

Historical Notes on the Construction Industry in Lancaster, Pa.

By Robert S. Wohlsen

*I*n comparing the building procedures and practices of the 17th and 18th centuries in and around Lancaster County and relate them to today's methods, unbelievably they turn out to be the same.

I am glad to have had the opportunity to research this question. It has made me think about what I do day after day and year after year, and this has helped me define “what is this high pressure, changing conditions, and most rewarding and gratifying of all professions.” You are the manager, coordinator, designer and expert of all the various trades and skills that go into the creation of a structure. You are the master builder and it has been that way for centuries. Very little has changed. Bricks laid one by one, lumber sawed by hand, paint applied by brush. The manufacturing method of the materials is different but the natural characteristics are the same. The hardness and grain of the wood, the natural stratification of the stone, the temperature of the day the plaster is applied. These are the same challenges that faced the 18th century builder and the same today. The man who perfected his trade became the master craftsman.

Need for a structure was dictated by the ambitions of the king, pharaoh, president, or mayor. These structures were to perform certain

functions such as providing protection from the elements, security from feuding societies and the enhancing of the individual's ego. You must have your post office, courthouses, waterworks and normal requirements for shelter. But beyond that, the grace, dignity and pleasing aspect of a structure is for personal enjoyment and edification.

To achieve these ends, the master craftsmen bonded together to produce the required structure. Under the direction of a master carpenter who became the master builder, he employed and organized the master mason, master painter, and the master glazer. These individuals were compensated suitably which raised them above the common laborer. Therefore, as their skills and talents developed, their compensation increased and their stature in the community rose accordingly—something difficult to come by under a feudal system.

So with the growth of the new nation during the 1600s and 1700s, each area was settled by its respective groups of people migrating from different areas of Europe. They brought their tradesmen, craftsmen, merchants, lawyers and politicians to carve out a place in this new continent. So with them came the ideas and skills of the areas where they had lived before and the things that they were familiar with they brought and applied to the colony. The greatest numbers of people were of the working class, not nobility. They were more prone to have lived in the rural areas. They brought the architecture and practices that they were familiar with to this country—the simple and plain style rather than the great Gothic and Georgian buildings that were being erected that time by nobility in the cities of Europe.

Philadelphia, being a successful settlement under William Penn, grew quickly. At that time there was a great rash of immigrants from the German and Swiss areas that migrated through Philadelphia, worked in Philadelphia and then spread westwardly through Berks and Lancaster counties.

The idea of the early settler living in a log house is a bit romantic. Most structures were half in the ground and half out. They used bent poles that were covered with skins, bark and wotting. After years of just trying to exist in a hostile environment, the materials of the area were worked into their structures such as wood, readily available, and stone which was quarryable. They brought with them the sketch books, price books and skills of the trade to produce the structures needed. There was no one builder as the concept is today. But there was a master carpenter or master builder who went about organizing and expediting the construction.

Early on prices were not quoted but were paid for from day to day or from week to week as expenses mounted. The master carpenter did bargain with the various trades for prices relative to their line of work. The exciting example of this development and the best organized was the Carpenters Company of Philadelphia, started in the 18th century. The Carpenters



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helped to improve the general condition of themselves and their fellow citizens. They promoted their wares and spoke of the ingenuity of its many mechanics. They boasted of their manufacture of rifles. The coach builders are not surpassed by any of the beauty of construction and finish of any other carriage makers.

