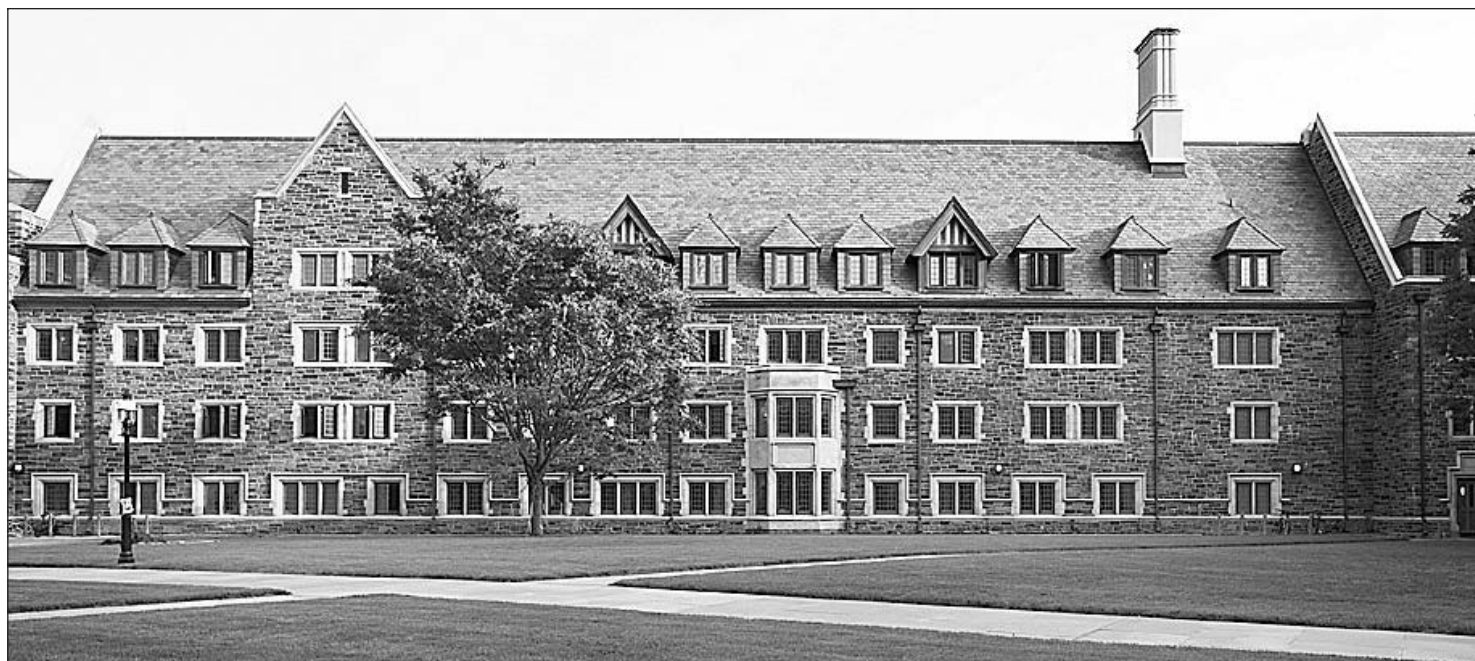
"I guess it came out pretty well," says Bill III, Bregenzer Brothers' superintendent, looking at the Whitman College structure.

"You never get a chance to just come here and look around," Mike says. In fact, he later describes how he and his employees took pains not to look out over the whole roof during construction so as not to be intimidated by the massive scale of the project.

"You guys can't believe you did it can you?" says Bill Jr.

"All that knowledge came in handy pop," says Bill III.

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All in the details. Roof and exterior work at Princeton University's Whitman College completed by the Bregenzer Brothers firm included hand-cut hexagonal brass anchor-bolts, above, for the copper drainage system they installed throughout the college, including over 80 hand-fabricated copper leader heads like the one at left.

Photography by
Andrew Wilkinson

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If you see a slate roof on the Princeton University campus, chances are Bregenzer Brothers made it. For close to twenty years the firm has bid on, and executed, the specialized and long-lasting roofs without which the leafy campus would not look the same.

"As far as roofing goes, you can't beat a slate roof for longevity, and beauty as far as I'm concerned," says Mike Bregenzer.

"As far as wear, we'll all be dead, there'll be another generation talking about it," says Bill III.

"They do virtually all of Princeton's copper work, all of our slate work, and there's a reason we keep using them," says John Ziegler, Princeton University assistant to the vice president for facilities. The work the Bregenzers do for the university requires varied and specialized skills, Mr. Ziegler notes, adding that their slate and copper creations "are both works of art in their own way."

Mr. Ziegler, who directed construction of the Whitman College project, says it was "clearly a monumental project," the biggest single construction project Princeton has completed. The Bregenzer Brothers firm "did what I think is by any, any standard a remarkable amount of high quality work by a small firm," he says.

