

Profiles

SHOWING THEIR METAL

PROFILE—March 2012

by Sarah Stebbins | Photography Nicole Wolf

This is the story of the other Lowes—craftsmen Bill and Elliot, a father and son who have made a name for themselves creating artful, elegant hardware for boats and residences



A sampling of their designs, rendered in chrome, includes a mortise lock (left unfinished because it won't be seen); a pair of brackets for cremone bolts (a type of decorative hardware typically used on French doors); and a cabinet knob made for the Hinckley Company.



Tucked away in a warehouse filled with whirring machinery, there is a treasure chest of sorts: a glass case with hardware affixed to little wooden pedestals and arrayed like silver and gold jewelry. There are knobs with delicate beading and diamondlike facets, impossibly smooth egg shapes of surprising weight, and gracefully curved levers and pulls. The display occupies a corner of an office inside Lowe Hardware's 6,000-square-foot Rockland workshop, where Bill and Elliot Lowe design and manufacture their products.

The powder blue building with the bright red door situated in a sleepy industrial park represents a new direction for the company. Before moving here in 2009, the Lowes operated out of a 1,600-square-foot barn Bill built next to his home in Owls Head. They were known for making high-end, made-to-order metalwork for yachts: steering wheels, skylights, railings, cleats, and door and cabinet hardware. "We were basically a job shop; we'd wait for a job to come in and then work on it, whatever the customer wanted," says Elliot, who joined his dad's business in 2003 after graduating from the University of Maine with an engineering degree. "But we didn't have anything to market." His vision for growing the enterprise: narrow the focus to door and cabinet fixtures and expand into the residential hardware world where there are more opportunities. They would also need a product line and, eventually, a facility that could handle the increased output. Initially, his dad was reluctant. "If I'd had my way, I probably would have stayed in the barn," says Bill. "I had a better than average job and I was content. I came around because I knew Elliot could do this and it was going to be good for everybody, but it took a while—we're a couple of independent Yankees." Elliot replies, "I wanted to use what my father had built up, which was a lot, and just expand."

Trained as a machinist, Bill worked in a couple of large manufacturing plants before quitting to pursue his dream of building wooden boats in 1967. "Growing up in Deer Isle, the desire was just in me—I couldn't help it," he says. Bouncing around to different boatyards, he became increasingly attracted to metalwork. "I liked it and it paid better, and I could see there wasn't much of a future for me in wooden boats." In 1982, Bill started his own business. Some of his early projects were for Bruce King, the renowned Newcastle yacht designer who created vessels for Hodgdon Yachts in Boothbay and the Hinckley Company in Southwest Harbor and Trenton (among many others). Both companies are clients of Lowe Hardware today.

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The Lowes' work on another celebrated craft, Bequia, led to their first residential job. A homeowner saw the suite of bright nickel knobs, latches, and pulls they had created for the 90-foot yawl, which was launched from the Brooklin Boat Yard in 2009, and she hired them to do all the door hardware in her house. Since then, they have collaborated with Belfast architect Dominic Paul Mercadante on custom knobs and levers for an Arts and Crafts-style home in Camden inspired by the famous Greene and Greene-designed Gamble House in Pasadena, California. Each piece features a plate with raised "cloud lift" motifs (a Greene and Greene signature) along the top and bottom edges and is finished in a black patina that will (intentionally) wear over time and expose the brass beneath. Giving architects the opportunity to design their own hardware "just isn't really done," says Jim Taylor, an associate with Peter Pennoyer Architects in New York, who is working with Elliot on fixtures for an island residence in Maine. "Because Elliot was willing to invest the time, we were able to adapt some traditional pieces with minute, but important, refinements—it's been an exciting process."

Visitors to the Lowes' workshop are also impressed with their manufacturing methods. "When I went there and looked around, I realized I was onto something," says Taylor. Whereas most hardware is forged or cast, the Lowes use a mix of computerized and manually operated machinery to carve each piece out of a solid, bar-shaped chunk of brass or bronze. The process produces more vivid details than other techniques, which are typically designed to meet a higher-volume demand, says Elliot. After a fixture is formed, it is sanded either by hand or on a lathe and polished to a high shine on a buffing wheel. If a brushed finish is desired, a wire brush wheel is used next; for a completely matte finish, the piece is pelted with tiny glass beads in a sandblasting machine. To create a black or brown patina, the item is soaked in an acid bath. If a customer wants something other than brass or bronze, the final step is to send the hardware out for electroplating—a practice that involves fusing another metal, such as gold, silver, or nickel, to the surface.

The Lowes employ one full-time worker to run the equipment and a part-time marketing coordinator. "Eventually, we'd like this to be 50 people, if that makes sense for us," says Elliot, who spends the majority of his time designing and finishing products, programming the machines, and meeting with clients. "The idea is just to keep growing." Bill, who is semi-retired, works most mornings helping to facilitate Elliot's designs, making prototypes and custom tools and offering advice his son considers "invaluable." "I know what he's good at and he knows what I'm good at, so it works out well," says Elliot. The proof is in the shining treasures they create.

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