

Historic Building Restoration – The Challenges and Solutions

Almost as long as there has been construction, mortar has been the basic element in the masonry process. For most of history – at least until the 1850's – lime or lump lime was carried to the building site where along with sand it was mixed with water to create the needed compound. Until the introduction of Portland cement or, earlier, Roman cement, this process was for the most part unchanging.

The dilemma for building preservation has been in the way the structures have been cleaned. Deterioration has occurred as a result of inappropriate care caused by a lack of awareness, especially in regard to waterproofing.

Adding to the problem, in order to improve production efficiencies, the construction industry has abandoned numerous skill intensive building technologies and the training and standards that have supported them over the last several hundred years.

This is of particular concern because very old and historically important buildings of Pennsylvania German origin abound in our region. Helping to fill this need are the relatively small numbers of professional historic building restoration artisans.

At this year's Festival, Saul Restoration Artisans will give a brief history of traditional stone masonry in 18th century Pennsylvania. They will demonstrate the use of limekilns in the production of mortar with a life-sized replica of a kiln and how it is operated. Taking a page from early history, they will show how large stones were hewn by hand using primitive tools.

Their presentation is must-seeing for everyone interested in the basic construction methods of old stone houses. Visitors will obtain valuable information on how to preserve and best care for historic masonry structures.

Particularly interesting are the artisans' experiences on various restoration projects. This includes repairing brownstone, limestone, and terra cotta elements using Jahn mortars from Holland.

Tradesmen will discuss the use of hydraulic lime mortars in repointing brick and stone with historically correct joint styles, ways of preserving tombstones and monuments using biocides, and solving church bell tower problems. They will also provide information on traditional stone laying on new construction projects as well as structural repairs on old buildings.

Restoration artisans are passionate about accomplishing the preservation of historic buildings the right way. Ken Saul says that he personally enjoys the artistic side of the job, using brush on rubber molds and recasting architectural details, hand carving stone elements, and creating new stonework.

“Taking down an old rundown house and restoring it to its original glory for future generations is satisfying work. Through the Kutztown Pennsylvania German Festival, we hope to educate the public concerning their homes and places of worship, before irreversible damage is caused through poor workmanship,” Ken said.

As a consequence of neglect and unawareness, expertise in historic renovation now resides for the most part in artisans. Ken explains that this is a bad thing and a good thing.

“The bad thing is that reliable skills can be hard to acquire and hard to get recognition for. The good thing is that as the market for historic reuse grows, and demand for skills with it, the artisans have a wonderful opportunity to influence the development of standards for training,” he said.

Plan to be with Ken and his father, Ken, Sr. for this excellent presentation on the restoration of historic buildings. Ken Sr. has 34 years experience in the masonry restoration trades and Ken Jr. has 12 years. You will come away with some good ideas and with an appreciation for the fine work being done by restoration artisans today.

