

craft matters



Douglas Merriam

Steve Thomas

a call to arms
(and saws,
and hammers)
for the next
generation of
builders

Recently I joined the Board of the Timber Framers Guild, a nonprofit educational membership association dedicated to the craft of timber framing. “Craft” is the product of the human hand, and it’s a critical element in a world populated by objects made in factories. It helps to define our humanity.

I’m best known for my work in television, on PBS’s *This Old House*, Discovery’s *Renovation Nation*, and the History Channel’s *Save Our History*. But my roots are in building and renovation. My father used to buy, renovate, and sell houses, both to make a little money and to shelter his growing brood of children. Although he wasn’t a pro, he did have “moxie,” and I learned early that with tools, knowledge, and the willingness to put your hands to the work, you can build and transform houses.

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After college I crewed on a sailboat racing out to Hawaii, then spent a year in the Mediterranean as first mate of a 103-foot schooner and working for a boat builder in Antibes, France. Then, with a buddy, I bought a 43-foot sloop in England, refitted it, and sailed it to San Francisco via the Panama Canal, the Galapagos and Marquesas Islands, and Hawaii. This was all about adventure and sailing and the romantic pursuits of youth, but the takeaway for me is that I trusted my craftsmanship in the boat I had refitted by taking it halfway around the world.

After this caper, I went off to Micronesia to study traditional navigation using stars, waves, and birds with the native “star path” navigators of the Caroline Islands. I spent two long fieldwork sessions on Satawal Island with the Navigator Mau Pailug, chronicled the experience in the book *The Last Navigator*, which was published in 1986 (and is still in print), and returned in the late ’80s to shoot

the PBS Adventure film by the same title. Satawal’s is a handmade culture, very closed, and I was accepted into it because I could work with my hands—use a chainsaw, sew sailcloth into sails, manipulate an axe and an adze. Build stuff. Craft stuff.

The Last Navigator was broadcast in 1989, virtually the same month I was offered the job to host *This Old House*. The first project I did as host of *This Old House* was the timber frame barn in Concord, Massachusetts, erected by the Timber Framers Guild. It remains one of the most popular *This Old House* projects largely because viewers are drawn to the beauty of the craft of timber framing.

At the same time I was also buying, renovating, and selling historic homes in Salem, Massachusetts, working on a First Period Colonial from the 1700s that ended up being our family home for 27 years. I remember with particular vividness stripping off the lath and plaster in the living room to reveal perfect timber frame joinery, executed and assembled with skill and respect some 250 years earlier. Whoever put that frame together understood that craftsmanship, like integrity, means doing the right thing, even when no one is looking. And I’m betting it endowed that craftsman with pride, strength, and a certain nobility.

These are not easy attributes to come to these days, so I would invite you to join our tribe. I’ve always loved renovation and building, and I still do. Every morning when I get to the job site I strap on the tool belt and say, “Let’s get to work! Let’s make it all happen!” Want a really cool job? Come join us and be a builder. Because craft matters. 

Steve Thomas is a home renovation expert. The former host of This Old House and Renovation Nation, he now heads up Steve Thomas Builders.



Henry Gagne

Above: Steve on the site of a timber-framed barn, filming a two-hour *Renovation Nation* special. With care and craftsmanship built into it, this barn could still be around in 250 years.