

‘The pinnacle of my career’: Meet the North End teacher who helped restore the Notre Dame

Michael Burrey, a restoration carpentry teacher at the North Bennet Street School, brought his woodworking expertise to the Paris landmark after its disastrous fire.

By [Billy Baker](#) Globe Staff, Updated December 19, 2024, 7:14 a.m.



Michael Burrey, a teacher at North Bennet Street School, recently worked on the restoration of Notre Dame in Paris. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

In 2019, as Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris was burning, Michael Burrey was 3,000 miles away, in the North End of Boston, watching the television coverage with his students and asking himself a question: What can we do to help?

It's a thought many people had. Ultimately, hundreds of thousands of individual donors would contribute toward the cathedral's reconstruction. But Burrey was in a unique position — he's an expert in medieval carpentry who spent 11 years as an interpretive artisan at what was formerly called Plimoth Plantation, and he is currently a teacher at the [North Bennet Street School](#), one of the country's leading traditional trade schools.



The spire of the Notre Dame Cathedral collapsed as the landmark was engulfed in flames in central Paris on April 15, 2019. AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Soon Burrey would begin a journey that would end with him becoming one of just a handful of American artisans to work on the French team that completed a stunning reconstruction of one of the world's great cultural artifacts.

“It’s the pinnacle of my career,” Burrey said recently, following the [grand reopening of the cathedral](#) on Dec. 8. “I have such great appreciation for being able to be a part of the group effort that demonstrated that the traditional trades that built Notre Dame 800 years ago are still here, still viable and teachable and learnable for people today.”

His work on the project was made possible by [Handhouse Studio](#), a nonprofit based in Norwell that focuses on building large historical objects as educational projects. In the past, the studio has recreated a Revolutionary War-era wooden submarine as well as a 17th century Polish synagogue.

Burrey has been collaborating with Handhouse for a quarter century, and they, too, were looking for ways to help Notre Dame. Thus, the [Handhouse Studio Notre Dame Project](#) was born.



Burrey spoke with student Luke Benedict working in Burrey's preservation carpentry class at North Bennet Street School. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

The first thing they did, both as an educational exercise and out of a show of solidarity with the French, was build a full-scale model of one of the wooden trusses that supported

the roof of Notre Dame. These were the hidden structures inside the massive cathedral where the devastating fire started.

Burrey brought a team of students from his restoration carpentry class at North Bennet Street to Washington, D.C., in 2021. For two weeks they worked with skilled traditional craftsmen from the Timber Framers Guild to build the massive wooden structure, known as Choir Truss #6, working all the way from white oak logs hewed with broad axes to the finished product.

“It was a way for us to say that building something as it was originally made is not only possible but also important,” said Marie Brown, executive director of Handshouse Studios. The original hope, she said, was that they might donate the truss to the French for inclusion in the cathedral. But something else happened, something even cooler.



Michael Burrey's tools on the wood that would become railing of the spire of Notre Dame Cathedral. MICHAEL BURREY

The build was so successful that the two architects overseeing the reconstruction of Notre Dame, Rémi Fromont and Philippe Villeneuve, traveled to the United States to see the structure. As a result, they invited two American timber framers to join the

reconstruction team in France. One invitation went to Michael Burrey. The other went to Jackson Dubois, a Washington state man who is president of the Timber Framers Guild.

For three months in the summer of 2023, Burrey and Dubois joined 18 carpenters from a French company called Asselin working on the wooden components of the Notre Dame spire. They operated out of the medieval town of Thouars in western France, about three hours from Paris, and Burrey worked on the decorative elements of the spire — the quatrefoils, trefoils, railings, and dormers. There were language barriers, Burrey said, but the one thing they had in common was that they all spoke carpentry.

“[Burrey] called me a couple times from France and was telling me about what he was working on, where he was sitting, what he was seeing in this medieval town,” said Claire Fruitman, the provost and interim president of North Bennet Street School.



A worker operated on the reconstruction of Notre Dame Cathedral's new wooden spire in Paris on March 14. LUDOVIC MARIN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



Burrey (third from left) joined French carpenters for a picture. The French carpenters built the quatrefoils for the nave of Notre Dame cathedral. MICHAEL BURREY

“No one ever wants any sort of heritage to have something go wrong,” she added. “But when it does it’s amazing to say we have people who can fix it and bring it back to life, and the lessons he learned over there are things he’s brought back into the classroom for the next generation of preservationists.”

Burrey, who lives in Plymouth, was not the only local craftsman to work on the project. Hank Silver, who owns Ironwood Timberworks in Hatfield, worked as lead carpenter for the nave, the central, large space of the cathedral that accommodates the congregation during religious services. Silver declined an interview request, but told [Elle Décor](#) that “for someone like me, being able to work on this building, which is the birthplace of this technique, is particularly meaningful. When I look at Notre Dame, I will be able to say, ‘I built that.’”

Burrey, meanwhile, has not been to the cathedral since it reopened, but he said he has marveled at the photos of the completed work.

“There’s nothing but a smile on my face, and a feeling of deep appreciation for being part of a group effort, when I think of everybody coming together to get things back the way they should be,” he said.



Newly restored Notre Dame cathedral held its first service for the public on Dec. 8 after a historic re-opening ceremony that saw firefighters, builders and artists celebrated for their work saving the 12th-century masterpiece. JULIEN DE ROSA/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

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