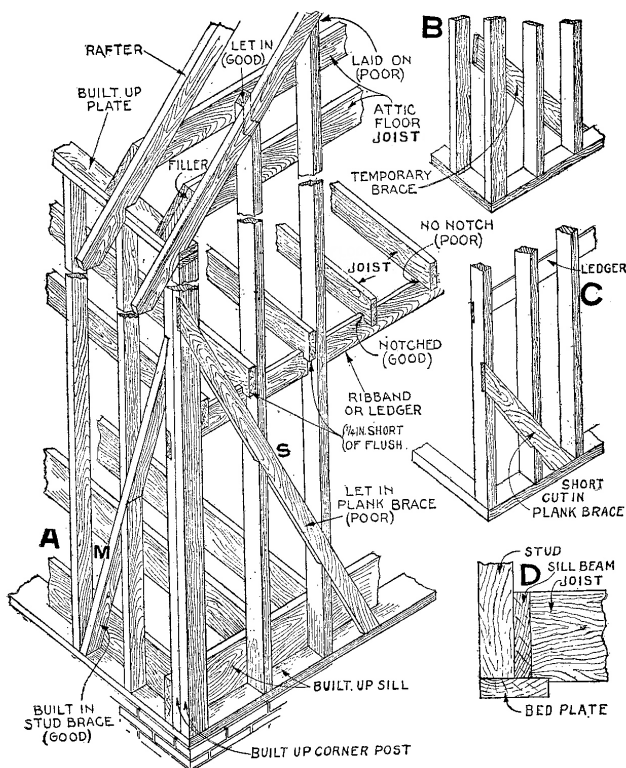


BY DEJAH LEGER



## Why Do We Say Joists and Rafters?

**Carpentry has its own specialized vocabulary.** The words we use often need to be translated when we're talking to homeowners and non-carpenters. True to the English language, carpentry terms have a variety of roots, ranging from ancient Rome to Scandinavia. And because of their niche nature and the broadly unchanged manner of building homes, many terms are stuck in time, having been used for centuries. But why do we use the words we do?

We use all sorts of weird terms while we're building a house. From furring strips to pony walls, from cripples to jacks, carpentry words can raise a serious eyebrow (ridge) on non-carpenters. But each of these terms is a doorway that opens into the history of building, deepening our understanding of our trade. (Not to mention the cool points you'll earn on a jobsite when you talk about the etymology of the word "stud." Trust me.)

In this article, I'll start at the ground floor and move up—literally. If you've ever waltzed across newly framed floor joists as if one misstep wouldn't make for a very bad day, then you're already familiar with the chunky timbers that form the horizontal framework within houses.

### JOISTS

English-speaking carpenters have been using the word "joist" for at least the past 650 years (before that, a joist was probably just called a "beam"). It came to English from the Old French word "geiste," which meant to "lie down." (Thanks to the Norman Conquest, English contains an immense number of French words.) The term makes sense. Joists are always horizontal. They are the bed for flooring to lie down upon.

We also have "sleepers," which are boards laid over concrete to provide a nailing substrate for flooring. While there is no linguistic connection between "joist" and "sleepers," the gist is the same. (Coincidentally, the word "gist" has the same root as "joist," as in, to lay down a point.)

### RAFTERS

Another word with an interesting past is "rafter," which came into the carpentry lexicon via Old Norse (the language of the Vikings). The Old Scandinavian word for "log" was "raptr." At the time, "pt" was pronounced like an "f," essentially meaning that, despite a few spelling changes, carpenters in the western world have used "rafter" to describe the same building element for more than 1,300 years. While the word meant "log," it was recorded as specifically referring to roof rafters as we understand the term today. If you look at historical and ancient structures, you'll see that many utilized full-sized logs as roof support.

Also, if you were to bind up all your rafters ("logs") together and float them down the river, you would have made a raft, and you yourself would become a rafter. Not the highest recommendation for jobsite lumber use, but from a linguistic standpoint, you're covered. Timber rafting is still a viable means of log transportation.

Hopefully, the next time you're hauling lumber up to the roof, you'll think of the Viking carpenter who was doing the same thing 1,000 years ago, both of you muttering "uff da, these rafters." Or when the apprentice calls the studs "joists," you can lay down the law and explain exactly why "joists" are always horizontal.

*Dejah Leger is a superintendent at Carlisle Classic Homes in Seattle and the genius behind [languageofcarpentry.com](http://languageofcarpentry.com). Do you have a carpentry term you'd like to know the origin of? Submit an inquiry to [dejahleger@gmail.com](mailto:dejahleger@gmail.com).*

Audrey Carpenters and Builders Guide (1923)