

Hill, William M.: At the Mortar Box ^[1]

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William M. Hill: at the mortar box

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 7/9/2006. Copyrighted.
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I visited with master plasterer William M. Hill at his home in Clinton, an hour southeast of Raleigh. At age 77, he is renowned for his painstaking restorations of some of the state's most historic buildings. He is perhaps best known for his breathtaking work at the Bellamy Mansion in Wilmington, where he and his crew restored badly fire-damaged walls, ceilings and ornamental work. The plastering had originally been done by slave artisans. Their work, he told me, was unsurpassed.

Hill is a soft-spoken, spiritual man who loves to garden and dote on his wife, Lucile. He told me that plastering is a dying art, largely replaced by cheaper, easier-to-do drywall and paneling. He helped me to see that history is recorded not only in books, but in joists and lathes, bricks and mortar.



William M. Hill. Photo by Chris Seward, 2006. ~~Do not use this image for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.~~

My dad was named Charlie Franklin Hill Sr. My daddy was in building, and I'm guessing it was just in my blood. He didn't finish the second grade, but he became a master plasterer. People beat a path to his door because he was good. He knew Plastering is as old as Time. It was done in biblical days. It was a means of covering up wood studs and wood ceiling joists, and it was done by hand, and still is. It hasn't changed much.

Here in Sampson County, black men were the only ones doing the plastering trade. That was true for plastering, brick masonry, cement finishing. Those were trades that took brain and brawn. It is hard work, physically hard work, but it is also I don't mind telling you, I got less pay than the white man, and I had to do it better than the white man. I could tell you something, brother. You don't know. I'm not lying to you, but oh, Lord, you don't know.

I started with my daddy when I was 11 years old. My brother and I were there, there wasn't anybody to keep us, so daddy carried us to the job.

That first day, I picked up some tools and I tried to put some mud on the walls. That didn't go too good, but it didn't take long, because I had my dad and three uncles working for him. They took a lot of interest in us.

It takes four years to get from apprentice laborer to plasterer. But you never get above labor. You never get above that common job: making up that mortar, pushing a wheelbarrow, building a scaffold. It's part of becoming a plasterer.

You learn how to mix the mortar. Your plaster material is a rock, a mineral that comes out of the earth, and you mix it with sand and water. You learn how to put it on the wall or a ceiling with a trowel. You use feather edges and darbies to get

My daddy brought me up in a way where I could go to a mortar box at 12 o'clock at night, run my finger in that box and do like that, and tell you what it was made of. That's the kind of training I had.

Back when I was coming along, there was a lot of plaster work. Schools, churches, courthouses, hospitals, all those type buildings had plaster. Some homes had tongue-and-groove wood, but most had plaster. Plaster was part of what it took

I went to college one year and I got flunked twice in English. I said to heck with this. I caught the train from Hampton to Fayetteville. Caught a bus from Fayetteville to Clinton, and that bus put me off at quarter to five that morning. I was at Dad

I said, "Open the door." When he opened the door, I didn't hug him. I said, "Where are you working?" He told me where he was working. I said, "I'll be on the job by nine o'clock."

I haven't looked back. He'd give me a crew of men and he'd send me one way and he'd go another. When I was 19 years old, he turned the business over to me, lock, stock and barrel. I became his boss. He didn't call me boss, but he would

We got up to about 50 men a week. And I got to say this: We took men that the teachers and principals wouldn't teach, wouldn't tolerate, and started them at the mortar box, started them pushing a wheelbarrow, and they ended up with sons :

We did hospitals, city halls, courthouses, jails, schools, banks, theaters, all that kind of stuff. We did the psychiatric wing at UNC-Chapel Hill. And you know that round classroom building that is in the middle of State campus? I did that building

In my younger years, I liked newer buildings: hit them and go. But I realized, in my older years, it is a challenge to go in something like the Bellamy Mansion, a building that is 150 years old. You have to get into the minds of those plasterers a

Now, to John Doe it might not mean a thing. But for me to go in there and take this stuff that is damaged by fire and time and restore it identical, that's a challenge.

After my dad retired, I used to carry him around with me from job to job to get him out of the house. We went to a job one day, and the men hadn't done what I had told them to do. My daddy didn't say a word, but man, I raised the roof!

After I pulled off, Daddy said, "Son, you'll never make a penny." I said, "Why?" He said, "You are a perfectionist. You put all your money back into the job."

I said, "Daddy, I'm only doing what you taught me to do." He didn't say another word. Not another word.

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From:
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9 July 2006 | Cecelski, David S.

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