

SENIOR SLATERS

by Joseph Jenkins



"It's not rocket science," Dave tells us. His handiwork included a band of hand-rounded slates across the roof, flashing around dormers and skylights, plus ceramic tile ridges. The force of the winds that battered his home is evident in the photo below, which shows only one of the many tress that succumbed to Katrina's massive assault.



Photos this page by Joe Jenkins

THEY SAY THE ROAD TO HELL IS PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS, but the road to Dr. David Clark's house north of New Orleans must have been paved with fallen trees after hurricane Katrina turned the place into a living hell. Huge tree trunks were stacked like Lincoln Logs fifteen feet high, mile after mile along the rural highway I was driving six weeks after the hurricane had committed her massive assault. I was on my way to view a newly installed slate roof that had been unfortunate enough to lie in the hurricane's direct path. But that wasn't the only thing unusual about this roof. It was installed by a sixty-eight year old practicing psychologist who had no prior experience with slate roofing. And he did some unusual things — according to conventional roofing wisdom.


When I arrived at the scene, there were dozens of huge trees that had blown over, snapped off, or were uprooted. They had fallen like dominos all around the house, but none had scored a direct hit. Dave reported that winds in excess of 150 m.p.h had battered his home and it had taken him two hours on foot to get one mile down his road after the hurricane passed over, due to downed trees. Yet, not a single slate had blown off his roof. He only lost a few slates where flying debris had bounced off the roof on the back of his house. This was a miracle in itself, yet, when

I asked Dave how he had fastened the slates to the roof, his answer made my jaw drop. He had simply drilled holes into the slating battens for the slating nails, then pushed the slating nails into the wood with his fingers. He did not "nail" any slates to the roof with a hammer. Any slate could be lifted off by hand.

Then why didn't the slates blow off? Were these some kind of super slates? Hardly. They were "saved from the dumpster," as Dave tells it. The slates originated in Brazil and were being installed on a roof in New Orleans prior to Katrina. The owner noticed "iron and sand" in the slates, saw some "weak" slates and said *no way are these going on my roof*. He made the roofing contractor take them off. That's when they were headed for the dumpster, until Dave got word of the, uh, windfall. He struck a deal with the roofer to haul away the seven tons of slates — enough to roof his entire house, free for the hauling.

For a roof deck, Dave used standard lumber-yard 2x4s ripped down the middle to make 1.5"x1.75" slating battens. He got the idea to drill holes and push the slating nails into place from the Slate Roof Bible, which shows photos of old Welsh slate roofs that were installed with wooden pegs hung over wooden lath. In fact, Dave had found the Slate Roof Bible online, ordered a copy, read it, then the gears in his head began rolling. He also ordered a slate cutter and a ripper from slateroofcentral.com. He used galvanized nails for the slating nails. "It was fun cutting the circular slates," Dave said, pointing out the rounded-bottom slates he had installed in a pattern on his roof. "The feel of the slate creates an earthy type experience," he explained, contrasting slate roof work to office work. "Straddling the ridge was neat — the view, the sounds of birds. My most memorable moment was when I fell off," he added, quite seriously, but with a laugh. He had failed to secure the hooks on his ground ladder one day and "the ladder slid down and I went with it." Dave broke his foot in the process and had to put his tools down for a couple months until it healed. This was particularly frustrating to Dave because he's also a marathon runner, running 4 or 5 marathons a year, even coming in 2nd at the Buffalo, NY Marathon of 2004. "The hurricane knocked a year off my schedule," explains Dave. So what another couple of months?

Dave's sage advice: "Don't drink too much wine when doing slate roofing."

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Al and his handiwork



MANY HOME OWNERS TODAY complain that they can't find a competent roofing contractor who can install a slate roof. Or if they do find a contractor, he screws up the job. Maybe they're just looking in the wrong age group. Albert Gerbig of Skillman, New Jersey, for example, had been an AARP member for ten years and was 60 years old before he started installing his first slate roof. A retired food technologist and consultant, his background didn't prepare him for the arduous task of stone roofing. However, with local roofing contractors charging \$3,000.00/square (\$30/square foot), or more, to install slate, Mr. Gerbig said, "What the heck? I can cross this off my list of things I always wanted to do!"

Mr. Gerbig, determined to install his own slate roof, prepared himself with knowledge and inspiration by reading the Slate Roof Bible. Then he ordered the appropriate tools, equipment and materials. His roof jacks came from slateroofcentral.com (ph: 866-641-7141). Other tools and equipment were procured from various sources and included a platform lift and scaffolding. The 10x14 Vermont black slate was purchased from Camara Slate Company in Fair Haven, VT.

Al began by stripping off the old cedar shingle roofing, which was the original roof on the house, and at only 20 years old it already needed replacement. He also removed the old spaced sheathing and replaced it with new solid sheathing. The project, still ongoing at the time of this writing, has taken about three and a half months, with three or four weeks lost to rain days. A professional sheet metal contractor is helping with the lead-coated copper flashings, which include drip edges and fascia flashing.



The slates arrive from the quarry.

Ready to start ripping off the old cedar shakes.



Photos this page supplied by Albert Gerbig



Al's Solid board sheathing makes a perfect deck for a slate roof.

Costs for the project added up to over \$40,000.00, including slate, sheathing, dumpster costs, tools, snow guards, copious quantities of leaded copper, and structural enhancements to the load bearing capability of the building. The new slate roof, however, should easily last a century. Al's grandchildren will be able to admire his craftsmanship — as adults.

In this day and age, when the popularity of slate roofing is soaring and natural roofing is experiencing a renaissance of sorts, it can be disheartening when the average roofing contractor does not have the time or the motivation to learn the basic skills required for such an endeavor. It's *not* rocket science. A simple search on the internet will yield a wealth of data about slate roofs, including books, information, instructions, sources of tools, materials, and slates.

Many times, a handy-person or property owner will ask, after searching in vain for a competent roofing contractor, "Can I install my own slate roof?" With the proper information, tools, supplies, safety equipment and determination, and thanks to the efforts of sexagenarians, the answer is a resounding, "Yes!"



Good ladders, a ladder hoist, pipe scaffolding, roof jacks and planks make the job a lot easier and safer.