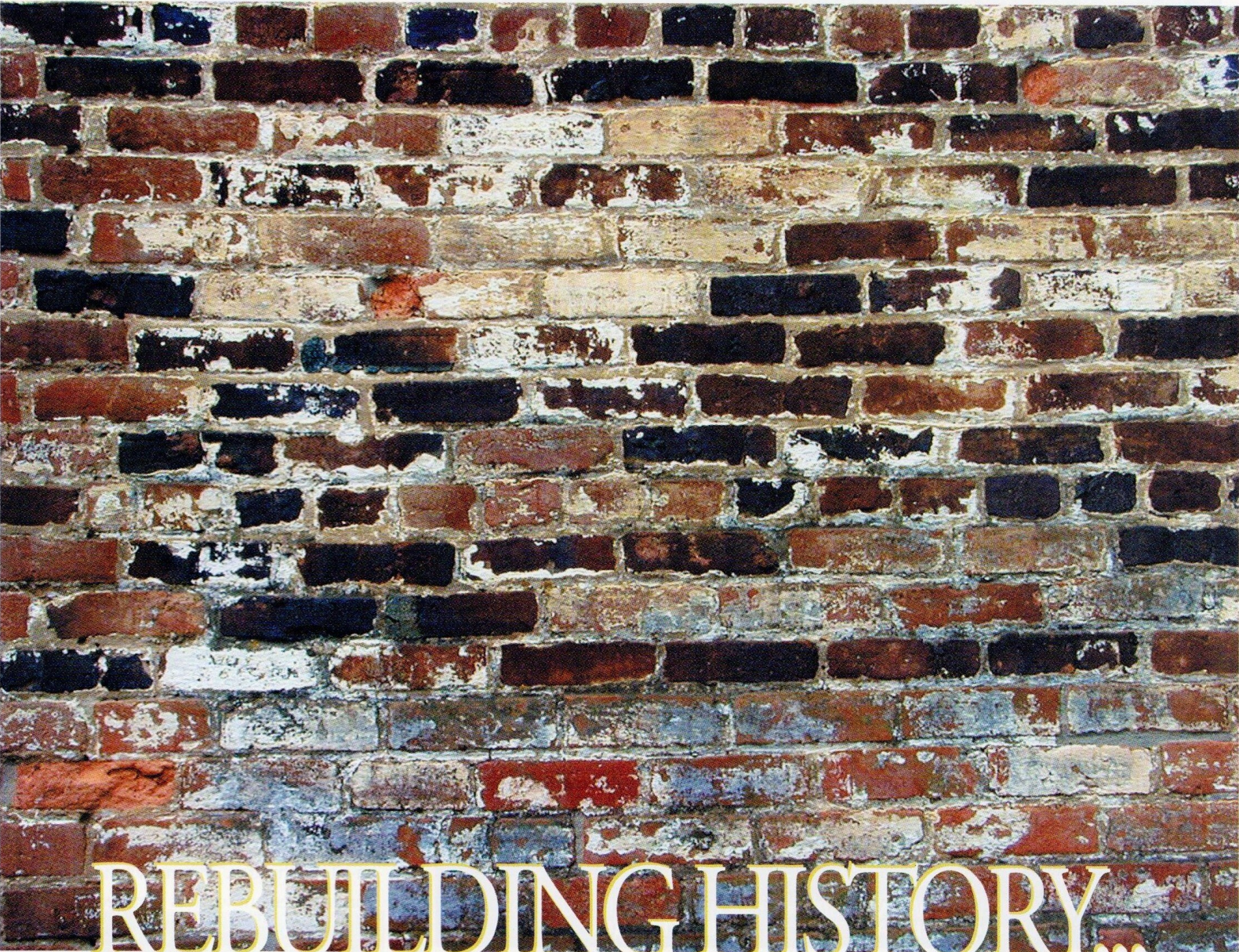




REBUILDING HISTORY

BRICK BY BRICK

By Kris Brown

“Most bricklayers don’t know anything about this type of work—or it’s too dirty for them,” says William Smallhouse, running his finger along a crumbling joint below a row of brick.

