



That the master builders of New Orleans are not better known or more widely recognized can be traced in part to the conventional hierarchies commonly used to evaluate creativity. Those who produce painted canvases are awarded the highest status as artists. After paintings, the presumed degrees of merit slide down gradually through drawings, engravings, sculpture, the decorative arts, and the crafts. While the achievements of carpenters, masons, plasterers, and other tradesmen are occasionally gathered together under the heading of the manual arts, there is little doubt that their contributions are, by and large, treated as minor if not marginal. But if one were to probe the history of the words associated with creativity, this scheme which favors works done in the studio over those done on the street would readily be inverted.

In the English language the word “craft” has a much deeper history than the word “art.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* locates one of the earliest appearances of “craft” in the writings of King Alfred in 893. Associated with the attributes of strength, power, might, and force, the term was soon linked to the ideal of skill in planning and performance. “Art,” being a loan word from Latin via French, did not make its way into regular English usage until around 1225 and for centuries it was treated as a synonym for craft or skill. That “craft” is linguistically the senior brother to “art” suggests that those who work in the building trades have been rather arbitrarily and unfairly overlooked. Even a cursory assessment of what they do would reveal that in their efforts they enact the oldest and deepest definition of craft. When they literally raise buildings out of the ground, those structures are certainly the products of strength, might, and force. The features that so delight our eyes flow from fine skills honed by years of customary practice. What they fashion for us is nothing less than the contexts of our daily experiences.

Folklorist Henry Glassie guides us toward an appreciation of the routine, normative acts that result in the creation of buildings when he explains how even the construction of a simple log cabin makes a crucial existential statement. Its carpenter, he says, tore a piece of the forest and “*built to make the world better, to secure a place of control and reason within the madness of wilderness.*” The cabin stands finally, says Glassie, in “splendid artifice.”¹ It is this quality of splendid artifice

that we confront repeatedly as we walk the city. Boards that were once trees, having been felled, sawn, and planed smooth, stand now in walls, roofs, and floors. Similarly, thousands of molded blocks carefully secured in regular rows that reach skyward were once nothing more than gobs of clay. Glassie asks us to pause and ponder the collective impact of the numerous tiny transformations of trees and mud that result in our daily worlds. Such acts are the obvious signals of the imprint of technology, but more importantly, they show how puny humans optimistically try to take charge of the environment. While such acts are challenged by every storm and flood, the truth that well-constructed buildings often do endure offers us the crucial hope that we humans might yet become the masters of our fates. By creating sturdy structures, building tradesmen provide us with a reassuring context in which subsequent civilizing acts might flourish; culture commences from the sense of place that flows from their diligent command over mundane materials.

The work of building artisans carried out by hand with the aid of only a few simple tools has been labeled by British furniture designer David Pye as “the workmanship of risk.” Contrasting this mode with the type of production found on factory assembly lines – what he calls “the workmanship of certainty” – Pye suggests that hand work inclines toward a richness, delicacy, and subtlety that machines cannot provide. He notes further that “*the crafts ought to provide the salt – and the pepper – to make the visible environment more palatable.*”²

Indeed, this is the case in New Orleans, where the most intriguing touches such as moldings, balconies, and arched doorways are the products of craftsmen. Contemporary plasterer Earl Barthé (Fig. 14) indicates clearly that the city’s artisans are imbued with the mission of perfection: “*My father and grandfather, they trained us right from the jump, trained us to appreciate this work. You cannot do this work if you don’t appreciate it. It’s not something you’re just*

“My father and grandfather, they trained us right from the jump, trained us to appreciate this work. You cannot do this work if you don’t appreciate it. It’s not something you’re just doing out of the sky. It’s some precious work. It’s like a diamond, like a jewel, and it’s for you to preserve it.”

– EARL BARTHÉ





"It shouldn't have any flat spots in it. It should be nice and perfectly round if it's supposed to be round or elliptical if it's supposed to be an ellipse. You look for the smoothness of two joints, where they intersect, where it's perfectly aligned and everything is smoothed down to where it looks like it's one piece of metal. The craftsmanship – it gets down to that."

– DONALD TUDURY

*doing out of the sky. It's some precious work. It's like a diamond, like a jewel, and it's for you to preserve it."*³ Barthé voices here a pride that is widely shared across many of the building crafts. Allison "Tootie" Montana, a master craftsman specializing in the installation of lath for fancy plaster work, expresses his pride when he claims to be *"the first man on the job, don't care where. Never miss work and was a master mechanic...I was good, good at my trade."*⁴ Certain well-done jobs are called "trophy work," says brick mason Theodore "Teddy" Pierre, not only because they earn

compliments but because he realizes that they are his most important accomplishments.⁵ The prime indication of skill for blacksmith Donald Tudury is the curvature given to an iron scroll (Fig. 15): *"It shouldn't have any flat spots in it. It should be nice and perfectly round if it's supposed to be round or elliptical if it's supposed to be an ellipse. You look for the smoothness of two joints, where they intersect, where it's perfectly aligned and everything is smoothed down to where it looks like it's one piece of metal. The craftsmanship – it gets down to that."*⁶

Each building trade has its own measures of perfection and pride. Each tradesman, in his own way, looks to claim mastery over his craft. While the art world may give them only a passing glance, building artisans understand the power of their gifts and they move through the city armed with the confidence that comes from a job well done.

FIG. 15 IRON SCROLL AND SPIKES, FRENCH QUARTER



FIG. 16 MORTISE AND TENON TIMBER FRAMING, LOMBARD HOUSE ROOF, BYWATER

CARPENTRY

The carpenter's art is difficult to appreciate because it generally lays hidden underneath siding, shingles, or coatings of plaster and stucco. We thus lose sight of the fact that a building's frame, a skeleton of beams and posts that gives a structure its form and volume, is its crucial first element. The framing of many early houses show a simple arrangement of vertical and horizontal members with diagonal braces set at regular intervals. The carpenter's art is revealed not so much by the pattern of the frame but by its system of joinery. The ends of the timbers were shaped with saw and chisel into narrow projections about three inches long called tenons. The tenons were in turn inserted into corresponding slots called mortises in the adjacent beams and secured in place with wooden pegs driven completely through both beam and tenon. Even though the frame was relatively light, the securely fastened joints ensured the rigidity of the building. In order to provide sills and plates that would span the whole length of the house, several timbers were spliced together with overlapping notches. The builders of some houses drove wedges, called "keys," through the center of these notches that served to tighten the joint and further ensure the security of the connection. Because little of this complex joinery is visible either to passers-by or residents, these woodworking techniques were essentially professional secrets shared only among carpenters. However, they resulted in a tight, square house able to withstand the elements.

Wooden buildings were quite numerous in New Orleans until 1794 when as a result of a terrible fire that destroyed much of the French Quarter new laws were passed that stipulated use of masonry construction as a safety measure.⁷ However, some sense of early carpentry skills can still be gained from a few surviving buildings, including Madame John's Legacy (1788) at 632 Dumaine Street.

