

Renewing Craftsmanship in **CHARLESTON**

A NEW GENERATION LEARNS OLD-WORLD ARTISTRY IN A FORMER CITY JAIL

by ERIC POWELL

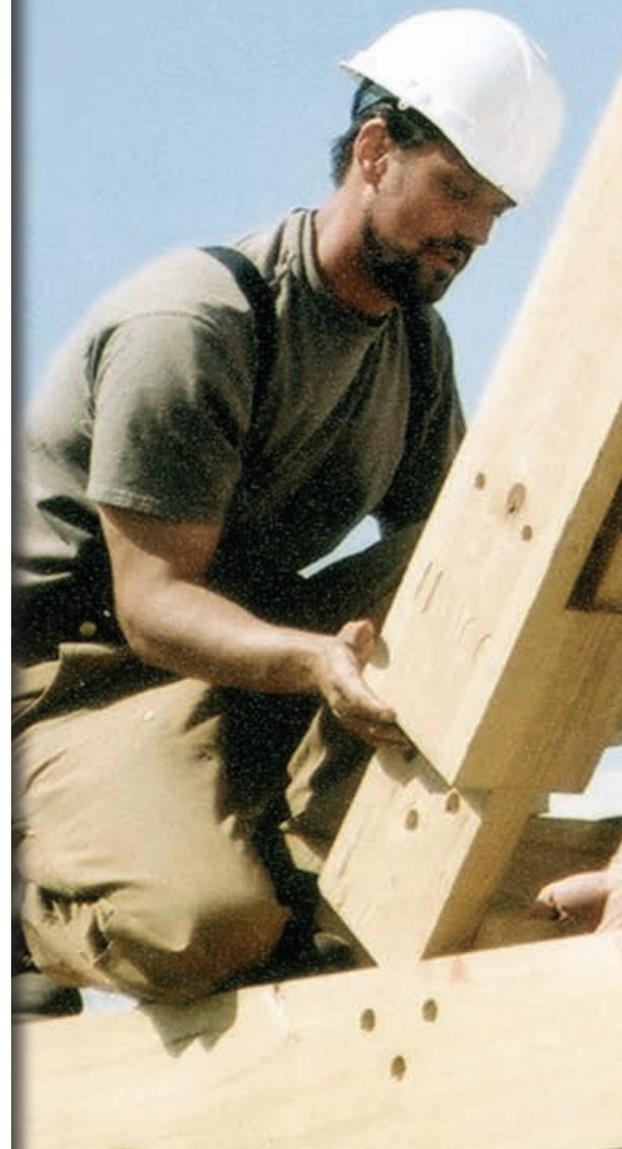
The latest chapter in Charleston's long history of contributions to the preservation movement is unfolding inside the town's Gothic-style Old City Jail. First constructed in 1802 and later rebuilt in 1859, the jail's structure is now in the process of being restored; but that's the least of the story. Inside the building, the staff of the American College of the Building Arts (ACBA) is working feverishly to prepare for the August arrival of 48 students who are slated to begin one of the most unusual and ambitious educational programs in America. ACBA is the country's first four-year school dedicated to teaching artisans by combining contemporary and traditional techniques. Its mission is not only to educate America's next generation of craftsmen and women, but also to raise the visibility of craftsmanship nationally.

Beginning this fall, the college will instruct students in six trades: architectural stonework, carpentry, masonry, ornamental ironwork, plaster working, and timber framing—the art of joining timbers without using nails. Master artisans will teach eight students in each of the six trades, combining intense hands-on training with classwork in subjects like math and English. Ten-week apprenticeships in the summer will round out the curriculum.

The college is being launched at a time when the quality of American craftsmanship and the prestige of the building arts are in precipitous decline across the country. The trend has particularly troubling implications for preservation. Bonnie Burnham, president of World Monuments Fund, which is supporting the ACBA through a grant from The Florence Gould Foundation, says she first became aware of the problem in the late 1980s, when WMF became active in the restoration of the Church of St. Ann and the Holy Trinity in Brooklyn. "The craftsman doing the exterior stone restoration work had died, and it was very difficult to replace him," says Burnham. "The United States has no system comparable to the European systems that can train students in the essential arts of the craftsman. There is a real lack of qualified craftsmen, in contrast to Europe where restoration crafts experts are trained in formal schools supported by guilds."

