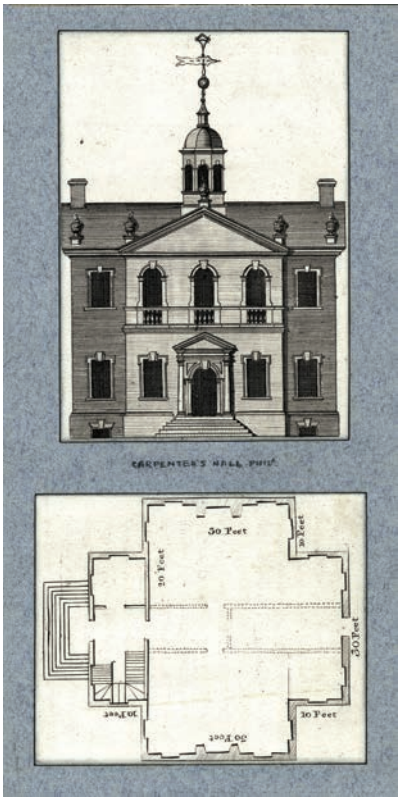
BY MARK LUZIO

The Carpenter's Company



Delegates to the First Continental Congress decided Carpenter's Hall—home of The Carpenter's Company—was a better meeting spot than City Tavern. If not for that historic meeting, the building might have been demolished by the middle of the 19th century.

Two blocks from Independence Hall, in a small courtyard off Chestnut Street, is a beautifully preserved Georgian building known as Carpenter's Hall. This traditional meeting hall was built in 1774 by "The Carpenters' Company of the City and County of Philadelphia," the oldest trade guild—founded circa 1724—in the U.S. Its members were the master joiners who built Philadelphia, and the building itself holds great historical significance as the site of the First Continental Congress.

At the time our country was founded, a master joiner—the GC of the day—would have started out, like many GCs today, as a carpenter's helper and would work up to master. At that point, he would also serve as architect and engineer; the profession of an academically trained architect did not yet exist in the American colonies. A master joiner would draw—or oversee the drawing of—the plans and then build the structure with the help of subcontractors.

Of course, it was a different business climate in those days, but the way in which the early-American GCs conducted business makes for an interesting study in peer support and the regulation of industry standards that's worth examining today.

THE 1786 RULE BOOK

The basis for business among the members of The Carpenter's Company was a small book, copies of which were discovered in the early 1950s by Charles Peterson, an architect and a historian, while he was crawling through the attic of Carpenter's Hall. In early America, this rule book was reportedly a well-guarded secret. Widows of Company members were pledged to return their husband's copy, and even a former U.S. president, Thomas Jefferson, was unable to secure a copy when he requested one in 1817.

The "1786 Rulebook" contained "Articles" of association, much like union bylaws, and the "Rules for Measuring and Valuing House-Carpenters Work," which defined a specific process for setting prices and adhering to building standards. Included with the rules and prices were detail drawings of windows, doors, roof framing, and the like that demonstrated correct classical proportions.

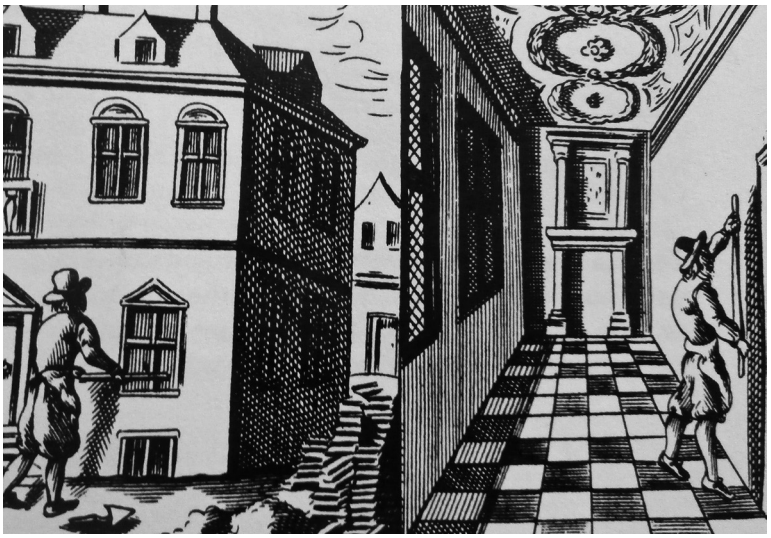
Before building codes and a legal system under which written contracts could be upheld, GCs faced the same problem they do today: How do customers know that they are getting a good value, and how do you explain to customers why your price is so much higher than another guy's?