Some of the more impressive roofs of the older houses in New Orleans were supported by a system of rafters and posts set in a pattern that may derive from houses in Normandy. Norman roofs employed two sets of rafters: principal rafters that carried the weight of the roof and a second set of smaller common rafters to which the roof covering was attached. Each pair of principal rafters

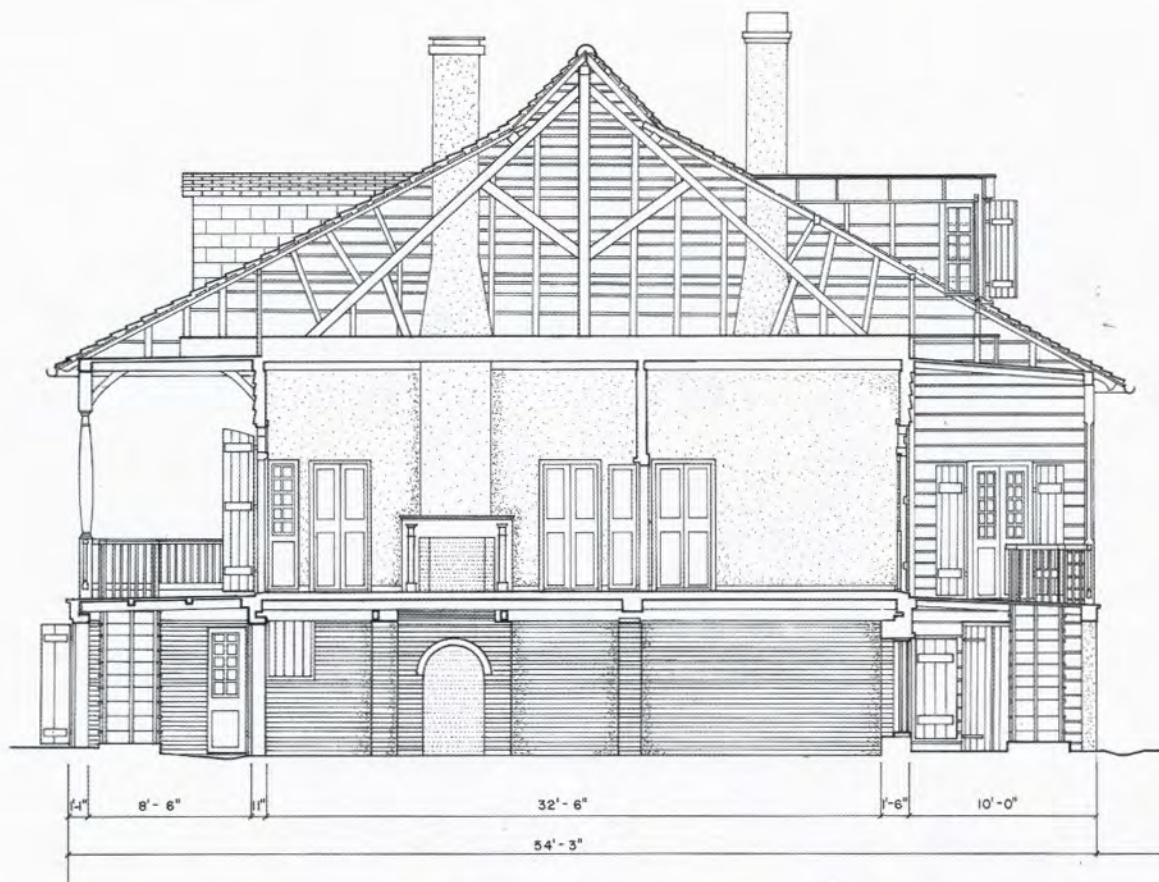


FIG. 17 MADAME JOHN'S LEGACY, FRENCH QUARTER, HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDERS SURVEY

was further supported by a central post (called a king post) that extended from the attic floor to the apex of the roof and was flanked by struts that braced the middle of the rafters.⁸

The roof supports at Madame John's Legacy follow this pattern in many respects except that the common rafters reach well beyond the walls of the house so that the roof would cover the front gallery and the rear loggia (Fig. 17). The roof thus has two pitches (Fig. 18): a steep angle close to the center of the house and a shallower slope that begins at the point where the common rafters reach out from the core of the house. This distinctive pavilion-style roof, which can be found as well on



FIG. 18 BRICK AND PLASTER CHIMNEY WITH ROOF STRUTS SUPPORTING RAFTERS, MADAME JOHN'S LEGACY, FRENCH QUARTER

the Pitot (Fig. 19) and DeMatteo houses on Bayou St. John, marks an attempt to adjust old European forms to the environmental conditions of semi-tropical Louisiana. Whoever these house carpenters were, it is certain that they were shrewd students of local culture as they joined the umbrella-like roofs encountered on the houses of Caribbean Indians and enslaved Africans to the forms that they knew from their own building tradition.⁹

Even the simple hipped roofs that are so typical of Louisiana and Gulf Coast entail considerable complexity. To the uninitiated, a visit into an attic space might resemble a confusing web of posts, struts, braces and boards all joined at odd and perplexing angles. (Fig. 20) Under their gently sloping surfaces one finds not only rafters but an array of other supports including cripples, valley jacks, and hip jacks. To raise any roof in an efficient manner all of its rafters must be measured and cut beforehand. Their lengths are calculated not by stretching out a tape measure between two points but by the application of the rules of basic geometry, as a rafter is thought of not merely as a board but as the hypotenuse of a right triangle. The triangle's base is the distance from the edge of the roof to the center of the roof (the "run" in roofer's lingo) and its height (or "rise") is the distance from the attic floor to the roof's apex. Knowing a roof's run and rise, the rafter's correct length is calculated precisely by the laws of geometry. Carpenter Evins Thornton, Sr., when discussing how he installs rafters, speaks of the "tricks of carpentry" that prevent one from making mistakes. Knowing how to figure a square root lets him fit a rafter with absolute precision; a roof with a twelve foot run and a twelve foot rise requires a rafter, he says, that is 16.96 feet long. His use of such infinitesimal units of measure reveal that among his "tricks" is the occasional application of the Pythagorean theorem.¹⁰



FIG. 19 PITOT HOUSE, BAYOU ST. JOHN,
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDERS SURVEY