Charleston itself has felt the lack of highly trained craftspeople. On September 22, 1989, just after midnight, the now legendary Hurricane Hugo made landfall in South Carolina and devastated Charleston's historic district, leaving many significant structures in a severe state of disrepair. As the city mobilized to restore the damaged buildings, the number of qualified craftsmen and women available to preserve structures built two centuries ago fell far short of the task at hand. French craftsmen had to be brought into the city to help.

The school's founder, preservationist and structural engineer John Paul Huguley,

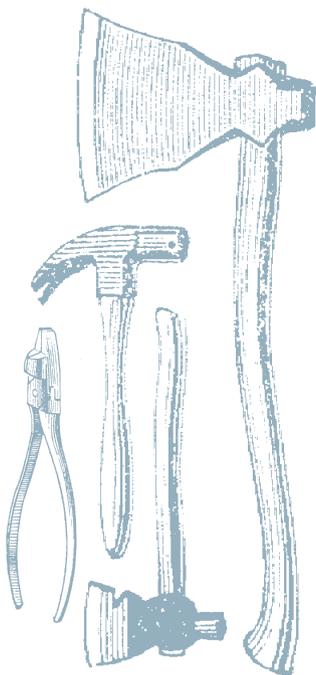


TIMBER FRAMING IS AMONG THE
CRAFTS TAUGHT AT ACBA.





ACBA WILL MOVE INTO THE OLD CITY JAIL (1802), ABOVE, UPON COMPLETION OF ITS RESTORATION THIS SUMMER.



has long been fascinated with the question of why buildings fail. His master's thesis was on structural problems at Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater. In his work, he found structures were failing in no small part due to the lack of quality craftsmanship available in America. Skilled craftspeople live and work in the United States, to be sure. But without an educational system or guilds to raise their profile, most work in isolation, and finding the right craftsman for the right job can be difficult. Inspired by visits to Europe, in particular to the schools of Les Compagnons du Devoir, a 600-year old organization of craftsmen in France, Huguley decided to found a school in Charleston dedicated to teaching craftspeople at the highest level. "It's not a new idea," says Huguley. "It's a very old idea. An extremely successful, time-tested idea that we are adapting for this country."

Huguley feels the time is ripe for a return to quality craftsmanship. "As Americans, even preservationists, we've been interested in building quicker, cheaper, and faster. As a society we've been accepting that. But now, I think people are saying 'I'll accept quicker, faster, cheaper in certain parts of my life but not others.'" Huguley is betting that a society steeped in the on-the-cheap ethos of TV remodeling shows may finally be ready to invest time and money in buildings intended to last for generations, rather than a few decades, and to place renewed emphasis on restoring the quality buildings that already exist. The first step is training more people who are expert in the crafts.

The ACBA's four-year program is modeled in large part on Les Compagnons de Duvoir program, which can last as long as eight years. The college has a partnership convention with Les Compagnons. The curriculum is being developed in part by Associate Director of Student Development Yvick Robin, himself a recent veteran of Les Compagnons. Robin's unique position at the college as both an administrator and a kind of ambassador of Les Compagnons is being funded through a grant from World Monuments Fund. "Fifty percent of the program will be academics," says Robin, "and fifty percent will be spent exclusively in the trade." But for Robin, perhaps the most significant element of the curriculum is the ten-week summer apprenticeship, or journeyman program, which will allow students to get real-world experience in their chosen trade.

