

Map quest

Old Town's James W. Sewall Co. thinks global and green in its second century

BY DOUGLAS ROOKS

James Page doesn't have the typical background of the CEO of an established Maine company.

Page holds an MIT doctorate in philosophical foundations of mathematics, or what he calls "an obscure branch of mathematical logic," a field so specialized that only a handful of universities offer degrees in it. After holding professorships in Boston, New Hampshire and Kansas, Page decided to return to his native Maine, but without any clear plan for how to do it. The number of available teaching jobs in Maine was "about zero," as he put it.

Page had a family connection to the James W. Sewall Co., which has long been known for its work in aerial surveying and civil engineering. Sewall Co. was founded in 1880 in Old Town, and Page's uncle, Joseph Sewall, who was the only legislator ever to serve four terms as Maine Senate president, in the late 1990s made Page "an offer I couldn't refuse" — an 18-month tryout.

The hiring of Page launched a new era at Sewall Co. that focuses the century-old business on one of today's most progressive ideas — green energy — now that the wind power, biomass and biofuels sectors have suddenly emerged as hot commodities. Sewall Co. has done civil engineering, aerial and ground surveying for five Maine wind power projects including Mars Hill and Stetson Mountain, and has wind farm clients in half a dozen other states around the country.

After the trial run, Page decided to buy the company in 2001 with a 27-year veteran of Sewall Co.'s forestry division, David Edson.

James W. Sewall Company

136 Center St., Old Town

CEO: James Page

Founded: 1880

Employees: 170

Annual revenue: \$10-\$20 million

Product/Service: Geospatial, engineering and forestry consultation for clients in Maine, the Northeast and around the world

Contact: 800-648-4202

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Page is now CEO while Edson serves as president.

The shift in emphasis from older industries to new technology was well timed. Sewall Co., long known as the premier surveyor and mapper for the paper industry's harvesting operations, has over the last decade seen most of the Maine giants it once relied on — Great Northern, Inter-national Paper, S.D. Warren, Champion — downsize or leave the state.

Page responded with a company-wide reorganization that expanded the range of clients and the company's geographical reach to five continents. The plan was successful — the company's workforce has doubled over the last decade to 170 employees, and revenues also doubled over that period to today's range of between \$10 and \$20 million, according to Edson.

New technology, new clients

Looking beyond the traditional forest products client base required rapid change, but also enabled Sewall Co. to move relatively smoothly from an old industrial landscape to a more diverse one that includes timber owners and managers and global companies that need the geospatial data that is one of the company's new specialties, Page said. In the process, the engineers and surveyors who work on contracts "have had to learn how to focus on clients' needs, not just on the work we already do," he explains.

Discovering new ways to serve clients has allowed Sewall Co. to get involved in projects on five continents, expanding well beyond its traditional base in Maine and the northeastern United States. Much of the international work involves surveys and analysis for large timber investment management organizations (or TIMOs). One recent project for a Brazilian company involved creating a web-based information system for each regional manager.

And Page sees further changes ahead. "We've only begun to understand the new



The veteran: David Edson, who for 27 years worked in Sewall Co.'s forestry division, is now a co-owner of the company

techniques for collaboration with other firms, each one performing its unique role," he said. For example, Sewall Co. subcontracted with another aerial survey company in the Pacific Northwest to provide imagery to clients there, and Sewall performed similar work subcontracting for some of that company's clients in the Northeast.

According to Dana Humphrey, dean of the College of Engineering at the University of Maine in Orono, "the James W. Sewall Co. is one of our most valued partners in the industry."

Humphrey acknowledges that the "arms-length relationship" that once existed between the university and private business, with academics doing the research and entrepreneurs the development, has been transformed into a closer relationship with for-profit businesses, much as it has in research institutions across the country.

He sees this development as wholly positive in that it offers the best hope for significant economic development in northern Maine, where so many traditional industries are declining.

A large potential project for Sewall lies off the Maine coast, thanks to growing interest in the



The logician: James Page, a former math professor, has pushed Sewall Co. into international and alternative energy markets

Using your strengths

Housing development and recreation — including trails, resorts and water access — all require the kind of survey and engineering services Sewall Co. provides, Edson said. He sees the North Woods being reborn to accommodate multiple uses like timber harvesting and recreation.

“The land still needs to have stewards,” he said. “We still need to practice silviculture, suppress fire and insects, maintain trails and roads.” In that sense,

the timber management trusts that now own much of the North Woods have just as many needs for services as paper companies, he said.