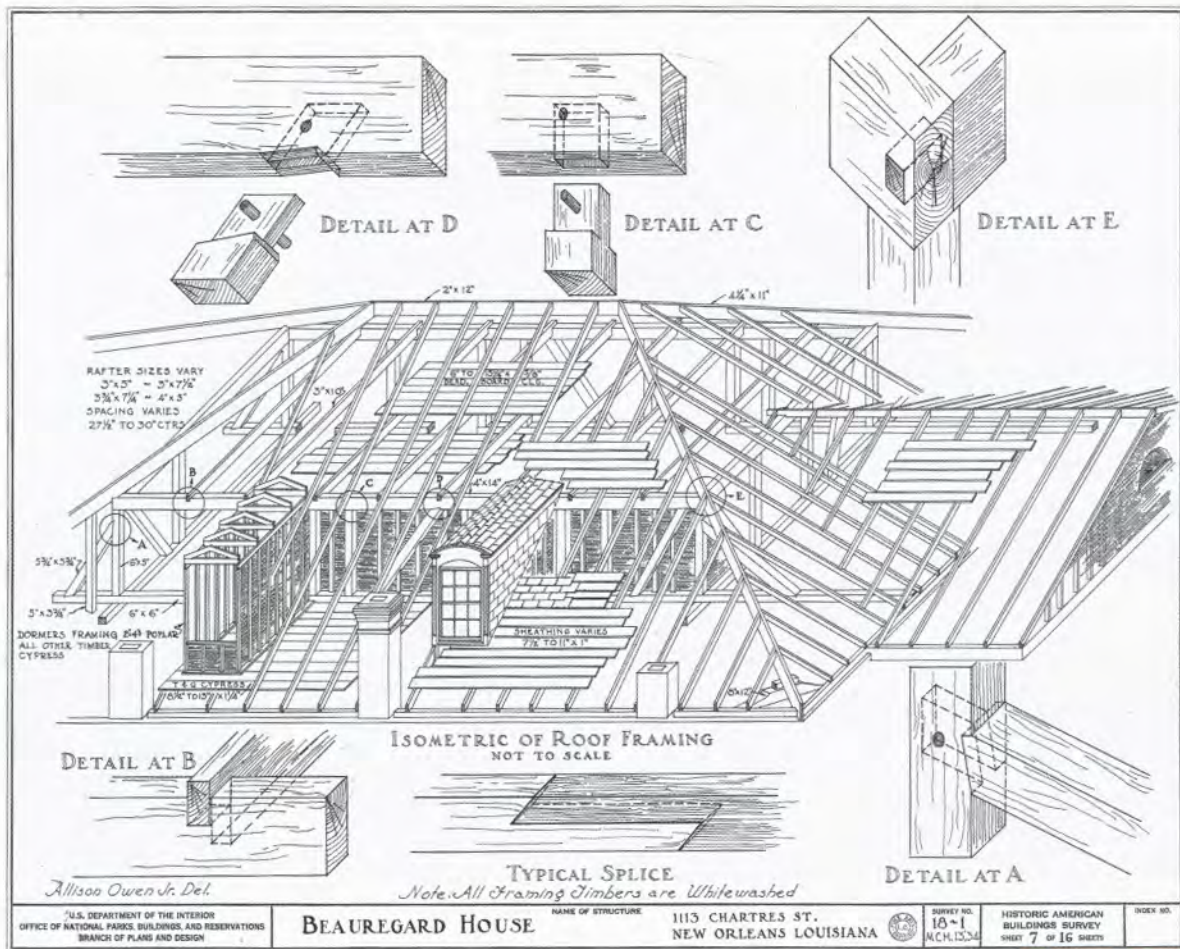


FIG. 20 BEAUGARD HOUSE, FRENCH QUARTER, HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDERS SURVEY

Precision is the hallmark of good carpentry and the best carpenters will take special care to make sure that no board is wasted because it was cut an irritating fraction too short. Carpenters speak of cutting a board at “a strong five-sixteenths,” that is, a bit on the long side of the five-sixteenths mark just to be safe. Thornton notes that mis-cuts can be avoided by using a previously measured board called a “preacher” as a guide. The preacher provides the correct length, says Thornton because “you know a preacher never lies.”



FIG. 21 ORNAMENTATION, CENTRAL CITY

The work of the trim or finish carpenter is much more visible than that of the framer and thus offers greater rewards in terms of praise and recognition. Thornton refers to a job where he has to install elaborate ornamentation as a “carpenter’s paradise” and is a bit wistful that contemporary buildings are generally devoid of decoration. But during the late nineteenth century, when expressions of gaudy excess were in vogue, even a modest shotgun house could be tricked out in a riot of spindles and jig-sawed ornaments (Figs. 21, 22). These frilly elements (also known as geegaw, gimcrack, or gingerbread) were factory-produced but could be assembled with care into wonderful openwork spandrels and crestings.



FIG. 22 ORNAMENTATION, TREMÉ

Their efforts did not stop with the exterior; interior spaces also called for decorative treatment (Fig. 23), particularly the entry halls that were often fitted with dramatic curving stairways. Particularly stunning examples can be found at the Robinson Sinclair House (Fig. 24) and the Cabildo. While the patterns for such work could be easily obtained, only a daring and talented artisan could undertake and complete such a complex installation. That man had to possess a superlative talent and be, as carpenter Russell Plessy said of himself, “gifted to woodwork.”¹¹



FIG. 23 CARVED MANTLE, PITOT HOUSE, BAYOU ST. JOHN



FIG. 24 STAIRWAY DETAIL, ROBINSON SINCLAIR HOUSE, GARDEN DISTRICT



BRICK MASONRY

Brick work, like many of the carpenters' efforts, is also often hidden from view (Fig. 26). The local bricks made from river mud proved so porous that they had to be sealed in a coating of concrete stucco if they were to serve for any appreciable period of time. But given the prohibition on wooden buildings, these bricks known as "soft reds" were used to build most of New Orleans during the first half of the nineteenth century (Fig. 27). Around 1850, a more durable "lake brick" made from clays mined on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain became available and it was then possible for the mason's handiwork to finally be displayed to the public, particularly in the construction of buildings that were being erected in the Garden District.¹² That so many brick buildings from the nineteenth century are still standing is more than adequate testimony to the skill and high standards of a previous generation of brick masons.

Even though no one could see what the masons had done, the artisans certainly knew that they were accountable and they marshalled considerable skill, diligence, and competence in their work. As he explains that a brick wall looks best if the joints are recessed, mason Desoto Jackson (Fig. 28), comments on a bricklayer's obligation to provide good work. *"Good work is doing work straight and plum. Plumb, straight, and level. You have to dress your work up. You have to strike it right. That's the joints, the mortar*



FIG. 26 POST BETWEEN BRICK,
MADAME JOHN'S LEGACY, FRENCH QUARTER

FIG. 25 CHISELED BRICK, COTTON PRESS BUILDING, LOWER GARDEN DISTRICT



FIG. 27 SEALED SOFT RED BRICKS,
MADAME JOHN'S LEGACY, FRENCH QUARTER

father who told him: *"I can take a pile of bricks and few sacks of mortar and a pile of sand and at the end of the process I have put together something that is beautiful, something that is remarkable, something that people cherish. I get a special sense of completion, a sense of satisfaction, that I can't get out of anything else that I do."*¹⁴

The senior Pierre confirmed for his son the deep pleasure of a creative act which transforms mundane material into something of enduring value. His inspirational words explain further why his son would rather be a builder than an architect. When explaining his decision to be a brick mason Teddy Pierre launches into impassioned description of the transformations that he can effect with a dull block of hardened clay: *"I can take a brick and I can do – I can build – anything from a foundation of a building, a fireplace, a fountain, a patio. I can build a brick wall. I can do a brick house. And I can do arches. I can literally build any*

*joints. They have to be dressed and they have to be straight. They can't be wavy up or down"*¹³

Moreover, walls that were not plumb were destined to crack and even collapse. Thus the mason's pride in his craft in combination with the moral duty to give one's best effort urged him toward excellence.

Teddy Pierre (Fig. 29), a second-generation brick mason who also holds a degree in architecture, claims to have gained the greatest appreciation of materials from his

"Good work is doing work straight and plumb. Plumb, straight, and level. You have to dress your work up. You have to strike it right. That's the joints, the mortar joints. They have to be dressed and they have to be straight. They can't be wavy up or down."