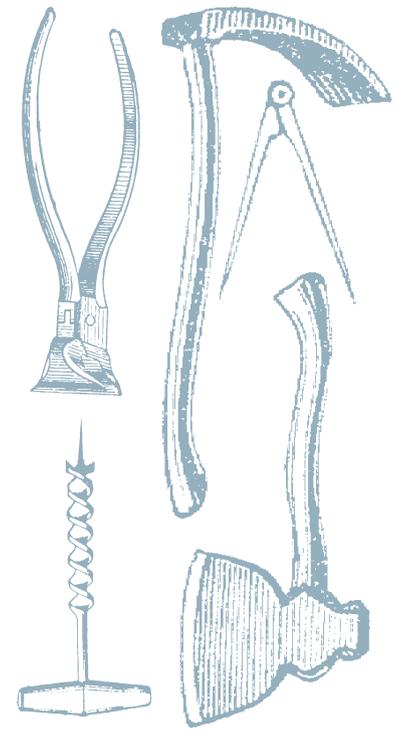
“It’s important for students to move around,” says Robin, who specializes in sheet metal working, a trade that won’t be taught initially at the ACBA. “In my program I’ve gone through eight years and worked for eight different companies in France, east, north, south, west. I’ve worked in England. I learned different techniques. The United States is a big country, I’m learning that every day. A carpenter in New York won’t practice the trade the same as a carpenter in Louisiana, because the weather is not the same, the need is not the same. We will have to adapt those things, which is why the journeymen program is important, for students to have experiences all over the United States to learn different techniques.”

In the French model, training in the crafts begins when students are high-school age, often as young as 16. Although the American educational system has not offered training opportunities in traditional building crafts, ACBA is reaching out to high-school students with youth programs. It also has a number of community outreach and partnership programs that teach the crafts to interested people who may not have the time to devote themselves full-time to the crafts. Some former participants in these programs will be among the 48 students starting classes in the fall.

Robin was also heavily involved in the recruitment of students, participating in open houses, visiting high schools, and educating potential students about the building arts as a career. “We wanted to communicate to people that a mason isn’t someone who doesn’t know how to count and write, a mason is a person who works as an engineer all day long to build a bridge, and that guy needs to go to college and be smart.”

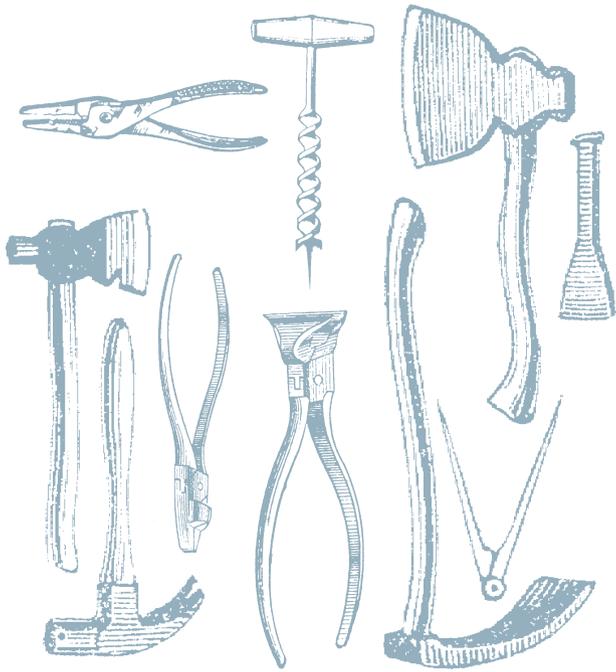
From 2005 high-school graduates to a 50-year-old former pharmacist, the incoming students are a diverse lot. “We wanted students who have an interest in the trade, of course,” says Robin. “Many of the students we get have already gone to college or have worked in preservation. Many have always wanted to work with their hands, but because their parents never told them about it, they had to discover it later on their own. We want people to know that the trade is great, its complicated and it will take a lifetime to go through it.”

The master artisans who will be teaching the trades are ACBA’s best advertisement. Simeon Warren, an English stone carver and acting director of academic affairs has a typically impressive resume. In England, he has worked at Lincoln Cathedral, Wells Cathedral, and carved stone for Buckingham Palace and the Palace of Westminster. “That’s why I had to come to America,” he says. “Once you’ve worked for the Queen, what else is there to do in England?” In Charleston, he has worked on restoring the stonework at the city’s historic Washington Park. Once classes begin, he anticipates students working with him on the restoration. “My philosophy is that you learn it the hard way. I can put a



A YOUNG MASON MASTERS THE ART OF ORNAMENTAL STONEMWORK





A CARPENTER, RIGHT, JOINS A WINDOW FRAME. THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY MCLEOD PLANTATION ON JAMES ISLAND, BELOW, WILL SERVE AS A SECOND CAMPUS FOR THE SCHOOL.



machine into someone's hand and I can show them how to use it but if that machine breaks down and you don't know how to fix it, the work stops. You have to learn from the basics."

