

There's No Such Thing as a Craftsman

Historically speaking, guilds have usually been formed during weak or flat markets. They are distinguished from labor unions in that all members are self employed. The primary weakness of the old guilds was the monopolistic character which evolved from the fact that most originating artisans became greedy and as controlling officers were not elected by the members allowing a few to control many. They no longer served their membership's needs.

THE GUILD of Fine Craftsmen and Artisans was founded in 1995. The association is a non-profit membership organization dedicated to the preservation and promotion of quality and standards in the building and restoration trades. The association advocates the sharing of ideas, methods, and techniques to foster outstanding performance as the cornerstone to lives of independence, dignity, and purpose.

The membership is open to all qualified craftsmen who meet the standards and practices of THE GUILD. Members must have a demonstrated experience and proven ability in a recognized trade for a specified period of time. The men and women of THE GUILD are recognized for their character and integrity in dealing with others.

What Makes the Organization Unique?

Only practicing craftsmen as full members. Many old guilds were criticized for their monopolistic character. As they grew, the originating members became powerful and wealthy and wanted to

control the members to their own ends. By limiting full voting membership to practicing craftsmen, it will insure the control of the membership in meeting the goals of maximizing the benefits of the organization for the tradesperson.

Minimum of 10 years' experience in stated craft. This and other requirements ensure that not only is the member skilled but he has withstood the test of time as a tradesperson. Anyone can learn a trade sufficiently to do a job adequately in the eyes of untrained persons, but it takes many years of experience before one can be called a master craftsman.

Coppersmith Pat Tarantino fabricates base flashing detail for copper roof as part of a restoration project on an 1890s Victorian structure in New Haven, Connecticut.

Carpenter/woodworker Billy Evans constructs a detailed carved connection while restoring a cornice on the 1890s Victorian.



THE GUILD standards. All members sign a notarized agreement to uphold THE GUILD Standards. The standards cover a range of issues involving ethics and proper business protocol both within the membership and between members and the public. The written standards are available to all with the idea of promoting honest and realistic expectations.

Evaluation and quality control. Members are accepted only after careful evaluation of their work by other craftsmen and careful review of their references. In addition, the organization routinely calls customers of its members to make performance evaluations in the effort to constantly improve on past performance. No other guild that we are aware of has set standards for entry into the organization.

Non-partisan and non-denominational. Many early guilds and even associations in this century have met their downfall due to political or religious dogmatism. It is not the place of this organization to be involved in matters of church and state, neither to lobby for or organize against





Shabazz, a painter, applies goldleaf to an Ionic column capital as part of the restoration project in New Haven, Connecticut.

Good construction technology reflects the craftsman's skills. Here the coppersmith solders a roof gutter installation at the 1890s Victorian structure.

the interests of others. The goal is to promote the value of good craftsmanship through practicing it.

Reasons for a Modern Guild

Preserving craft and skilled workmanship.

The response of today's construction industry to the lack of skilled craftsmen is to produce products that can be installed with unskilled workers with no efforts to educate the public about quality. Replacement materials and inferior products with limited or reduced life expectancies promote an obsolescence that bears a great cost to society. An appreciation for older things and the value of skilled labor to refurbish and maintain these objects encourages development of a culture less inclined to waste precious resources.

Creating standards for good business practice. These standards and ethics are to be understood and upheld by all members for the purpose of better understanding and communication between tradespeople. In addition, the written *Standards* are available to the public so that those requiring the service of a member can have accurate expectations as to the performance of a member.

Exchanging ideas and methods. Through meetings, newsletters, lectures, the Internet, communication with other like organizations, and a research library, craftsman will be able to refine construction techniques and monitor the effectiveness of materials. Many skilled and experienced craftsmen are reluctant to train or share ideas with someone they are not sure can be trusted; hence, much valuable knowledge is being lost. A strong organization is needed to reduce these fears and begin the flow of information.

Providing a quality of life. Through the growing numbers in the organization we will be able to reduce costs or increase coverages for medical plans, pensions, disability insurance's, liability

and worker's compensation, college funds, and many other benefits. Many older craftsman are forced to work physically long after retirement age either because they never had time to plan for old age or did not belong to an organization that could offer an alternative such as teaching or research.