— DESOTO JACKSON

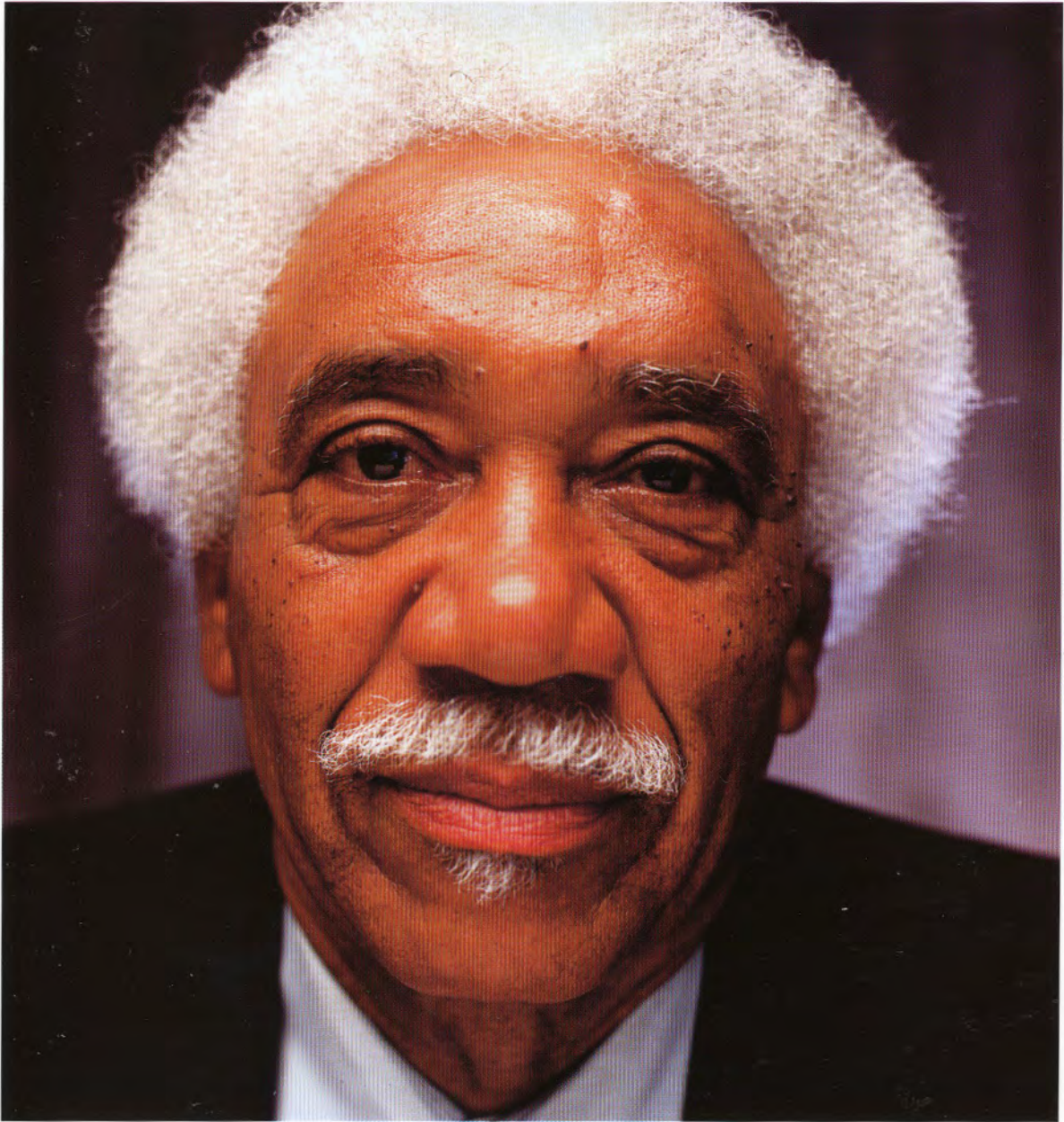


FIG. 28 DESOTO JACKSON

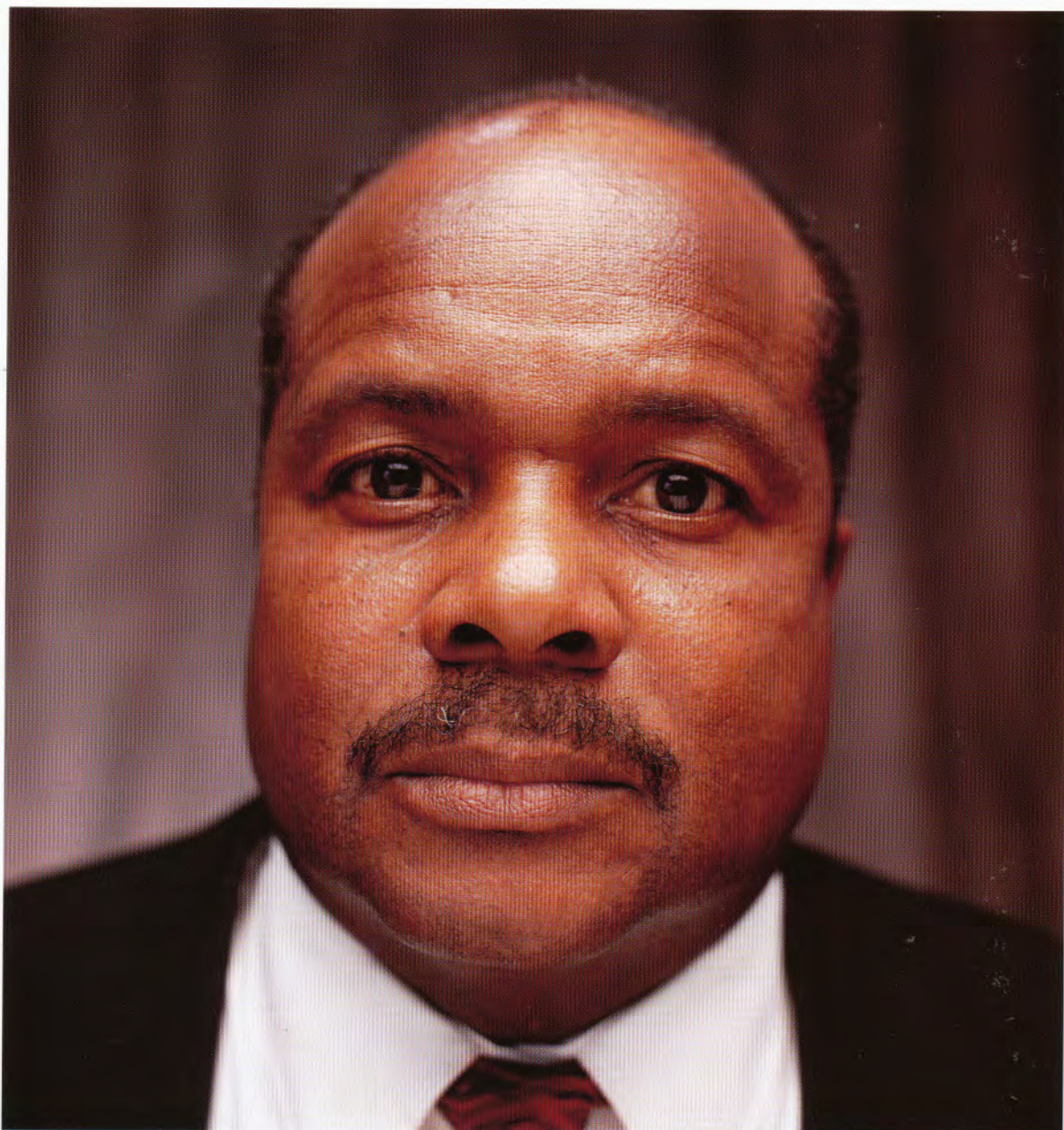


FIG. 29 TEDDY PIERRE

part of a house that could provide shelter and beauty with brick. And I can't think of another building material that has that range.”¹⁵

While some might quibble with his assertion that he can build “anything,” none can doubt his fervor as an advocate for the mason’s craft. Pierre’s deep feelings for his craft reveal why the work of the hand continues to flourish in the era of the micro-chip.



FIG. 30 MODIFIED SHOTGUN HOUSE, SEVENTH WARD



FIG. 31 INTERIOR, PLASTERER'S HOME, SEVENTH WARD

PLASTER AND LATHING WORK

The art of the plasterer is encountered most often on interior walls and ceilings and grows out of the partnership that plasterers maintain with lathers. When carpenters frame the walls of a house, they only outline its spaces. Rooms appear only after walls and ceilings bear finished surfaces. This critical transformation begins when the lathers arrive to cover the studs and joists with splints of wood that will in turn support a coat of plaster. (Fig. 32) Lather Vernon Abadie explains: *“The lather has to form everything in preparation for the plastering work”* and adds somewhat ruefully, *“Our work was covered up. By our work being covered up, the plasterers always somewhat got the glory.”*¹⁶

But the plasterers for their part not only understood their dependence on the lathers, they will, on occasion, lionize the efforts of their building partners. Allison Montana (Fig. 33) is a lather often singled out for high praise by Allen Sumas (Fig. 34). When recounting what it was like to see Montana and men like him at work, Sumas becomes almost lyrical: *“You would watch these guys with total amazement to see how fast they could nail a nail. They formed a rhythm. It’s like music being played. The nails would come in a fifty-five gallon drum. They would take these nails and put their hands in the drum and get a handful of nails and throw them in their mouth. He knew and he learned how to turn the nail so the point is coming out. When he spit the nail out and put it in his finger, the head [of the nail] is facing downward where he had to hit...He put one nail in each stud. If the wood lath was long enough to catch three studs, he nailed that. He had a piece where he only needed two, he put two nails. When he nailed it, he nailed it with rhythm. The rhythm would go one nail. The next nail would create a song. In other words it went *bink-bank, bink-bank, bink-bank*. You hear this sound and he is actually driving nails with this sound. They are making music. So amazing.”*¹⁷