Warren is also typical of the ACBA's staff in that he sees the college's mission as something much broader than teaching individual craftspeople. "We as an organization need to communicate to architects and clients that they need to begin to ask good craftspeople to actually produce quality products. It's very easy to go to Loew's or Home Depot to pick out something that's already been produced. But the qualities that craftspeople bring to the table are things that can't really be defined. Once you see something that a craftsman who knows what they're doing has made, it's an amazing experience. But unless architects have conversations with craftsmen, they're losing out. We need to raise the visibility of the craft and at the same time raise the visibility of our students. We need people to know we're training new craftspeople for the future."

Yvick Robin already has his eyes on the future of the college. "There are 60 Compagnons campuses all over France. That's where we'll see the growth of the ACBA. One hundred and fifty students will be it for Charleston. But perhaps the next campus will be in Louisiana, or in Richmond, the next in Boston, or New York, that's the way the college will grow."

Charleston's historic Old City Jail will serve as ACBA's downtown campus and administrative offices. A second campus is being developed at the seventeenth-century McLeod plantation on nearby James Island. Until the plantation is ready, the first group of students will attend classes and master the trades in facilities at Charleston's old naval base. They will also have an important role in helping restore both future campuses.

The workload promises to be intense. "It's much like medical school," says



Huguley. “You’re not going to make it if you can’t rise to the challenge. The students will have to have passion to get through the rigor of the program.”

To judge from the enthusiasm of incoming students, lack of passion shouldn’t be a problem.

Emily Waugh, 19, of Charleston, will be concentrating on ornamental ironwork. She already has a forge at home, and has been creating her own iron pieces through the ACBA’s outreach programs. She recalls being inspired by an ornate iron gate, just outside her church in downtown Charleston, that was wrought by master blacksmith Philip Simmons, now 91 and one of the country’s most celebrated artisans. “Mr. Simmons is my inspiration,” says Waugh. “I’m just in awe of people who can create things that beautiful by hand.”

William Denton, 21, of Arlington, Virginia, will study timber framing. “I’ve always loved to build things,” he says. “In high school, I was the guy on the crew team in charge of deck maintenance. In band I built instruments.” After graduating, Denton went through a historic preservation program, but found the approach too academic. “I just love building,” he says. “Look at the city of Charleston. Those homes are hundreds of years old and very few of those techniques are still used. The McMansions going up now won’t last. It’s comforting to know you’re living in a house that won’t start to deteriorate in your lifetime, because its built for several lifetimes.”

Alex Fulmer, 35, with a degree in civil engineering from Clemson, comes from a family of accomplished woodworkers and will focus on carpentry. Like other incoming students, he has an obvious commitment to the building arts. “When you rely on a machine, you’re getting precise stuff, but the faster you go, the more you lose,” he says. “You drive down the street and you see sprawl all over the place. You look at stonework but it’s not stone, it’s stucco with foam sprayed on it. Somebody tacked it up and sprayed it, but the skill, the romance is gone. You look at older, beautiful houses that have been around forever. I don’t think any of the houses being thrown up in sprawl will last close to that long.”

When the 48 students begin classes this fall, they’ll be doing so with the knowledge that the future of craftsmanship in America depends in no small part on their success. If dedication and enthusiasm are barometers of future success, then ACBA should enjoy a bright future. Students are already coming to this unique program with a passion for craftsmanship. “You have pride when you build something,” says Fulmer. “You stand back and you know that you’re in it, that you’re part of it.”

For more information on the ACBA, please visit www.buildingartscollege.us ■

**THE ART OF ORNAMENTAL
IRONWORK IS PASSED FROM MASTER
TO APPRENTICE.**

