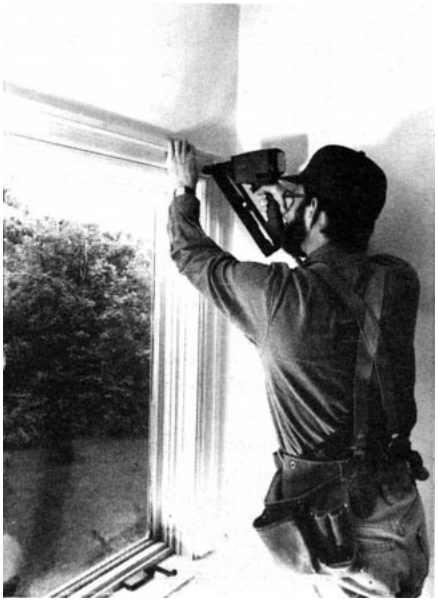
A FINISH CARPENTER'S WISH LIST

BY JIM TOLPIN

IF YOU WANT THE FINISH WORK TO LOOK ITS BEST, THE FRAMERS HAVE TO DO THEIR SHARE

For more than ten years I was the "finish carpenter in residence" for a number of custom-home builders. As the framing carpenters liked to point out, I was the guy who was always muttering about the studs, or lack thereof. But for me to do my job well, I needed their best work in certain areas — areas where the woodwork would forever remain in plain sight, long after the framing was covered up.

What helped was a wish list that I prepared for the framing foreman, specifying just what I needed from his framers. The list varied somewhat from job to job, depending on the types of molding and cabinetry I was going to install. With an understanding foreman, I usually got just what I needed in the framing, and the trim went up smoothly. My work looked good, which made me happy; but more importantly, it pleased the customer and reflected well on the contractor.



Precision Counts

I start my list with a plea for precision and emphasize the outcome of lazy framing.

Make the walls plumb, especially in the areas around doors and outside corners.

If a wall isn't plumb at a door opening, there isn't always enough slack in the finish work to be able to hang the door plumb without mucking up the trim. And if a wall is out of plumb at the corner, it will be tricky to trim out without the moldings reflecting the bad angle.

Set partition walls straight, especially in runs containing door openings.

Most framers snap a nice straight chalk line for a partition wall, but they don't always fasten the bottom plate to it. Unfortunately, the wall usually wanders a lot around doors, probably as a result of the carpenters whacking out the partially cut plate section at the door opening (see Figure 1). If this isn't corrected, I have to set one leg of the door jamb out from the wall to take out the warp, which makes it harder to case out.

Use straight studs in wall areas that will receive wainscot or hanging cabinetry.

If I'm going to panel a wall with wainscot, the first thing I check for is the flatness of the wall I'll be attaching it to. There is nothing so obvious to the eye as a length of chair rail that caps the wainscot running in and out of humps and valleys along the wall. I've had to tear out drywall and fix or replace 2x4s that wouldn't have found a home on a roller coaster track. If these kinds of studs are backing up a wall where I'll be hanging upper cabinets, I know I'm in for a lot of

Figure 1. *The bottom plate on either side of this rough door opening has been knocked off the chalk line. This will cause problems for the finish carpenter hanging and casing the door.*

