

# Maine Home

January 2013

+ DESIGN

Nestled in  
**at Sunday River**

A modern home is a launching pad  
for one family's winter lifestyle

# Maine Home +DESIGN

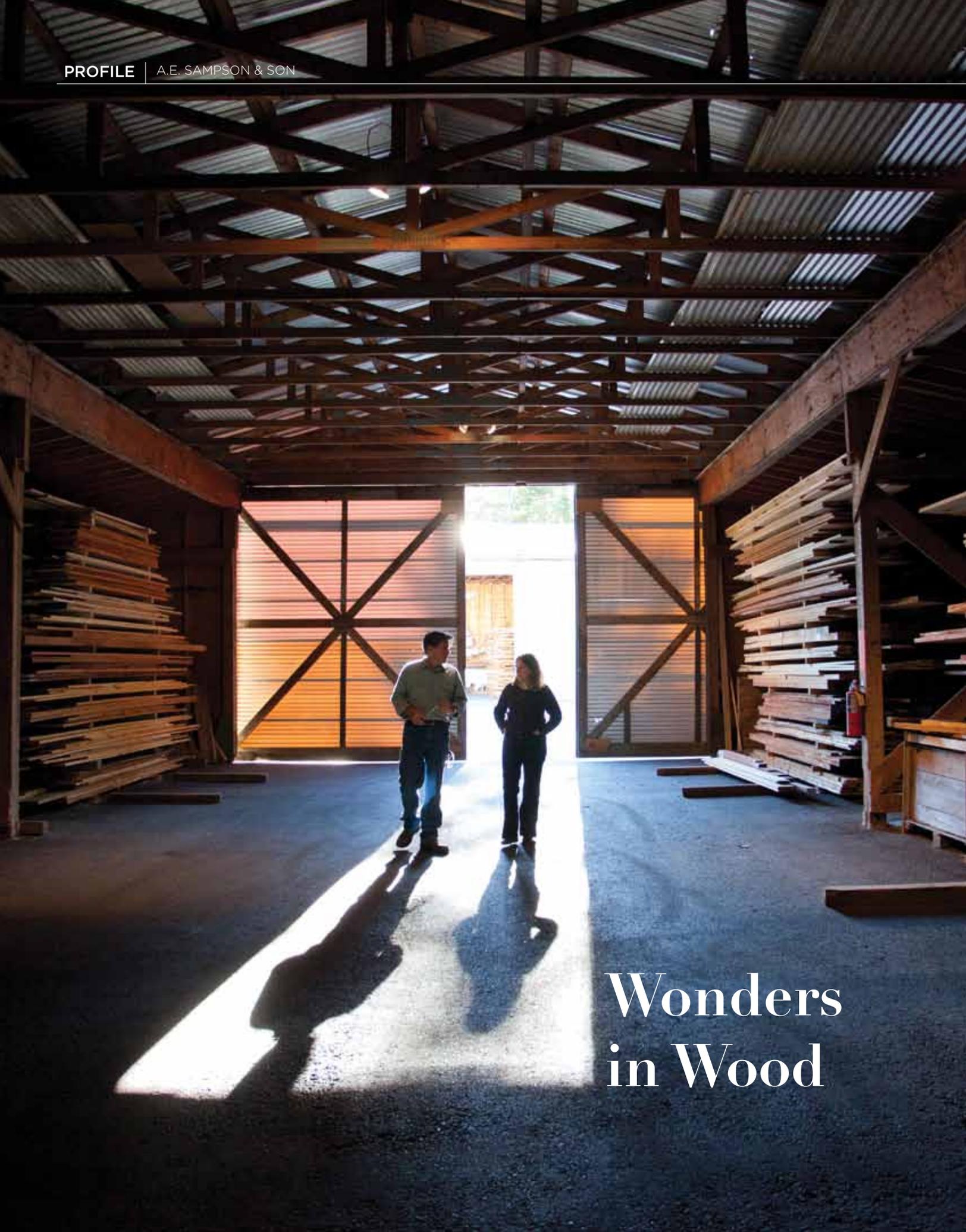
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Wonders  
in Wood



## Jula Sampson scouts Maine for the exceptional wood that her husband, Paul, handcrafts into beautiful flooring

**It's noisy on the day** I visit Jula and Paul Sampson at A.E. Sampson and Son's shop in Warren. There aren't any customers in the front office or showroom, and it's quiet out back where the warehouse is. But in the mill the sound of whirring saws is deafening. I need a noise-cancelling headset to enter, and Paul doesn't even try to talk as he gives me a tour. Looking relaxed in jeans, a checked shirt, and a small canvas apron, he points to various machines then gestures to indicate that he will describe their operation later. Paul insists that everyone prefers him to work on the mill floor so they can't hear him talk, but I don't believe this bit of self-deprecation for a minute. I've spoken with him on the phone and know he's not just affable and willing to talk: he's a great storyteller.

