

The Maine State Prison A Fryeburg Fair Vendor



If you just happened to ask a Mainer where you could buy a great cutting board, they'd likely point you to the Maine State Prison Showroom in Thomaston. That's where you'll find some of the finest wood workmanship anywhere. Tables, bureaus, cupboards, chairs, toys, salad bowls, birdhouses, jewelry boxes, corn hole boards and about 50 other high quality items are for sale. The workmanship in each piece is made by residents serving sentences at the Maine State Prison located about 4 miles down the road from the Thomaston Showroom in the town of Warren. The maximum-security prison built in 2001 replaced the original Maine State Prison in Thomaston that was built in 1824. The prison's capacity - 916 adult male residents.

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Ken Lindsey is the Industries Manager at the Maine State Prison overseeing the woodworking operation. He started as a guard at the facility in 1988. He welcomed my request to visit the prison to highlight one of our most interesting Fryeburg Fair vendors. The Prison sells product at their Thomaston store, Frye-



Ken Lindsey, Maine State Prison's Wood Industries Manager with a cherry dresses built at the prison.



Residents at work at the Maine State Prison.

burg Fair and to some vendors in the state.

The prison is remotely tucked into rural Maine in the scenic town of Warren, about 15 minutes inland from the rocky coast. One might expect a Maine prison to be like those in the pages of a Stephen King book. As it turns out, they do have a section of the prison they call, “the Mile.” Security, of course, is tight. I was given an emergency call device. Ken Lindsey led me down long hallways, behind iron doors, and down The Mile. Lots of cement, walls and barbed wire.

88 residents of the prison were working in the woodshop on the day of my visit. The workers are maximum, medium and minimum security residents who have expressed an interest and have a good behavioral record. Lindsey says, “We have some workers doing life and we have some getting out in a year. You won’t be able to tell the difference.”

The shop spans the size of a football field and smells like fresh cedar and sawdust. A multitude of running machines require conversation to be close and loud. The workshop is segmented by task from raw lumber to finished product - cutting, sanding, staining, airbrushing, painting, carving, CNC, plasma cutting, lathe and welding.

The entire facility is exceptionally organized, tidy and well run. Everyone is busy. Experienced workers are training new residents. Lindsey says, “If you’re willing to learn, there’s someone here that will teach



Skilled residents training others.

you. We have Lean 101 classes that teach residents how to set up their work area in a productive way. This is the best part of the residents’ day. And those of us who work here really enjoy it. We’re watching residents learn and gain new skills for when they’re released. For those serving life sentences, this work gives them purpose and a positive focus. We treat each of them as a worker not an inmate. Everybody finds their niche here. If you’re a new worker we put you with a group of four other residents. We move residents to new challenges if they do well and want to do more.”

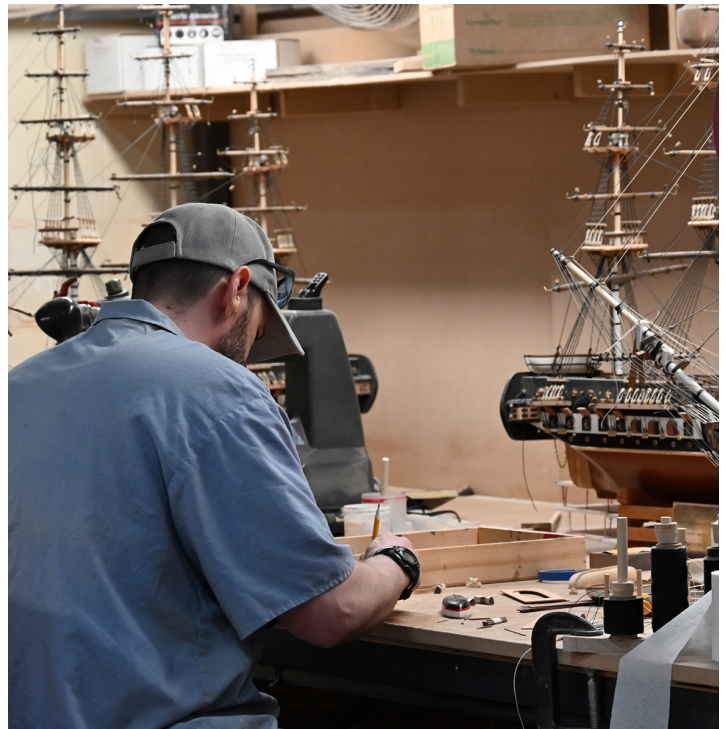


Painting corn hole boards.