Such bravura performances were theatrical events, the last proud statements before the lather’s achievement was hidden forever under three coats of plaster. If we wonder what challenge there might be in the simple task of nailing wooden splints onto studs, consider that to cover just one wall ten



FIG. 32 LATHE, CAMELBACK, UPTOWN

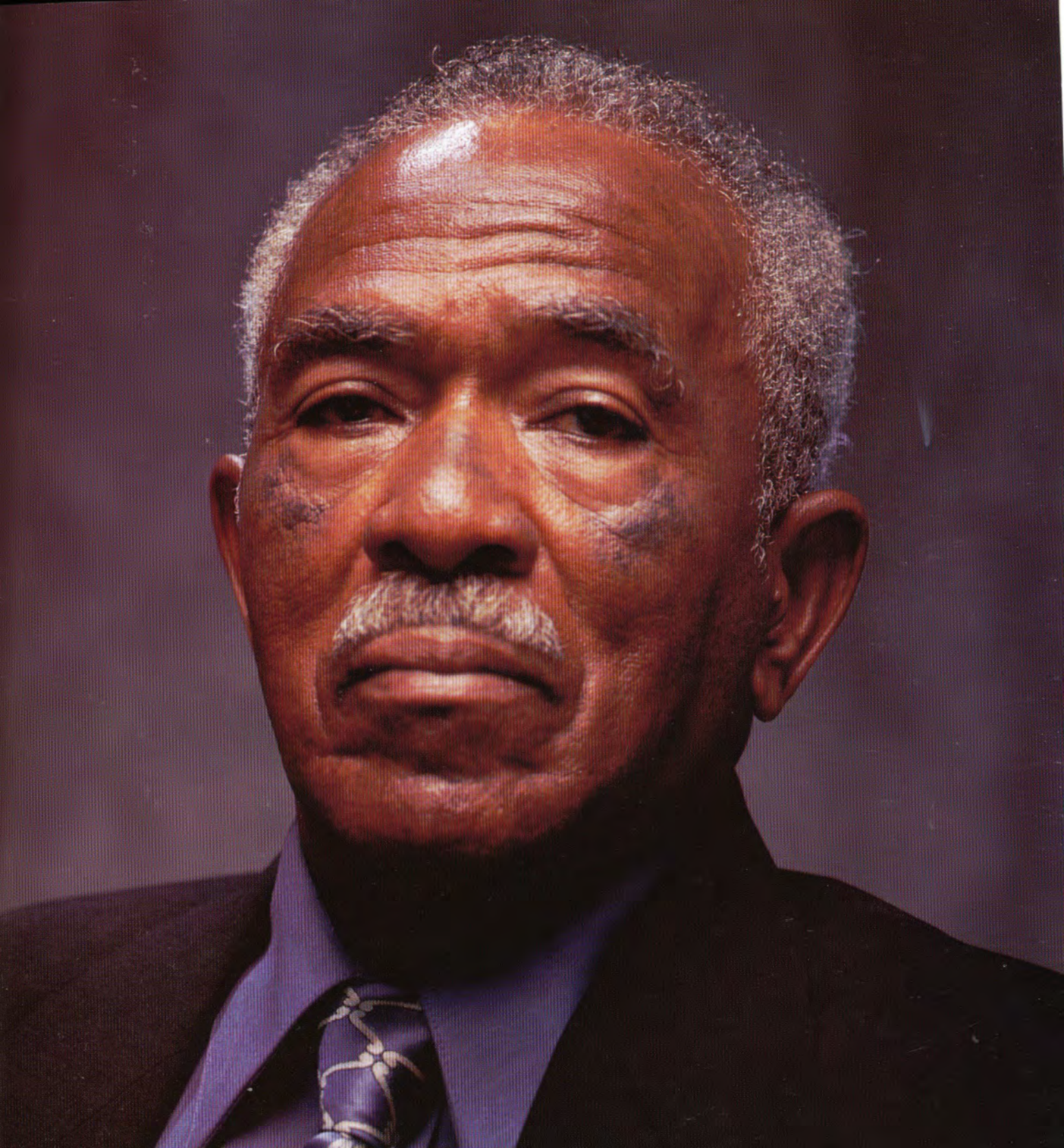
required to build the old lath and plaster walls still survive and some men such as Earl Barthé will even suggest that the trade is poised for a comeback: “We have a slogan here – Call us. Don’t tear off that plaster. We’ll revive it. We’ll save it for you.” Barthé extols the virtues of a coat of well-applied plaster calling it a “Cadillac finish.”¹⁹

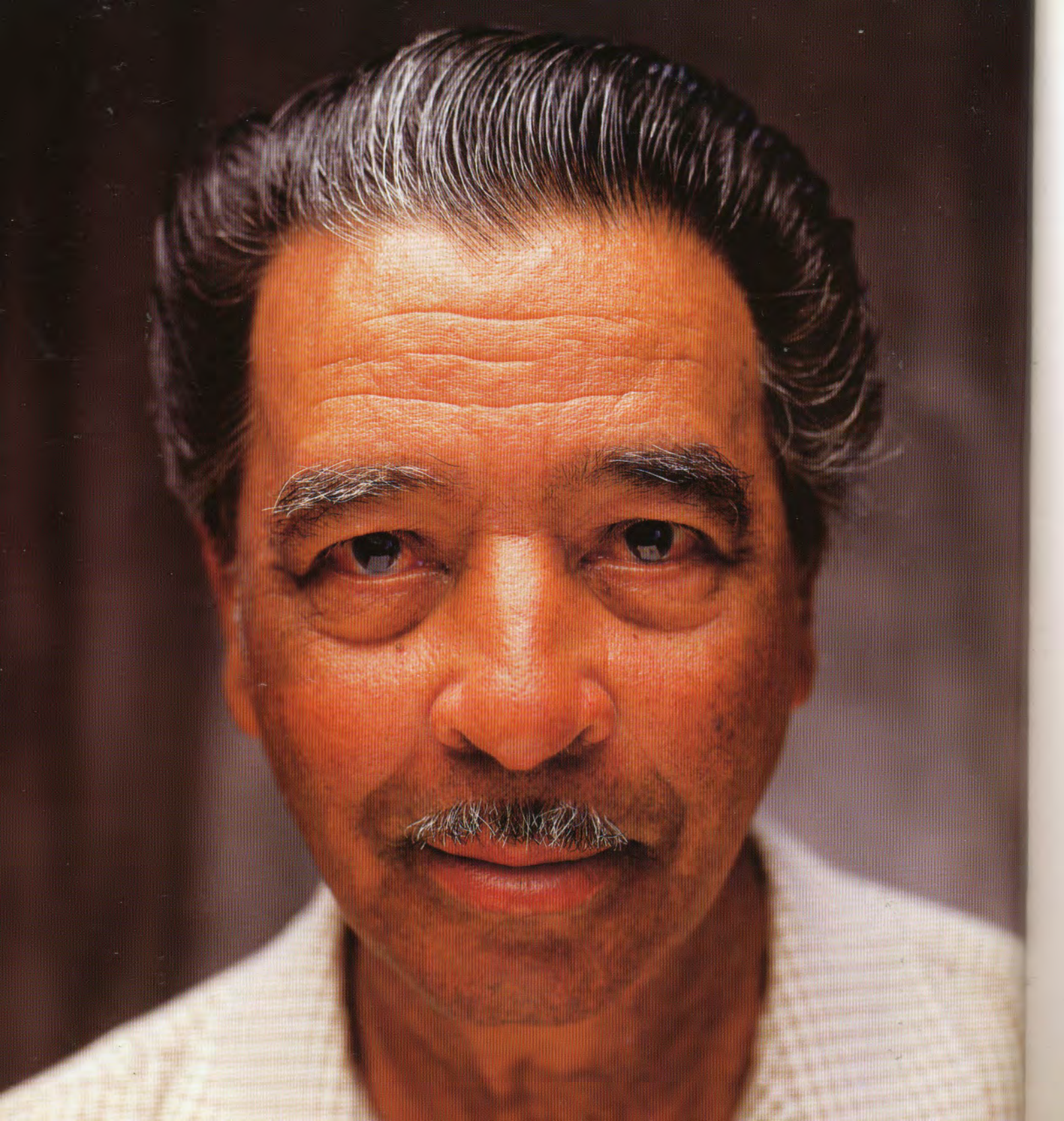
feet high and thirty feet wide would require almost 3000 feet of lath nailed at intervals of sixteen inches. The interior of an entire house would require miles of lath in order to cover all of its walls and ceilings. While these efforts are quickly forgotten and thus usually ignored, the best lathers made a lasting impression on those fortunate enough to see them ply their trade. With the introduction, during the 1950s, of plaster board or sheet rock as a covering for interior walls, the careers of many lathers and plasterers came to an end. Contemporary plasterer Tevis Vandergriff suggests that “the advent of sheet rock kind of became a death note for plastering.” But he hastens to add that there is still a need for the older materials because “It’s just strong. It can resist a lot of things that sheet rock cannot do well.”¹⁸ Vandergriff and his colleagues continue find work either with clients who demand only the best materials in their homes, people who own what he calls “the more exclusive homes,” or in jobs repairing historic buildings and other landmark structures. Consequently the skills