He's already told me about his first week working for his father, Alan Sampson—that is, his first week *officially* working for his father. Paul grew up on a Lincolnville farm, and there were always chores to do, especially after Alan opened a cabinetmaking shop in the three-story barn that he had built on the property. School and summer vacations might find the young Paul assembling apple boxes or peeling cedar logs for posts. When Paul was in his early 20s, his father formally employed him—and then laid him off after a week.

At the time, the University of Maine at Orono had hired Alan to build lockers for the Harold Alfond Sports Arena. Paul delivered the first batch and expected to return to the shop to work on the second. Only, as Paul tells it, the university's new hockey coach didn't want any more lockers. He wanted pegs for the visiting

team's locker room. "I want the psych-out factor," the coach apparently said, even though the teams weren't likely to be touring each other's locker rooms before play. Whatever the case, with no lockers to build Paul was out of a job.

So he took advantage of a different opportunity. He accompanied a friend's mother to England so she could visit her son. From England, Paul would call home periodically to see if his father had any work. If he didn't, Paul would tour the sights for another week. "About the time I ran out of money," Paul says, "my father had work again." Paul came home, joined the business, and never left.

One important change had taken place while Paul was away. His father had started to sell milled wood that he had priced low in order to move. "That was the beginning of our flooring business," Paul says. Over time, flooring and architectural millwork came to dominate the business. Eventually the cabinetwork disappeared altogether.

Not long after he returned from England, Paul met Jula Bickford, then manager of the Lord Camden Inn. Jula was from Massachusetts but had spent girlhood summers on Vinalhaven. After college at Williams and a stint in Chicago, she decided to come back East. "Vinalhaven wasn't a year-round community unless you were a fisherman," she explains, so she settled in Camden. Jula and Paul married, and Jula joined A.E. Sampson and Son to handle retail, bookkeeping, and wood purchasing. Like Paul, she has a friendly manner, which is marked in her case by a gentle thoughtfulness.

Now, if you're in a beautiful, custom-built house in Maine and

Paul and Jula Sampson, partners in marriage and in business, walk into their lumber storage shed in Warren (opposite).

Paul Sampson (above) checking wood samples.



The showroom at A.E. Sampson and Son (above) displays a variety of wood flooring and is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so customers can stop by even when the mill isn't in operation.

A storeroom with samples of flooring, handrails, and trim (far left), which customers can take home to consider.

A.E. Sampson and Son makes sure that every piece of wood that comes out of a machine on Wednesday measures the same as the pieces that came out on Tuesday. The only way to assure this consistency is by using high-precision tools such as this dial caliper (left) for exact measurements.

you're admiring the wood floor, there's a good chance you are looking at the work of A.E. Sampson and Son. "I don't know anyone else who does what they do," says Michael Roy, the owner of Phi Home Designs in Rockport. A.E. Sampson and Son is able to produce beautiful floors because they handpick their boards and run them individually through the mill and because Julia—who has strong relationships with Maine landowners, foresters, sawyers, and kiln owners—can find exactly what her customers want when it comes to wood color, grade, and size.

"We buy from the source," says Julia. "When purchasing a floor from us, you know where the wood came from, who milled it, and how it was milled. People want to know where their food, furniture, and clothing come from. Why not their housing and construction materials?"

Customers tend to begin a flooring project with A.E. Sampson and Son by meeting with Julia in the showroom, where wood is on display. Often people arrive with an idea of what they want. Still, they may benefit from further education. Julia might let them know that cherry darkens after it is installed and walnut lightens. Or that very dark wood, which shows scratches, isn't a good choice for those with an active lifestyle.

In addition to flooring, A.E. Sampson and Son makes banisters, stair treads, casings, mouldings, paneling, wainscoting, and kitchen countertops. An upstairs room displays samples of this millwork, all of which customers can take home. Paul says that

homeowners don't always realize that, if they get a floor from A.E. Sampson and Son, they can also get other elements. But he notes, "If architects want to set a mood or develop a design element in a project, they want all the parts and pieces to be coordinated." Given this, A.E. Sampson and Son has an array of mouldings and other parts for contemporary and period houses. Paul, whose personal tastes don't tend to the Victorian, still loves making mouldings from the era. "It's challenging with the corbels and finials. It's fun stuff to make."

After decades in the business, you might think the Sampsons would be tired of wood and talking about wood, but this is anything but the case. They brighten as they explain details that a layperson might not consider, like moisture content or the virtue of rounding the edges of the tongue-and-groove on the floorboards so installers don't cut themselves. (A.E. Sampson and Son wood is shaped to make it particularly easy to install.) Just before I leave the shop, Julia tells me how much she enjoys talking with customers, particularly at home shows, where people will come up and tell her stories. "Wood in general really brings out good memories," she says and offers a smile. Clearly, she and Paul have many such memories of their own. **MH+D**

*For more information, see Resources on page 94.*