"They really take pride in their work. Those guys really take it to heart. I never saw a bunch of harder workers. They were out there in all kinds of weather," Mr. Ziegler says.

According to Mike Bregenzer, just the sheer amount of materials used at Whitman College are indicative of the scale of the job. The firm used upwards of 467 tons of slate, shipped from a quarry in Vermont, and 30 tons of copper on the job.

Because the \$136 million collegiate

Gothic structure, designed by London-based architect Demetri Porphyrios, was entirely new construction, the Bregenzers had to contend with a modern concrete plank underpinning for the roof, and could not affix the slate directly to it, instead needing to lay spruce lathe strips across the whole roof expanse. "We used over 120,000 lineal feet of lathe, truck loads of it," says Mike. The lathe had to be cut into small pieces installed on the roof every 12 inches, he says, a massive undertaking in its own right.

In such an extensive project, changes throughout its course were inevitable, and the Bregenzer Brothers firm had to nimbly accommodate such twists and turns. Among major changes, according to Mike, were the need to incorporate copper framing into each of the 104 copper molding dormers when planned cedar millwork wasn't available in time, as well as a change in one large conical roof from slate to all copper. The custom-designed chimneys, because of structural and weight considerations, required the Bregenzers to come up with specialized copper caps. "We were working nights on them," he says.

The work was daunting but the Bregenzers and their crew made up for their small size by putting in long hours. "We might be a small company but we are efficient," says Bill III. "Nothing like those 11 hour days to pick up the time," he adds with a laugh.

"Our employees, they all hung in with us, did whatever we told them," says Mike.

Although Whitman College was the firm's primary focus on campus, there were other projects to be tackled as well, according to Mike. "We did the addition on Alexander Hall at the same time, as well as work on Madison Hall on Nassau Street," he says. Without much of a breather, the firm is now going to head to the university's Forrestal Campus this fall for new building projects.

"I don't know pop, this is making an

old man out of me," Mike says to his father with a smile.

Bregenzer Brothers was founded in 1919, according to Bill Jr. "After World War I my father and his two brothers started Bregenzer Brothers: William, Nicholas and Charlie," he says.

The company was more of a general contractor back then, building homes in and around Princeton and specializing in high quality copper and plaster work. And yes, "we did slate (roofs) from the word go," Bill Jr. says.

The firm prospered over the years, but remained fundamentally a tight-knit family enterprise under Bill Jr.'s oversight. There was no real question as to what career path he would take, Mike says. "When Bill (III) and I were growing up with pop, we pretty much knew what was happening," he says.

Giving a tour of the company's Ewing headquarters along with his wife Jackie, who is the firm's office manager, on a sunny morning, Mike describes how, in 1991, he took over sole ownership and operation of the company, and began to concentrate solely on high-end slate and copper roofing work.

Mike gives a tour of the shop floor, featuring handbrakes and huge shearing machines, the stock in trade of the custom copper and slate work his firm does. There is a high-tech "computer break" into which specifications for copper shaping can be programmed and stored, and old handbrakes, the design of which "hasn't changed for hundreds of years," Mike says. He shows off a custom slate cutter he designed himself as well as a ridge roll press he custom designed too.

Many of his design innovations are to enable him and his small staff to remain competitive in creating and producing roof components as prolifically as a larger company might. "It helps us out a little," he says. "We can do the big work but we are small."

But what really seems to drive the

firm's ability to tackle and execute large, quality jobs is its reservoir of family good will, mutual support and willingness to do whatever it takes to complete the task at hand. "Without the family effort we wouldn't have been able to do half of what we do," says Mike.

His wife Jackie describes the daunting paper work for the Whitman College project, where full blueprints and change order plans for the whole project would arrive and she and her husband would have to sit down and decipher what new, updated work orders were embedded in the plan which their firm had to execute.

She has three big boxes of Whitman College paperwork in storage, Jackie says. "All the files are yellow, and I will never use yellow again," she says.

"It's been a lot. I think after this particular job I can handle anything," Jackie says. Everyone else in the firm agrees. Jobs couldn't even start without Jackie Bregenzer's organizational skills, says Bill III. "Without her we wouldn't even make it one year, we wouldn't even make it a couple weeks," he says.

At the shop, Mike describes one of the saddest aspects of the period dominated by the Whitman College project, the death from cancer of his older sister Bernadette, an integral part of the family business who worked in the shop. At 5'1" she was fond of jumping behind the wheel and piloting the big dump trucks the company frequently needed, he recalls.

Despite this personal tragedy, the family had to pull together and keep at the Whitman College project, which by all counts they did with a success fueled by hard work and good humor.

"It was scary, it was really scary wondering are we going to make this, are we going to live through this?" Jackie says.

"Thank god it's over with," says Mike. There is no doubt that Bregenzer Brothers Inc. has no intention of resting on its laurels, however, and is ready for its next big challenge.