*“the first man on the job,
don’t care where. Never miss work
and was a master mechanic...I
was good, good at my trade.”*

– ALLISON “TOOTIE” MONTANA

FIG. 33 ALLISON “TOOTIE” MONTANA





A plaster wall cloaks its complexity under a cool veneer of quiet, unassuming smoothness. Concealed are not only several miles of lath, but all the steps and stages of the plasterer's demanding technique. First to be applied is the scratch coat, an application of "rough stuff" made of lime, sand, and fiber. This material is forced onto the wall with a trowel so that it penetrates deeply into the gaps between the lath forming the "keys" that hold the plaster in place. Before this coat dries completely, it is raked with a fork-like device called a scratcher or scarifier. The small grooves produced by the scratcher become the "keys" that will hold the next layer of plaster known as the brown coat. The brown coat serves mainly to bring the wall surface close to its final position and after it has dried sufficiently it is covered with a thin finish or white coat of lime mixed with plaster of paris. But a wall is not plastered all at once. Rather narrow strips called "screeds" are first built up at intervals of about four feet and checked against an offset plumbline to insure their vertical alignment. Then using the screeds as guides, the space between them is filled and brought up close to a smooth and plumbed finish with a tool known as a float. (Fig. 35)

Beyond the satisfactions of a well-finished wall, plasterers also delight in adding decorations

"Just being a part of a family tradition and working under some craftsman, especially a good craftsman - if you take that trade up - you have a responsibility because of your last name. Not because of your personality or your skills. That's what really motivates them [craftsmen] to do even better. They don't want to hear that they are not like their father or grandfather."

- ALLEN SUMAS

to ceilings, mainly cornices and medallions. Cornices that are "run" in place actually become structural elements of the wall. To install a cornice, a guiding rail is temporarily attached to the wall close to the ceiling. Next a template is cut from a piece of sheet metal outlining in reverse the profile of the cornice. Placed in a wooden device called a "horse" (sometimes a "slipper"), the template is drawn along the guide rail by the plasterer as his assistant trowels wet plaster ahead of him. This process of running the cornice is repeated over several days until all gaps and voids are filled and the entire surface attains an even smoothness. Exerting too

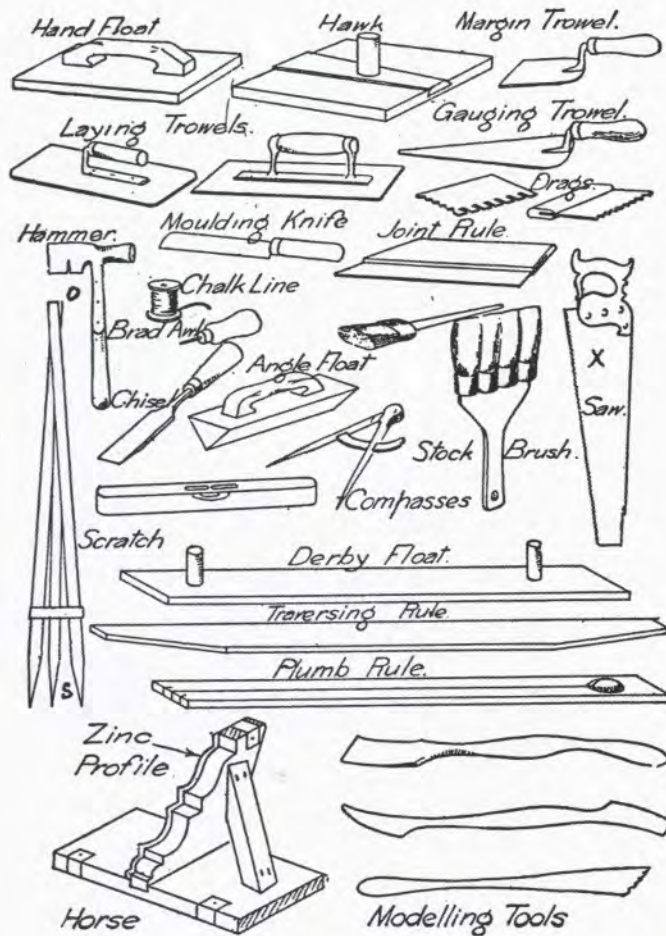


FIG. 35 PLASTERERS' TOOLS, FRED T. HODGSON, *CYCLOPEDIA OF BRICKLAYING, STONE MASONRY, CONCRETE, STUCCO, PLASTERS AND EVERYTHING CONNECTED WITH THESE AND ALLIED TRADES*; CHICAGO; FREDERICK J. DRAKE, 1911.

The artisans who performed the work are unrecorded, but the example of their efforts in this beautiful room remains an inspiration to contemporary plasterers.

Ceiling medallions could also be run in place with the aid of a template. One end of the template was affixed to a point on the ceiling and the plasterer then rotated it like a compass

much or too little pressure on the horse or moving it at the wrong pace can produce disastrous results; a master's sense of touch developed over years of practice is crucial.

Decorative elements called enrichments can be added to a cornice, usually in the open spaces between its curves and rib-like projections. Rows of flowers (Fig. 36), bands of fretwork, or other motifs consistent with the decor of the room are cast in molds and then affixed to the cornice with adhesive plaster.²⁰ The first-floor parlor of the Gallier House on Royal Street offers good examples. Here James Gallier, Jr. designed a cornice that was so deeply curved that it took the form of a wide cove. Over this shadowed space he called for a series of alternating floral and animal appliques.