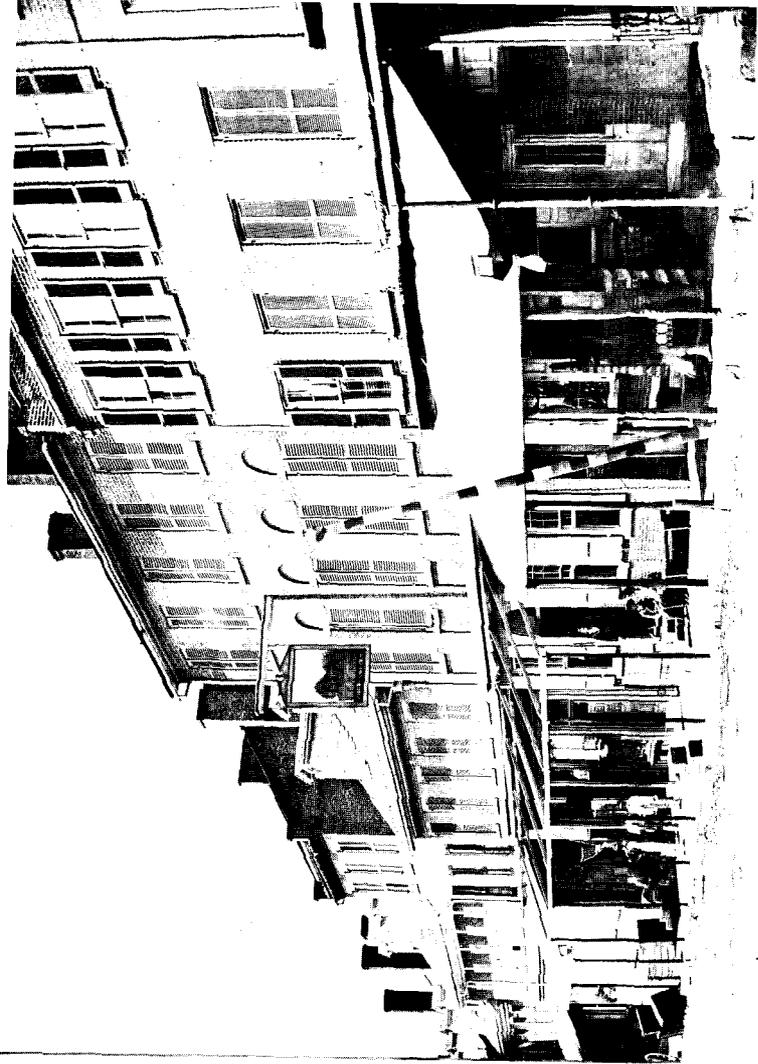
Cabinet makers rival the finest mechanics of Philadelphia for neatness and taste, and for excellence of workmanship; and in all other branches carpenters, builders, hatters, boot and shoe makers, fringe lace and carpet weavers, plane makers, saddlers and harness makers, silver platers, copper and tin smiths, white smiths and black smiths, chair makers, etc. The Mechanics Society took the responsibility for them all! It also admonished:

. . . while we labor to meet competition from abroad on fair grounds, to provide the means of construction improvement to our apprentices, not only in the profession which we are bound to teach them, but also in the various branches of useful learning. We must encourage virtue and discourage vice. We must wean them from spending their leisure hours in idle and immoral pursuit. We must foster industry and reward merit. We must often open to them sources of knowledge and we must expand their minds, that on their arrival at maturity they may be able to take the station in respectable society in which the ignorant and uneducated never can be admitted.

The Mechanics Society took upon itself the responsibility of the formation of an apprentices' library which would consist of books of instruction upon the arts and sciences, civil government, moral and natural philosophy, history and biography and from which should not be excluded works of fancy, of standard value, and of a moral and instructive tendency. Teachers were employed. Rewards given for fine work performed. Dues were 12½ cents per month. If you were absent from a meeting, you were fined 6¼ cents.

You may wonder why we bring up The Mechanics Society? The reason is to administer the apprentices' training, to judge and grade quality and perfection, to police and rule themselves and all in the sight of the strength for ones' community and personal well-being.

I have taken you from the 16th century through the 17th century. In the 20th century it is the same. There is *still* the master builder. The system of apprenticeship exists. An apprentice today starts with wages being 65% of a journeyman carpenter. Over a four-year period his wages are raised 5% every 6 months. He must go to school, taking courses in math, surveying, steel, etc. The passing of the secrets flows from family to family. The skill of the carpenter and the mason is passed on from father to son. The construction industry is not much removed from the time of the pharaohs, the Greeks, the Romans or the 18th century Lancastrians. With the exception of steel, I can't think of one revolutionary change that has taken place in these 4,000 years. The only thing I know of that has changed is the development of steel and energy provided by the use of petroleum or electric. Bricks are still place one upon another. The buildings are built with sweat of the



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J.C. Bowman 1861-1941

he adapted to recordkeeping and the speed in which he acquired work. The record confirms he obviously was working as a master builder by day, kept his books at night, attended the German-speaking church of Zion Lutheran and still had time to rear eight children. I would have to say that these people were talented individuals. They left their homeland and their families behind and carved out a new existence in this country. In 1890, it is evident that he started out on very small jobs. An entry in his ledger states, "June 18ty, 1891, Mrs. Jay, putting up a screen door, 3½ hours, 75 cents, paid."

He went throughout Lancaster County performing itinerant carpenter jobs. I am impressed by his handwriting, spelling of which I don't have the knack, and his ability to perform the mathematics. All and all he had a very orderly accounting of his labor extended and his bills paid. I love to read that at "Mary Street, fixing shutters and file back latch, 50 cents."