Recognizing ability and experience. In many areas of America there is no licensing or accreditation by states for skilled services such as roofing, carpentry, and masonry. This is changing, but in many cases it takes the form of a registration with no appropriate means of determining skills or good practice. Neither the contractor nor the public has a reliable source for qualifying workers in terms of abilities or reliability. "Word of mouth" is not an effective means either to satisfy the public or to create the stable life of a craftsman. An organization is needed to network and accredit those with superior skills.

Call to Arms

The mini-boom in the field of preservation seems to be stabilizing. Many new organizations have been formed or are in the makings that deal with issues of networking, training, and certification.

Similar organizations need to learn from each other and band together so as not to waste valuable monetary resources reinventing the wheel or duplicating efforts. Further, as associations we need to offer more services to our members and through strength in numbers help lower the cost of



doing business and minimize the risks that are unavoidable for the self-employed craftsman.

We must not only have the vocational schools, training programs, and source lists, we need to employ the services of the old masters in the field. Apprenticeships are a necessary part of learning a skilled trade. We must create an organization for which the young can have pride of membership and the old can teach in the twilight of their careers, while having the economic security of a viable career as a sole proprietor.

Yes, there is such a thing as a craftsman. However, we must work to redefine the role, set achievement goals, and meet modern societal needs. As a tree needs a forest, so a craftsman needs a guild.

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Photos by the author.

Back in the booming 1980s, you couldn't find anybody in the Northeast to do skilled restoration work. The few that had the capabilities had promised their services for the next two years at an undetermined cost. Getting an estimate was as difficult as guessing the market value of your home: "How much?", "You mean today or in two weeks."

A short-term boom market is as great a threat to quality craftsmanship as the bust is to the craftsmen and their families. Good and excellent contractors spoke of their relief as the demand began to wane. Many in the trades assumed three things would occur as the economy slowed: 1) an apprentice or assistant would stay on at least until he knew his trade, let alone the business; 2) that quality builders, like cream, would rise to the top; and 3) that we would have a better quality of life when demand and supply for services began to even out.

In the summer of 1992, my father called me from Vermont. He was doing some restorations on his 1750s residence and lamenting that there weren't any real craftsmen anymore. In Vermont? That beautiful state full of Yankees, ingenious enough to do or make anything? The state where I had apprenticed under three different master carpenters to learn my trade 25 years ago? How could this be? My answer at the time was, "Of course there are. However, the craftsman of today isn't also an accountant, administrator, salesman, estimator, manager, and marketing director, and he's not working for the same wage as two decades ago."

There are many mom and pop, second- and third-generation businesses out there operating in a vacuum. It's a family affair, and a typical breakdown has the mom as accountant and administrator; pop is the estimator, salesman, and foreman; while the offspring are the young and strong hands to the eyes of the trained and experienced dad. (By the way, guess who works for free in this scenario?) All too often the kids look at the old man and decide this is not for us. He works like a dog, his knees are shot, he has arthritis in his hands, and he can't even retire. He is wise, skilled, honest, well respected, but not worthy of emulation. With this image in mind, I began to research the history of guilds and trades organizations to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of past efforts to provide enduring careers for builders and craftsmen.

There are references in Greek and Latin to the first guilds of stone masons. In fact, the origin of the word can be taken back to the German *gelth*—'pay', or the Dutch *geld*—'money', and with less certainty through the words *gilde* and *gold* to the Latin origins *aurorum* and *aurora*, meaning gold and dawn. The point of interest is the undeniable link from the earliest times between the word origin and a day's pay.

From the 6th and 7th centuries, medieval times and early modern times we find that guilds were most always associations of self-employed individuals where membership fees and dues (more fashionable in modern times than payments and sacrifices) were paid for the common good of the group. Although one must distinguish between the merchant guilds, whose purpose was often the freedom of a township, and the crafts guilds, which were often started by the artisans to allow sole proprietorship, they all had essentially the same goals: 1) freedom to practice one's craft; 2) regulate quality, production, and training; and 3) create economic stability. "It was generally considered a threat to the entire township if someone operated a business or performed a trade without serving a proper and approved apprenticeship."*

* *Preston Guild Merchant*, "Preston's Week of Pageantry as celebrated from 1328 to 1952," by Thomas R. Flintoff. Kaymar Printing. No date of publication.