360 degrees to form a set of raised ribs in a circular pattern (See Fig. 33). Should the client desire a more complex design, again enrichments could be added. In many older New Orleans homes one encounters huge lotus blossoms or large sprays of anthemion or acanthus leaves affixed to the ceiling. These designs are compilations of numerous individually cast plaster elements that were usually gathered around the support for a hanging lamp. Such embellishments often cause visitors to stand transfixed with their mouths agape in wonder, a gesture of their amazement as they ponder how



FIG. 36 PLASTER MOLDINGS, ROBINSON SINCLAIR HOUSE, GARDEN DISTRICT

such things were done. The visual effect of these decorations has been labeled by architectural historian Alan Gowans as the “chaos of ostentation.” He explains that this quality stems from the “buoyant individualism” of the second half of the nineteenth century, a period when the newly wealthy called upon the masters of the building arts to enact the entire inventory of their skills.²¹

This era and its aesthetic mode is now well behind us but the continuing joy that is sensed in the visual richness of that period moves current owners of old houses to keep the old plaster ornamentation in good repair and thus allows the venerable plastering trade to endure. The plasterers, for their part, confidently expect to carry on their the craft, bragging that “*Plaster last forever. Michelangelo did the Sistine Chapel, it still exists – plaster.*”²² Assured of his mastery Allison Montana proclaims, “*There’s nothing to it, man. When you know it, you know.*”²³



GIL J. BOUDREAU
MAR 9 1912 — NOV 17 1982

IRONWORK

While New Orleans is often cited as a “Mecca” for ironwork, many of the city’s fences, gates, and window grills are made of cast iron and thus they are an industrial product. Their designs were produced by a pattern maker working probably in wood. When finished to his satisfaction, his patterns were handed over to a gang of foundry men and used to create molds in a bed of sand laid out on a casting floor. The hollow space formed by a pattern was filled with molten iron and after the iron cooled sufficiently, the mold was opened and a metal replica of the original pattern was retrieved. Cast iron decoration left little creative work for an ironworker since his chief task was confined to installing the prefabricated pieces in their proper positions.

While several important foundries were established in New Orleans during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the bulk of their production was concentrated on boilers and steam engines for sugar mills. Much of the decorative work encountered in the city, it turns out, was imported from elsewhere. The famous balconies on the Pontalba buildings (Fig. 38) were cast in New York and the much photographed cornstalk fence on Royal Street was made in Philadelphia at the foundry operated by the firm of Wood and Perot. Interestingly, this company’s 1858 catalogue offered fifty patterns for ornamental fences, many of which show up in New Orleans because of the efforts of local businessman Charles A. Miltenberger. Forming a partnership with Wood and Perot, he opened a local showroom on Camp St. where orders could be placed for the firm’s wide array of gates, railings, and garden furniture.²⁴ While New Orleans’ foundries did produce more decorative items toward the end of the nineteenth century, today none of this kind of work is done locally. Blacksmith Donald Tudury reports that the closest iron casting operation is in Bogalusa and much of the contemporary cast iron used in restoration work is actually made in Birmingham, Alabama.

New Orleans’ premier craftsmen in iron were its blacksmiths. Working in wrought iron, they hammered individual pieces of metal on an anvil until it conformed to the desired shape. The final form of any piece, a clear example of the workmanship of risk, flowed directly from the smith’s



FIG. 38 PONTALBA BALCONY RAILING, FRENCH QUARTER

efforts. Blacksmiths offered New Orleanians a wide range of services from fixing wagons to repairing fences. Some of their decorative efforts are even found in the necessary hardware that they made for various buildings and houses.

Consider the door and shutter hinges installed in Madame John's Legacy. Although they are all basic strap hinges fashioned from thin strips of sheet iron, they were rendered in a surprising array of shapes. The most elemental were punched with a few holes and tapered down gradually to a small disk. But the most ornate were formed into curvaceous replicas of a ram's horns with the ends of the horns either given sharp points or terminated with disks punched with holes. (Fig. 39) The same fancy ram's horn patterns are encountered, as one might expect, in prominent French



FIG. 39 RAM'S HORN HINGES, LOUISIANA STATE MUSEUM

elliptical scrolls, combined with asymmetrical C-curves, signal the last phase of the taste for Baroque ornamentation. These swirling shapes would eventually give way to a new, more restrained fashion. The unadorned vertical bars seen on the balconies of the Chesneau Mansion and the Gally House outline the pointed shape of the lancet windows that had become so popular with the rise of the Gothic mode of decoration during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Suffice it to say that because wrought iron is essentially a flexible medium, blacksmiths could satisfy any reasonable request made by one of their customers. On occasion blacksmiths would even combine some

Quarter buildings. But as evidence surviving from the nineteenth century makes clear, when one had to hang a door or a shutter, the blacksmith's superb skills were democratically available to all customers. Wealthy and the working class alike benefited from their remarkable craftsmanship.

Wrought iron balconies are probably the best known and most visible of the blacksmith's decorative contributions to the New Orleans cityscape. Bending and twisting relatively thin bars into whatever patterns were requested, they provided an ornate filigree of iron that served to dress up a building's sober facade. Some of the oldest balconies are still in place on the Bosque House and the Cabildo. Forged during the 1790s, their fanciful motifs follow the patterns of the Rococo style, the fashion that was then in vogue in Paris. Their long J-curves ending in

decorative castings with their forge work. The fence at the Beauregard House offers a good example of how the two very different modes of ironwork could be beneficially combined. The functional elements – the rails and balusters – were fabricated first in wrought iron and then a set of cast anthemion blossoms was attached to the top rail where they would have the greatest visual impact. (Fig. 40) A more ominous form of embellishment – tiny bundles of spikes – were affixed to balconies at the Gally and Seignouret houses. These claw-like projections were defensive devices meant to threaten any potential thief or intruder with severe injury.

All of these works of decorative iron encountered on the streets, in the parks, and even in the cemeteries of New Orleans provide inspiration for the contemporary blacksmith. Donald Tudury reports that his company is considered a firm of choice by the Vieux Carre Commission, an indication that a good deal of his work involves the restoration and replacement of pieces of decorative iron that are more than a hundred years old.²⁵ While the demands of restoration jobs might appear to stifle the inspiration of a creative person, Tudury finds creative challenges in most of his commissions. “*Most scrolls,*” he says, “*they flow and they just have a nice easy pattern to them where it’s pleasing to the eye to look at them.*”²⁶ Having produced decorative wrought iron for more than fifty years, it is fitting to characterize Tudury as a man of iron. Fully engaged with this material, he is primed to see the beauty and the strength in any ironwork. He says of his work, “*It’s almost like sculpture you know.*”

MECHANICS

When New Orleans’ masters of the building arts describe one another they do not use labels that identify a particular trade like plasterer, mason, or carpenter. Rather the best craftsmen are called “mechanics.” This usage is honorific, reviving the spirit of the sixteenth century, when “mechanic” was the common designation for a manual laborer or handicraftsman. In the Crescent City the term signifies and marks the foremost artisans, the men whose talent seems matchless.