Much of the lumber for building, mostly ash and pine, comes from Maine’s Mountain View Correctional Facility where it is milled. Other woods are procured from various sellers. During COVID the prison ran out of lumber and had to close down the Thomaston showroom for months. They are in the process of restocking now.



Using the band saw to carve salad bowls.



Maine shipbuilding. These replicas are impressive in their detail.

The wood shop uses every bit of wood they receive. Sawdust is vacuumed up and is one of the items sold at the Thomaston showroom.

Lindsey says, “During COVID when we had no wood coming in, we turned to mask making. The residents made over 225,000 masks and donated them to different veterans homes, schools, and homeless shelters. We went online with other industry managers from around the country to get patterns and figured out how to make them. We turned a negative into a positive and the residents felt very good about that.”



Maine State Prison employees: Hal Thayer, Dean Leonard, Patrick Connor & Ken Lindsey. Hal & Dean come to Fryeburg Fair with a truck load of prison-made items and set up shop in Expo 5 next to the Pulling Ring. “We love Fryeburg. We’re busy all week long. The people are great and we love staying right at the Fair.”

Tax-payer dollars are not used for the wood industries program. It is self-supported by \$1.5M of retail sales annually. The program has benefitted from a few substantial donations. Lindsey says, “Doris Buffett, the older sister of Warren Buffett, was a financial supporter through her Sunshine Lady Foundation. She visited the prison a few times prior to her passing in August 2020. We now have a welding program thanks to her. She was a very generous and very nice woman.”

Lindsey says their most popular product is the cutting board. “We sell a ton of them and often can’t keep them in stock at the store. Our corn hole boards are taking

off in popularity right now. Especially the ones with the Maine lobster on them.” They are currently working on a big project for an Ellsworth, Maine hotel - 56 bureaus, night stands and chairs.

Residents work with over 10,000 typical woodworking tools which are closely monitored.

As we keep moving through departments, Lindsey says, “You’ll see everyone is busy. There is no drama, no

arguing. We’re always moving things around for efficiency and better use of space. Residents work from 8-10:30 am and 11:30-3:30 pm. This program helps them get through their sentences. They are able to make some money with this work. We require mandatory savings. Otherwise they can spend their earnings in the commissary and send some home to their families.”

The program at the Maine State Prison has been a very positive example to correctional facilities all over the country. Lindsey credits Commissioner Randall Liberty, Warden Matthew Magnusson and their administrative staff for their support. CBS Sunday Morning recently featured the prison program. After the show aired, tons of emails were received about purchasing items. The retail store does not ship and can’t sell product outside the state. Customers can only visit the Thomaston showroom to make purchases.

Ken Lindsey is proud of the work done on behalf of these men. “This is the best part of the workers’ day. If not, we want to know why. Our residents take pride in their work. It’s hard to come in and think of what has transpired to get them here. Every day they’re faced with their sentences. We give them positive social behaviors and skills. The majority of residents don’t come back. They need this chance. They’ve messed up and know it. Besides woodworking, here at the prison they can get substance abuse and anger management counseling, college classes right up through a master’s degree and opportunities to make personal improvements. In a negative environment we want to be the positive.”

Written & photographed by Rachel Andrews Damon, Fryeburg Fair, August 2022



David Hastings III, President of Fryeburg Fair, speaking from a new podium built by the Maine State Prison. Here Hastings was speaking to 2,000 members of the Airstream Club International at their week-long conference held at the fairgrounds in July. As hosts for a variety of community events - weddings, reunions, meetings, funerals, and conferences, it was determined that a podium was needed. Ken Lindsey was contacted to see if they had one for sale. Within a short time, the residents designed and hand-crafted this beautiful, hardwood podium, custom-made for Fryeburg Fair.