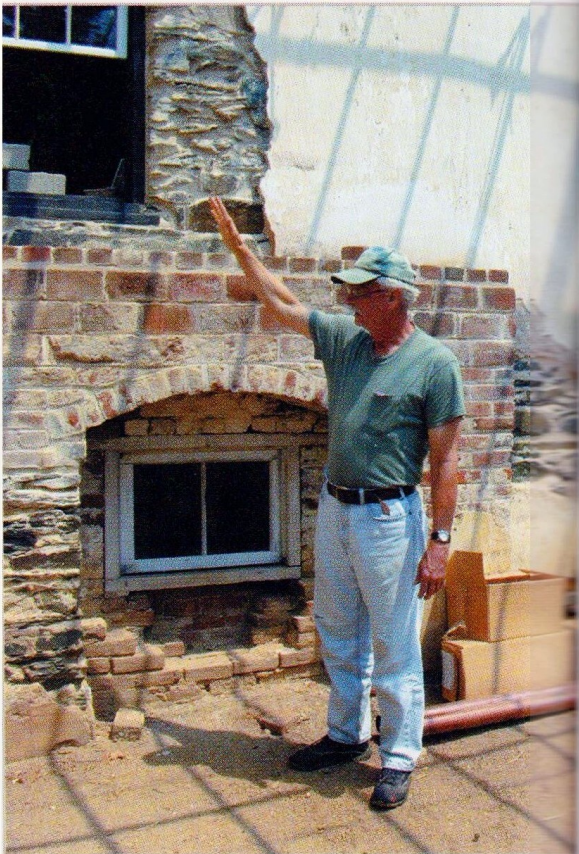
Smallhouse, who works in the little-known world of restorative masonry, deals solely with existing brick, binding it with his own mortar. He uses clay, sand, and lime to make a traditional mortar, although the precise ingredients and their proportions are his secret.

Brick making dates back almost as far as civilization itself. It is a process that is at once simple and infinitely complex. The ingredients have essentially remained the same, but talk to those working with old brick, and it’s evident that even mortar has a seemingly endless variety.

“I use my own mixture...but I don’t tell anyone what it is,” he says with a grin.

Modern mortar, commonly referred to as Portland cement, has often been blamed for damaging structures when it is used to repoint bricks for which it was never intended. “Modern cement can ruin historical structures,” says Smallhouse. Portland cement binds to older bricks with such strength that it can be impossible to remove without destroying the bricks themselves. You lose a lot of brick that way.

Traditional old bricks were usually made



H.M. Baker points out work done on the interior of the recently restored Oatlands Greenhouse.

on-site in the area. When major, or even minor, replacement work is required, brick can be gathered from other structures that have fallen into more serious disrepair.

Smallhouse obtains any replacement brick he needs from structures found anywhere from Loudoun to Georgetown. “I’m always looking out for old brick,” he says. Sometimes he’ll stumble across the bricks, but he often gets them from people who want to remove what remains of an old structure on their property.

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Loudoun boasts some fine examples of brickwork dating back several hundred years. To see what distinguishes traditional brick crafting from modern mass production, it helps to understand how bricks were made and used in Loudoun at that time.

Before the advent of modern transportation, it made little sense to haul most heavy building material over long distances. Ordinarily, if bricks were to be incorporated into a building, they were formed and fired on-site. Native Loudoun bricks were made primarily during summer months when the soil was at its softest. Clay was shoveled from the ground into a treading pit, where workers used their feet to mix it with water. When smooth, it was moved to a molding table and shaped in wooden molds. The bricks were then dried on beds of sand for two weeks, dried further in a drying shed for six weeks, then fired in a kiln.

During his 55-year career, Smallhouse has worked on some of Loudoun’s best-known structures, including site work in Waterford and at Oatlands. Local historian and archeologist Dan Kent has put in his share of time at both sites as well. In addition to serving as social studies department chair at Broad Run High School and adjunct professor at Northern Virginia Community College, Kent directs the Loudoun County student archeological survey projects for the Waterford Foundation and Oatlands Plantation. Waterford and Oatlands are home to some of the most notable brick structures in the county.

In the business of restorative brick work for 55 years, William Smallhouse says, “A lot of bricklayers know nothing about this kind of work.”