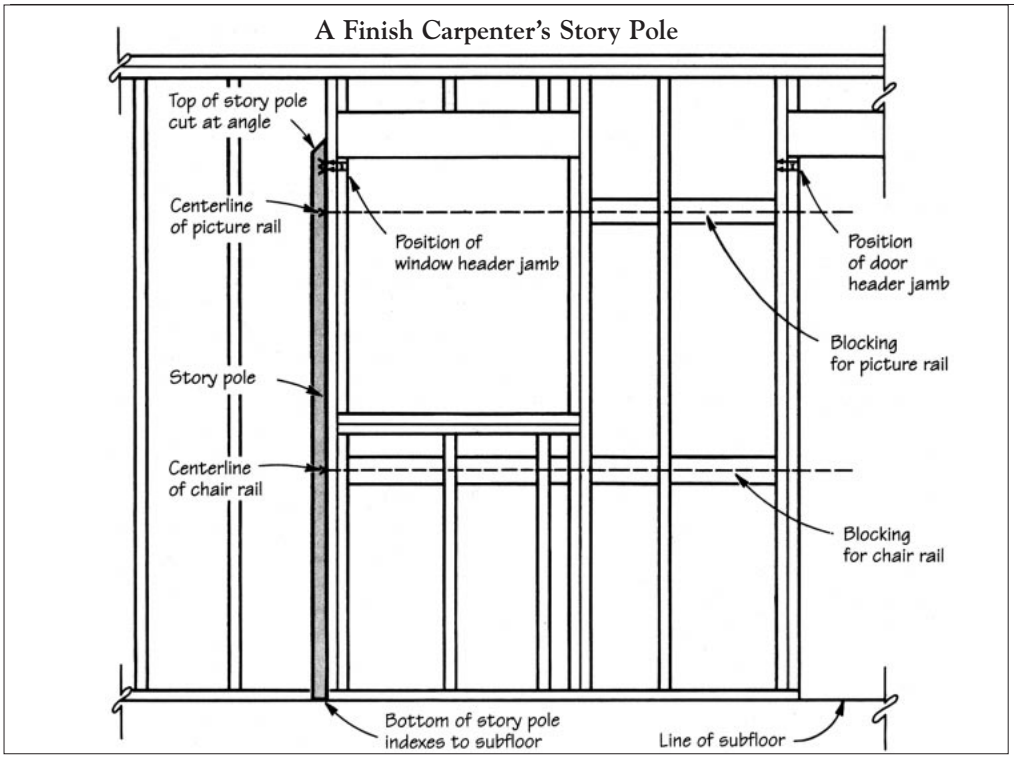


Figure 2. *A story pole is a straight stick with header jamb height, picture rail and chair rail centerlines, and other finish dimensions marked for quick reference.*

shimming and scribing, and perhaps even making up special moldings to conceal the waviness.

✎ *Frame the corners of rooms square, especially outside corners.*

This is another situation where the molding I'll be putting in will accentuate the defects in the walls. Nothing's more obvious than baseboard running around the end of a partition wall that doesn't have a square end.

✎ *Install windows level and at the same height throughout the building (unless specified otherwise on the elevations). It is especially important that paired windows be set level and even with one another.*

It's pretty hard to get window casing to look right when it has to span a pair of misaligned windows. Poorly installed windows usually advertise the fact by the change of the reveal between the inside edge of the casing and the header jamb. The finish carpenter can adjust the reveal somewhat by tapering the molding itself, but this shows too.

I sometimes make up a story pole for the framer who will be setting the windows (see Figure 2). This is simply a stick that runs vertically from the floor to just past the height of the head casing. A mark on its edge indicates the exact placement of the bottom of the header jamb. Before setting the windows, the framer transfers this mark to one side of the rough window openings throughout the building. The windows are then installed level to this mark. I also mark the story pole with the heights of other moldings, such as chair and picture rails.

Figure 3. *The blocking at the top and bottom of this stud corner will provide good nailing for crown mold and baseboard.*

Blocking and Backing

✎ *For wide baseboards and crown moldings, install short lengths of 2x4 (8 to 12 inches long) to the tops and bottoms of the corner studs.*

This blocking ensures that I have adequate nailing when I'm going to be running unusually wide baseboard or wide crown moldings. Without the blocking, I may not find any nailing at the critical corner joints (see Figure 3). In this case, I have to resort to driving in long finish nails at a steep angle, which sometimes opens up the joint.

✎ *Be sure to install blocking to back up the wall rosette to which the stair rail is attached.*

In most cases, it happens that this rosette falls on the corner studs of a wall and thus does not need additional backing. But not always. It is critical that there be an absolutely secure way to fasten this little piece of molding. If it's loose, the whole balustrade will be dangerously loose as well.

✎ *Install short blocks to the base of door jacks.*

I ask for these when I know the door casings are going to be a little wider than the standard 2¼ inches, or if the door casing includes plinths. Without this block, there's no nailing for the end of the baseboard where it meets the casing or plinth (see Figure 4).

✎ *Install blocking in the ceiling where a peninsula of upper cabinets will be attached.*

No choice on this one, unless the hanging peninsula will be running perpendicular to the ceiling joists. Then it can be bolted directly to this framing. But Murphy's Law states that these commonly 13-inch-wide

Figure 4. *With door casing wider than 2¼ inches, blocking at the base of the door jacks will provide nailing for the baseboard where it meets the casing.*

Figure 5. *Remember to provide blocking for the toilet paper holder.*

units will always run out from a wall precisely centered between two joists. I like 2x4 or 2x6 blocks, laid flat between the joists, every 16 inches on-center.

✎ *Install blocking in the stud walls of the bathroom where towel and toilet paper bars will be attached.*

There's nothing quite so disconcerting as a million dollar house that features a toilet paper bar that falls off in your hands (see Figure 5). And it will do just that if the finish carpenter ends up mounting it with molly bolts into the drywall (which he might do when he gives up on finding blocking anywhere near the right spot).

✎ *Double the surround frame of rough openings that will receive built-in cabinet units.*

This is necessary where the cabinets will be trimmed out with a wide casing and a single stud may not provide nailing for the outside edge of the trim.