In the 1890s his jobs became larger and more complex. He then worked providing many estimates for residents and the construction of houses through Lancaster City, including two offices for J.R. Foster, porch for Professor J.C. Bowman and installed fireproof shutters for H.S. Williamson.

This is quite an undertaking. The building as it stood would be a challenge even today; it used construction practices not much different than those found in large buildings centuries earlier. It is by the master carpenter who becomes the master builder who employed, advised and supervised the other master craftsmen. With his knowledge of all the crafts and his ability to supervise and coordinate the implementation, the building was then completed as per the sketches and plans provided. Often the details are worked out in the field with the consultation of the master builder.

I have here a picture of my grandfather at the dedication of the F.W. Woolworth Building. A section of the books shows when he closed the account and received final payment for all work and extras performed. He makes the statement "I was jewed down \$371 by F.W. Woolworth". Now if you will look at that sparkling and smiling face of Mr. Woolworth and the rather uncomfortable, uneasy expression of Mr. Wohlsen, I think they speak a lot for the characters of both the individuals. That is what you call good business on the part of Mr. Woolworth and that is how he gained his fame and reputation.

I am always excited to see when grandfather would close out his job. He would write big X's through most of the pages and say "self..." For the Woolworth's store-"self" was \$2,100.

I don't know how he jumped so quickly. He built his own house at 430 West Orange Street, with a cost for sheds behind him and four rental houses in the amount of \$20,000. He had gone a long way from his cottage in Fransenberg, Germany to a row house on Green Street and this magnificent home which is now the headquarters of the Lancaster Chapter, American Red Cross. His works included the Hager store, Watt and Shand store, and many of the finest homes on West Orange and West Chestnut streets. They still are standing as sturdy and elegant examples of careful workmanship although most of them have been converted into apartments and professional offices. The Watt and Shand store, of course, continues to thrive as a handsome and busy department store in downtown Lancaster.

Preparation of this paper gave me the opportunity to rethink my direction and what the construction business is truly about. Builders as a group do not like to ally themselves with one another and share everyone's secrets. Therefore, there is no larger or stronger governing body which represented the builders. They are always at each other's throats. Back in my younger days when we walked down King Street to our cars in the evening, if a competitor went past, none of my family would talk to him. This I found quite baffling until after I had been bruised for about five years in the business, then I agreed.

This lack of cohesiveness among contractors has made the rise of what is known as the architect-one who assumes a position in the construction industry in which he is ill-suited to represent. He is not a skilled craftsman or

a journeyman. He is an artist with conceptual ideas. He does not know the reaction of moisture to wood and masonry and plaster. That it rains one day and is 120 degrees the next day and what it takes to organize and produce a finished building.

A construction group will not produce a quality project without the master builder. There is a great deal of pride and dedication to their craft that keeps them motivated and satisfied for the various work that they perform. As they were taught, because of their religious background and the feeling of equity and goodwill for a job well done, they will not do anything but the best for their self satisfaction. Thus the architect demands something from a group of people which they cannot produce. The solution will have to be the formation of a strong organization of master builders with the industry as the objective and not personal gain of the individual.

This has not come about as yet and I do not see it in the near future. The architect is trained as a developer in thought and ideas. But when he puts these ideas to work and does not account for the master builder, he fails.

The educational system is inadequate because the institutions do not teach students to be builders. This is not a one-sided harangue, but a fact. Fortunately our educational system has recognized that a program directly related to the skill of being a builder has been devised. There are now degrees given in general contracting which teach the student to estimate, organize, expedite, structural analysis, the various reactions of material to one another and giving him a broader aspect than the rather concentrated curriculum by the entry of other builders through the civil engineering degrees.

My conclusion is that how they do it in England under William the Conqueror, or in Philadelphia, or how they do it in Lancaster and the way it is done today are identical. I am proudly aware of being the master builder and I have the bumps to prove it. I have been richly rewarded by knowing many young and capable men and I have a son, Robert, Jr., who ascribes to the ambition of being a master builder. At this time I am not ready to confer the title of master builder to him, but he will have it as witnessed by his past efforts and accomplishments. I also look forward in all probability to an additional rewarding experience when my Navy son stops floating around in the sea of Japan on that guided missile cruiser as a navigator and will some day come home with a civil engineering degree, and will ascribe to becoming a master builder.

If I can leave behind two or more young people and they carry on the works of the masters, we will not have to fear the glass and impersonal chrome of the future. We will still have the beauty of nature and the talent of artisans to enhance the world in which we live.