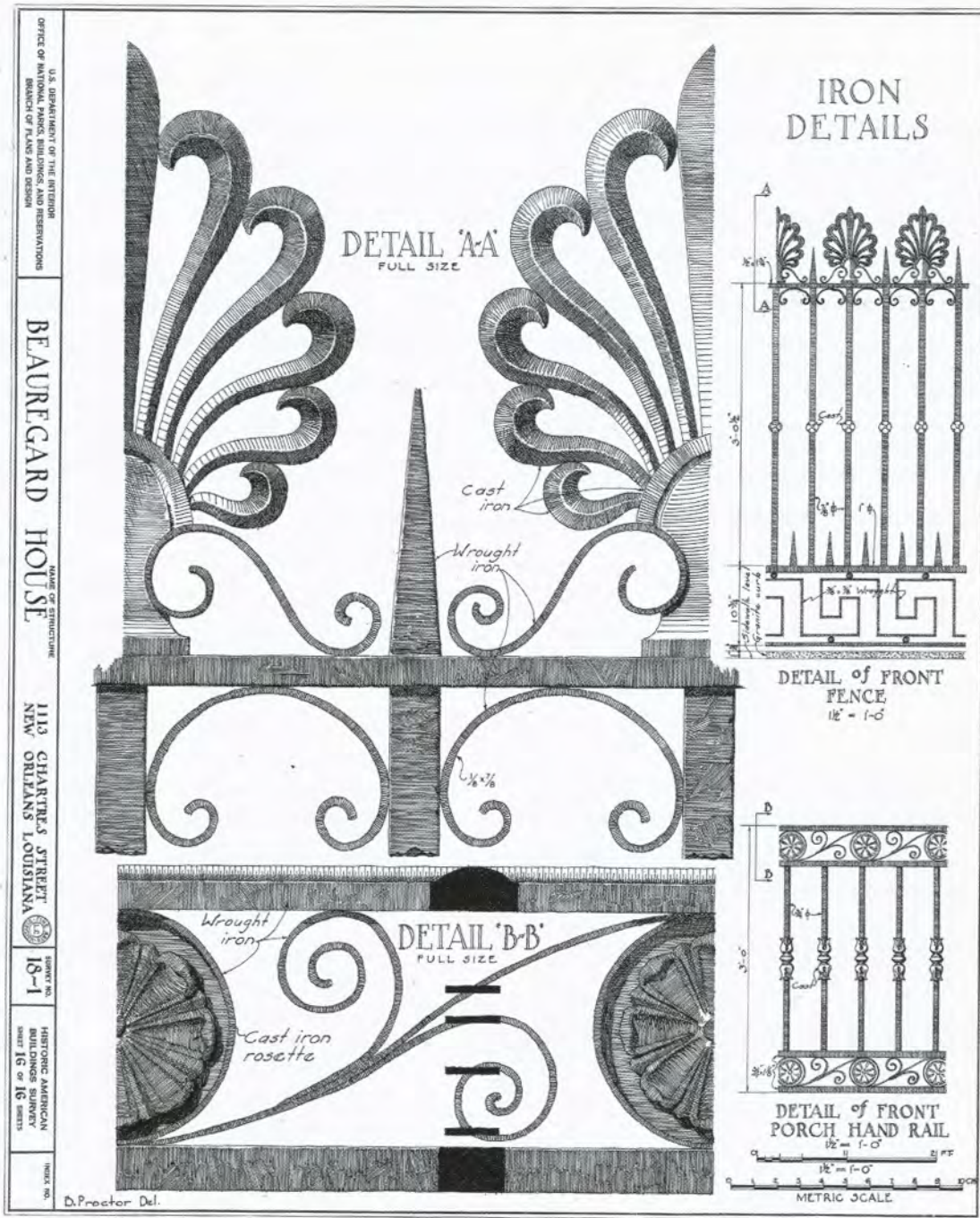


FIG. 40 BEAUREGARD HOUSE, FENCE DETAIL, FRENCH QUARTER, HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDERS SURVEY

According to brick mason Desoto Jackson “*When I say a good mechanic, I’m talking about a man who knows the work and doesn’t mind doing it.*” For Jackson, such artisans, armed with ample reserves of skill and ambition, are “the cream of the crop, the top of the line.”²⁷ Lather Allison Montana echoes Jackson’s observation when he suggests that “*When you can do accuracy with speed, that make you stand out...When you can use your accuracy, your speed and accuracy work together. [Then] you’re good. You’re a good mechanic.*”²⁸ When asked to recall the best of the old masters, plasterer Earl Barthé remarked with considerable reverence: “*That’s a special group...there’s nobody can touch them. I don’t know if we’ll ever produce that caliber mechanic. My goal is to do that. That’s a long haul, but we’re working on it.*”²⁹ Barthé and other craftsmen hope to find in the precedent of past work a model for future excellence.

FOOTNOTES

1. Henry Glassie, *Vernacular Architecture* (Philadelphia: *Material Culture*, 2000), pp. 33-34.
2. David Pye, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 4-8, 76.
3. Nick Spitzer, Working on a Building, *Gambit Weekly* Vol. 21, no. 3 (Sept. 5, 2000), p. 34.
4. Daniel Sammuels, Interview with Allison Montana, June 18, 1999, New Orleans Building Arts Project, University of New Orleans.
5. Lisa Richardson, Interview with Teddy Pierre, June 30, 1999, New Orleans Building Arts Project, University of New Orleans.
6. Frankie Legaux, Interview with Donald Tudury, June 29, 1999, New Orleans Building Arts Project, University of New Orleans.
7. Jay D. Edwards, “Cultural Identifications in Architecture: The Case of the New Orleans Townhouse,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 5, no. 1 (1993), p. 20.
8. See Jay D. Edwards, “The Origins of the Louisiana Creole Cottage in Michael Roark,” ed., *French and Germans in the Mississippi Valley: Landscape and Cultural Traditions* (Cape Girardeau, Mo., Center for Regional History and Cultural Heritage, 1988), pp. 47-51.

9. See Jay D. Edwards, *Louisiana's Remarkable French Vernacular Architecture* (Baton Rouge: Department of Geography and Anthropology, Louisiana State University, 1988), pp. 14-18. See also his article What Louisiana Architecture Owes to Hispaniola (and what it does not), *Louisiana Cultural Vistas* 10, no. 2 (1999), pp. 36-47.
10. Ray Poret, Interview with Evins Thornton, Sr., June, 1999, New Orleans Building Arts Project, University of New Orleans.
11. Daniel Sammuels, Interview with Russell Plessy, June 19, 1999, New Orleans Building Arts Project, University of New Orleans.
12. S. Frederick Starr, *Southern Comfort: The Garden District of New Orleans* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), p. 138.
13. Frankie and Gerard Legaux, Interview with Desoto Jackson, June 14, 1999, New Orleans Building Arts Project, University of New Orleans.
14. Nick Spitzer, Interview with Theodore Pierre, Jr., July 25, 2000, New Orleans Building Arts Project, University of New Orleans.
15. Nick Spitzer, Interview with Theodore Pierre.
16. Keri Coumanis, Interview with Vernon Abadie, January 23, 2001, New Orleans Building Arts Project, University of New Orleans.
17. Heather Knight, Interview with Allen Sumas, Jr., January 25, 2001, New Orleans Building Arts Project, University of New Orleans.
18. Frankie and Gerard Legaux, Interview with Tevis B. Vandergriff III, June 23, 1999, New Orleans Building Arts Project, University of New Orleans.
19. Nick Spitzer, Interview with Earl Barthé, July 27, 2000, New Orleans Building Arts Project, University of New Orleans.
20. See Natalie Shivers, *Walls and Molding* (Washington, D.C.: Preservation Press, 1990), pp. 159-165.
21. See Alan Gowans, *Styles and Types of North American Architecture: Social Function and Cultural Expression* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 173, and *Images of American Living: Four Centuries of Architecture and Furniture as Cultural Expression* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 346.
22. Heather Knight, Interview with Allen Sumas, Jr.
23. Nick Spitzer, Interview with Allison Montana, July 26, 2000, New Orleans Building Arts Project, University of New Orleans.
24. Starr, *Southern Comfort*, p. 141. Also see Ann M. Mason and Lydia H. Schmalz, *Cast Iron and the Crescent City* (New Orleans: Louisiana Landmarks Society, 1995), p. 35; Susan and Michael Southworth, *Ornamental Ironwork: An Illustrated Guide to Its Design, History, and Use in American Architecture* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1978), pp. 38-39.
25. For an example of Tudury's restoration work see the Sindos-Latorre-Boucvalt House, 1025 St. Louis Street where he re-installed the first level of the side gallery. This task required him to replace a full set of cast iron elements that been destroyed by a previous owner.
26. Frankie Legaux, Interview with Donald Tudury.
27. Frankie and Gerard Legaux, Interview with Desoto Jackson.
28. Nick Spitzer, Interview with Allison Montana.
29. Nick Spitzer, Interview with Earl Barthé.