The final paragraph from the Articles of the 1786 rule book put it this way: "The real intent and meaning of what hath been done is, that every gentleman concerned in building may have the value of his money, and that every workman may have the worth of his labor."

MATCHING QUALITY WITH PRICING

As Philadelphia was growing from a colonial outpost to a world-class city, the problem of establishing quality grew acute: how to value and differentiate the work involved in building "plain simple houses erected in the early times of this state to serve the necessary purposes of life" from the richly adorned buildings in demand "as the inhabitants grew more opulent and strangers from time to time arrived from other countries, where many elegancies were in use."

This issue has not changed and is still very much a modern-day problem: Whether you are building a house, an addition, or a new kitchen or (as I usually do) making and installing custom millwork, it's up to you to explain to a client why your price is so much higher than the other guy's. Contractor licensing and job permitting provide meager assurance. They establish base-level standards—assurance only that a structure won't cause injury or death; that



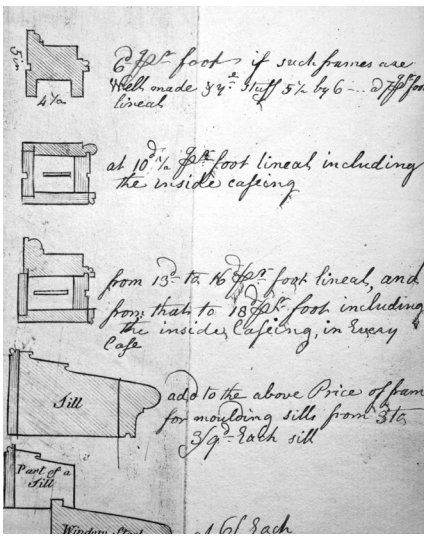
PEDIMENTS over inſide doors, the opening a-
bout 3 feet 2 inches in the clear, as follow, *viz.*

Plain, with a flat frieze, - -	1	10
Ditto, with a ſwelling frieze, - -	1	12
Ditto, with a dentle or fret bed-mould, -	1	15
Ditto, with a dentle or fret bed-mould, and ſwelling frieze, - - - -	2	-
Ditto plain, with coffer'd truſſes, - -	1	17
Ditto, with fret or dentle bed-mould, and coffer'd		

risk of fire is limited, and if a fire does break out, the occupants can escape; and that the foundation and septic won't harm the environment or make the neighbors sick. More recently, energy codes have been added that limit a building's energy use. But none of these standards say anything about the quality difference between "plain houses" and opulent or elegant ones.

The Carpenter's Company rulebook allowed for a carpenter's peers to help set prices for his area and also to confirm a level of quality beyond the life-safety baseline of today's building code. The "rules" established a common way that all jobs were to be measured, either by "square, yard or foot." For every job, two other carpenters—people "able to judge" and see details and materials choices that a client would surely miss—evaluated the work after it was built. In that way, valuation differed markedly from

In early America, carpenters didn't competitively bid on work. Instead, the price of a completed project was confirmed by "measurers" (top). Members of The Carpenter's Company acting as measurers evaluated the work of their peers, using "rule book" prices. The book listed "plain" details along with more elaborate versions (above).



In Colonial times, window "trim" spanned the entire wall thickness, serving as both rough-opening framing and finished woodwork.

the modern-day bid system. Presumably, the master joiner would talk to a client beforehand and give a reasonable estimate to match the quality and level of elegance desired. Anything like a contract price was determined afterwards. And much of early Philadelphia was built on a spec basis, as well, by master joiners acting as developers, and the system worked brilliantly for that.

Only carpenters at the upper levels of the profession, who commanded the respect of their fellows, were offered opportunities to act as "measurers" or "valuers"; their fundamental purpose was to arrive at a price that was fair to everyone. The measurers generally worked in teams of at least two, adding another checkpoint to the process. Their valuation was subject to scrutiny of both client and craftsman. In addition, as carpenter-builders, they would, in turn, have their work measured by others. As Charles Peterson explained, "It was the satisfactory combination of professional expertise, estimated cost, and independent valuation that made the system of 'mensuration' a popular form of deciding the final price."

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