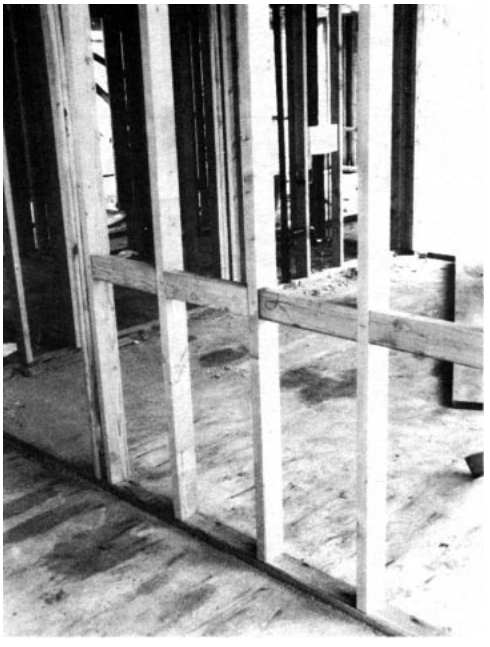
✎ *Provide running backing for wainscot boards.*

The upper ends of wainscot obviously need something other than drywall to fasten to. Running 2x4 blocking between the studs works best, but a let-in 1x4, though a little bouncier, will also do the job.

Some wainscot designs specify that the boards sit on top of a baseboard molding. This is common in situations where the baseboard, if laid over the wainscot, would protrude out farther than the standing moldings (door casings, etc.). In this case, you will need running backing at the bottom as well to catch the bottom of the wainscot. The backing can be 2x4s, or 2x6s for higher base moldings, installed between the wall studs with their lower edge sitting on the bottom plate (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. *The running 2x6 blocking on the bottom plate provides nailing for the bottom end of wainscot paneling that will sit on top of the baseboard.*

Figure 7. *Two-by-fours on edge provide running blocking for a chair rail.*



✎ *Provide a run of backing for chair and picture rails.*

While not essential, these moldings will look better if the framers have given me a secure backing the entire length of the run (see Figure 7). This way, even if the wall dips or bulges between the studs, the molding will be tight against the wall. In paint-grade work it's not as important, because caulk can be used to fill the gaps. But in stain- grade, any colored filler I've used to date has compromised the quality of the job.

Chair rails do not need additional backing if they are to be attached to the top of a run of wainscot.

Stair Carriages

✎ *When setting stair carriages, try to get them parallel. Be sure to both level them across the treads and square across the faces of the risers to the wall.*

When I install treads and risers, I always count on having to fine-tune the level and plumb of these boards with shims from underneath. But there's a limit to how much shim stock I can use. I like to keep it under 1/2 inch. If you shim more than that, the fastening of the treads and risers becomes a problem. It becomes hard, for instance, to bed the treads in construction adhesive, which I use to keep the stairs from squeaking.

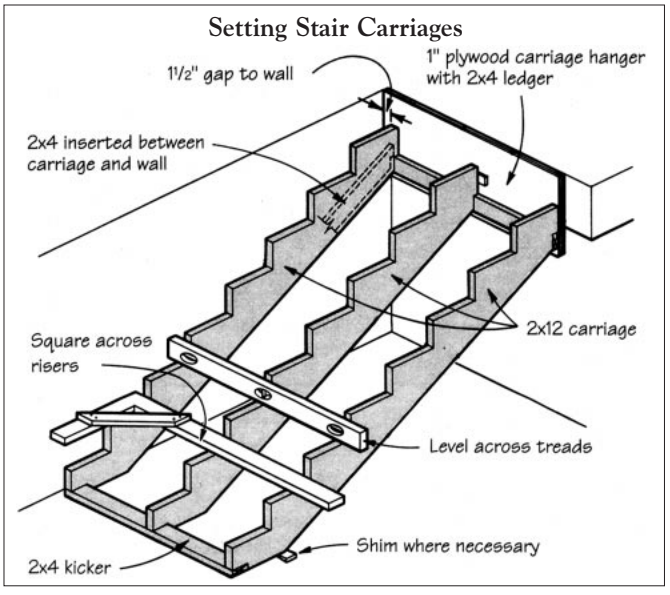


Figure 8. *Install stair carriages parallel and square to the wall. Leave a 1 1/2-inch space at the wall for the finish skirt and provide a 2x4 kicker at the bottom for nailing the bottom riser.*

✎ *Hold the stair carriage out from the wall to allow the skirtboard to slip in. Don't forget to install the kicker.*

Framers don't usually forget these things, but a reminder never hurts. A common method is to install a 2x4 along the bottom edge of the stair carriage on the side meeting the wall (see Figure 8). This automatically gives plenty of room for the skirt.

The kicker is simply a 2x4 notched into the base of the carriages at the floor line. Without it, there would be no nailer for the lower edge of the first riser. ■

Jim Tolpin is a finish carpenter and cabinetmaker in Arcata, Calif. He is author of Working at Woodworking *(Taunton Press, Newtown, Conn.) and of the forthcoming* New Manual of Finish Carpentry *(Craftsman Press, Carlsbad, Calif.).*