

ADVENTURES IN SLATE

A YOUNG SLATER'S FIRST FORAY INTO THE SLATE ROOF RESTORATION BUSINESS
by Stacy Moore



Stacy Moore replacing a valley with copper on the First Presbyterian Church in Greenville, SC.

Working with and getting to know a group of slate roofers in western Pennsylvania has been one of the greatest joys of my life, and I have treasured every moment. It was only a handful of years ago that I didn't know what a slate roofer was. That was because the "slaters" who worked in my hometown area of Greenville, South Carolina, were long gone—for that matter, almost forgotten.

But they were indeed there nearly a century earlier, as evidenced by their handicrafts that still hang with great longevity and beauty high above the bustling city streets on some of the older historic buildings and residences of character in my hometown.

Winter was upon me several years ago, and I was feeling a bit depressed. Perhaps it was because I was relatively new at enduring the long, cold, damp and grim winters in the shadow of Lake Erie. Maybe it was because I had spent several years working indoors and lacked the ambition and confidence to get out of my chair and do something about it. Nevertheless, I was uncertain about my course of direction and a stack of bills was literally growing from the surface my desk.

I needed to make some changes in my routine. I wanted nothing more than to be finished with my part-time indoor job at a local university, when the opportunity to get involved in the slate roofing trade arrived on my

doorstep like a mysterious little gift. I accepted the opportunity as a way to change my lifestyle, for the summer at leastthe supposed "therapy of manual labor," I imagined. Little did I know, slating was a much bigger concept than just hauling heavy rocks up a ladder to nail on the roof. My future was going to depend on my ability to salvage the clues, techniques and materials of many generations past.

I met Joe Jenkins through my research assistantship position at Slippery Rock University. Through Jenkins, I met Barry Smith of Union City, PA. Barry needed help for the summer working on an elaborate old house in Bellfonte, PA, with lovely Peach Bottom slate. I accepted his offer. As his helper, I had to buy a few tools, among the most important of which were a slate cutter, a ripper, a slate hammer, a prybar and some other miscellaneous tools, such as sheet metal snips. Through his expert tutelage and never-ending patience, for which I am ever so grateful, I began to learn the trade.

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The rare Peach Bottom slates we were using for replacements were already off the roof and were on a local farmer's property. It was my job to cut these larger recycled slates down to the small beveled style that we needed. One day as I was busy shuffling through the slate piles, I noticed someone had carved his initials on one of the pieces and the date "1882." It is not uncommon to find slate that old, but we saved that piece anyway. I knocked on the slate with my knuckles and it rang like a bell, well over a century later. I was learning how good a material it was that we were recycling.

I also imagined the great pleasure the slater who carved his initials must have felt when he left his mark on that particular slate, hoping that someone in the distant future would notice....and we did. Although the initialed slate was probably not worth much money, it felt to me like finding an important historical artifact.

The job was completed on schedule, and I was somewhat relieved, partly because I was sore, sunburned and bee-stung. I was also glad not to spend my days forty to fifty feet above the ground anymore. Barry had no more

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use for me, as he was going home to do other jobs.

I wandered back down south to my hometown with a few hundred dollars in my bank account and a few new skills. I gathered my cutter, ripper and some ladder hooks and tossed them in the garage, in case I might ever need them again.

I doubted I would at first, until I spent some time looking at the various ways roofers were doing "patch jobs" on the beautiful slate roofs in my town—with tar, roof sealants, face-nails and other techniques I had learned were unattractive and of poor workmanship.

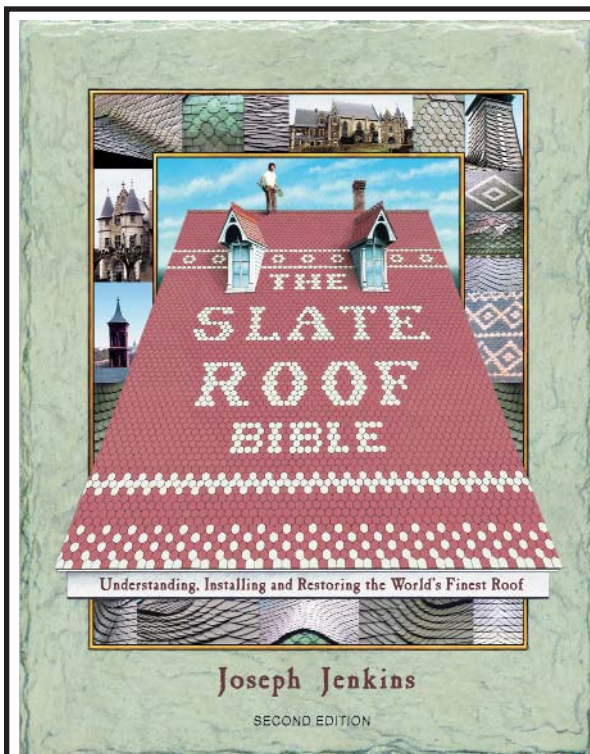
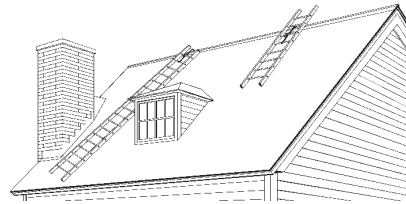
Suddenly I had a revelation: "I have \$300.00, a cutter, a ripper, a hammer and about 150 recycled sea green slates. I am the luckiest man in town!" I exclaimed to myself. Within a few weeks, I landed my first job. I have made a living recycling roof slates for restoration jobs ever since.

Recently, I traveled to Scotland with a group of Pennsylvania slate roofers. We had the opportunity to observe a culture that generally places a high value on its roofs, both functionally and artistically. Due to its population density and limited resources, Europe has traditionally taken a more environmentally sensitive approach than the United States in its selection of building materi-

als, in an attempt to reduce waste and save energy. And they do this with style and pizzazz, using some of the best materials and techniques I've seen anywhere. I was inspired by what I saw on the other side of the Atlantic.

Among the various folks I was able to meet in Scotland in the traditional roofing trades and slate industry, the Honorable Master Slater John Ball of Northern Ireland undoubtedly left the greatest impression on me. Not only is he the most artistic and creative roofer I have ever witnessed, he is a warm and friendly fellow who did not hesitate to take a few hours out of his busy day to share his knowledge and skills with us. I was truly lucky to see such a heavyweight in action. His ability to pass the trade on to his apprentices so gracefully is quite admirable.

Belonging to a younger generation of slate roofers, I am truly grateful for the efforts made by all those before me who have so generously shared their experience and vision. We'll try our best to do the same...Can you please hand me your ripper? Thank you. ☒



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