Another continuing focus is state and local government. Sewall Co. has been providing the data for property tax maps for Maine municipalities for generations. The proliferation of digitized data has led to new opportunities here, too. Sewall Co. last year bought the South Carolina Internet company FTG, or the Forest Technology Group, “to create more sophisticated services” for clients. Page said the software programs it acquired allow it to segregate confidential information and to provide various levels of “need to know” information to managers of a particular company, including the proprietary maps, surveys and databases that Sewall Co. sends out electronically. In all, it maintains nine regional offices, as far south as Alabama and as far west as Minnesota.

Page emphasizes that software and programming are not ends in themselves: “It’s at least as much about pushing data and analysis to a higher level as it is providing whiz-bang technology tools.”

Page said Sewall Co. is committed to staying in Maine, where it finds many advantages, though the location is a mixed blessing. A lack of broadband width in northern Maine deserves all the attention it is now getting from the state officials, and a relative dearth of other high-technology firms here can make it hard to attract others.

“We’re honored to be mentioned in the company of The Jackson [Laboratory] and Cianbro,” Page said. The problem, he said, “is that we need a dozen Cianbros, a dozen Jackson Labs.”

Page recently stepped down after six years as head of the Geo-Library Board, a state advisory panel that seeks to integrate mapping and survey data in forms that the can used by all state agencies, from Maine Revenue Service assessors to Department of Environmental Protection planners.

The proliferation of information can itself be a problem for clients seeking to evaluate poten-

tial projects, Page said. “Much of what we do is to sort through data, to probe and present it so that it’s in a concise, usable form. Just presenting lots of information is not enough.”

Since evaluating Maine’s natural resources “is our strength and passion,” Page said, he sees the shift from paper companies to wind power firms more as an extension of the company’s expertise than a dramatic shift. “A lot of the test of good management is in knowing how to deploy your strengths.”

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A brief history of Sewall Co.

- 1880** James W. Sewall and brother Joseph establish James W. Sewall Co. in Old Town to provide engineering, forestry and surveying services
- 1946** Joseph Sewall incorporates the company and purchases first company airplane, aerial camera and stereoplotter for photogrammetric mapping
- 1988** Sewall expands to include automated mapping/facilities management for utilities
- 1995** Sewall enters a partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and private firms to develop digital charts to aid navigation
- 1998** Sewall captures 1 million aerial images
- 2000** Sewall acquires Park Aerial Surveys of Kentucky, offers web-based geographic information systems (GIS), and appraises lands in Australia, New Zealand and South America
- 2001** Dr. James Page and David Edson purchase Sewall, moving the firm from family to management ownership. Sewall establishes forest appraisal and forestry consulting office in North Carolina.
- 2003-2006** Sewall acquires Weiler Mapping of New York, Surry Engineering of Maine, and Forest Technology Group of South Carolina, allowing it to offer traffic engineering and web-based software
- 2007** Sewall maps 2,000 towns nationwide
- 2008** Geospatial group formed to pursue new international business opportunities

Source: James W. Sewall Co

prospects for offshore windpower. While Page is more circumspect about the ocean’s potential, Humphrey is out front.

“Step one is to find where the wind is strongest and most consistent, and that’s 20 miles offshore,” he said. “The potential is extremely large, as much as 100 gigawatts.” There are, of course, many technical challenges, such as designing the huge platforms that would be necessary and figuring out how to transmit large volumes of electricity back to land and then to customers.

Yet there is already private sector interest in investigating siting and power production offshore, work for which he said Sewall Co. would be suited. So far, Sewall Co. has produced a “white paper” outlining the technical challenges involved that could be useful when a client decides to launch a formal offshore study, Edson said. Page said that offshore projects are “in the earliest stages,” but the potential for extending the company’s reach well beyond Maine’s land mass intrigues him.

Over time, he foresees “a great expansion and exploration” of newly recognized resources like wind. “People have woken up” to the need for alternatives, Page said. “The tipping point has been reached.”

With all the emphasis on new industries and new clients, Edson said land-based surveying and engineering remains a core service and major revenue-generator, though the balance has shifted. The company’s traditional business line has over the last decade given way to its new initiatives, which now account for half the company’s revenue.

“The players have definitely changed, but the resource remains, and that’s one of Maine’s most important assets,” Edson said. “Some businesses have left, but the land is still here.”

Edson said it will take time for Mainers to adapt. “The size and the seemingly static nature of what we had” makes it hard to adjust to rapid change. “Companies like IP provided nearly 100 years of reliable jobs.” But the rapid replacement of Sewall’s client with new ones shows it can be done, he said.