

How Tuckpointing Is Really Done: The Tuckpointing Process Steps a Working Mason Follows

A Trade Walkthrough in Plain English, for Homeowners Who
Want to Know Exactly What Happens to Their Wall

by Travis Nech

Champion Brick Repair — championbrickrepair.com

Champion Brick Repair — championbrickrepair.com

Copyright © 2026 by Travis Nech. All rights reserved.

This book is free. Share it with a neighbor who needs it.

Chapter 1: The Tuckpointing Process Steps at a Glance

If you've ever stood in your yard and watched a mason work your wall, you know there's something different about the way a real craftsman moves. He doesn't hurry. He doesn't skip. Every joint gets the same treatment, whether it's at eye level or up on the scaffold where nobody can see the difference.

I've been doing this work fifty years, and I can tell you the whole job comes down to a sequence. Miss a step, or do them in the wrong order, and the repair fails years early. Do them all, in order, and the wall outlasts you and me both.

Here are the tuckpointing process steps, start to finish, the way a working mason does it:

1. **Read the wall.** Walk it, sound the joints, mark exactly what's failed and what hasn't. You don't cut mortar that's still sound — and you don't leave mortar that's already dead.
2. **Set up the tools.** The grinder with the right blade, the chisels, the trowels, the mortar bags, the jointers, the

dust control. The setup tells you half of what you need to know about the man doing the work.

3. **Cut out the bad mortar.** Grind or rake the failed mortar out of the joints to a uniform depth — usually around a half to three-quarters of an inch — leaving a clean, square-backed cavity.
4. **Clean and prep the joints.** Brush out the dust, blow them clean, and dampen them so the thirsty old brick doesn't suck the water out of your new mortar before it can cure.
5. **Mix the mortar.** The right type, the right sand, the right color match, mixed to the right consistency in batches small enough to use before they go dead.
6. **Pack the joints.** Fill the cavities in layers, packing each layer tight so there are no voids behind the face.
7. **Tool the joints.** Strike the profile — usually a clean concave — when the mortar is at thumbprint hardness, so it sheds water instead of catching it.
8. **Cure it.** Keep the fresh work shaded and damp, out of the Texas heat and wind, for a couple of days while it gains strength.
9. **Clean up and check.** Wash the haze off the brick faces, walk the whole wall, and look at it the way a

homeowner will look at it every morning for the next twenty years.

That's the whole tuckpointing process, steps one through nine. The rest of this book takes each step apart so you can see what's supposed to happen — and, just as important, what a bad contractor skips. Because when you know the steps, you can judge the method. And the method is the whole difference between a repair that lasts thirty years and one that pops loose in three.

One word of housekeeping before we start. In the strictest sense, "tuckpointing" means a decorative technique — a thin ribbon of contrasting mortar tucked down the center of each joint after repointing. "Repointing" is the structural job: cut out the bad mortar, pack in new. In Texas residential work, when anyone says tuckpointing, they mean repointing — the repair job, not the jewelry. I'll use tuckpointing the way the trade uses it, and when the decorative version comes up, I'll call it out by name. What's the same either way: the tuckpointing process steps are the steps. The sequence doesn't change.

Chapter 2: Reading the Wall Before You

Touch It

The first tool a mason uses isn't in his truck. It's his eyes. Before a single joint gets cut, a good mason reads the whole wall the way a doctor reads a patient — top to bottom, looking for symptoms, figuring out what's sick and what isn't.

I start at one corner and work my way across, slow. I'm looking at every joint, and I'm asking one question over and over: is this mortar still holding, or is it dead?

There's a simple test anybody can do. Take a screwdriver or an old knife and run it along a mortar joint. Sound mortar fights you — the tool skims the surface and barely leaves a scratch. Dead mortar powders under it, crumbles, flakes out in chunks. You'll feel the difference in your hand before you see it. Where the mortar powders, that's where the cut-out starts.

I'm also tapping. You rap the brick face lightly with your knuckles or a rubber mallet and listen. A tight wall sounds solid. A hollow or drummy sound means the brick has lost its bond — the mortar behind it is gone or so deteriorated it

might as well be. Those bricks may need resetting, not just repointing, and I mark them different so I don't forget.

What I'm really doing is drawing a map. I mark the wall — chalk works fine, painter's tape on the brick face works better because it doesn't wash off — showing exactly which joints are failed, which are questionable, and which are sound and staying. On a chimney, maybe it's every joint on the north face and half of the south. On a house wall, maybe it's a twenty-foot run above a window where water has been working for a decade.

Here's why this step matters to you as the homeowner: this map is the scope of your job. When I say the bid covers 80 square feet of joint, I'm pointing at that map. A contractor who doesn't read the wall first — who eyeballs it from the driveway and gives you a number — is guessing. He'll either price the whole wall (and you overpay) or price too little (and the number goes up mid-job when he "discovers" the rest). Either way, you're paying for his failure to look.

While I'm reading the wall, I'm also checking for things that aren't mortar problems at all, because cutting out mortar doesn't fix them:

Spalled brick faces. If the brick faces themselves are flaking and peeling — what we call spalling — new mortar won't save those bricks. Spalling usually means water got into the brick and froze, or someone put hard modern mortar against soft old brick and the brick face popped off trying to move. A few bad bricks get replaced as part of the job. A wall full of them is a different conversation.

Cracks that run through the brick, not just the joint. A hairline crack following a mortar joint is mortar failure — normal, repairable. A crack that jumps from the joint and splits straight through a brick, or a stair-step crack that walks down the wall, is telling you the wall is moving. Soil movement, foundation settlement, a lintel that's sagging — the mortar is the victim, not the criminal. You repoint the joint and the wall keeps moving and the crack comes right back. Read the crack before you repoint it.

Bulges and bows. Stand back and sight down the wall face. If a section is leaning or bowed out, that's not a repointing job — that's a structural problem. The wall may need partial rebuild or tying back. Mortar is the glue, not the frame.

White powdery deposits — efflorescence. Those white streaks on the brick face are mineral salts being carried out

by water. The efflorescence itself isn't damage, but it's a report card: it tells you water is moving through the wall somewhere. Find the water source — often it's a gutter, a sprinkler, or failed flashing above — and deal with it, or the new mortar will face the same water and fail the same way.

Cracks in the chimney crown or failed flashing. On a chimney job, the crown — the concrete or mortar cap across the top — and the metal flashing where the chimney meets the roof are as important as the joints. Water coming down through a cracked crown will destroy new pointing from the inside out. I look at those while I'm up there and tell the homeowner straight.

All of this goes into the map. When I'm done reading a wall, I know: which joints get cut, to what depth, which bricks need replacing, whether there's a water problem to fix first, and what the mortar needs to match. That's the plan. Every one of the tuckpointing process steps after this one is just executing that plan.

Chapter 3: The Tools on the Truck

Open up a real tuckpointing man's truck and you'll see the difference between him and a handyman with a caulk gun in about ten seconds. The tools tell the story. Here's what the tuckpointing tools look like, what each one does, and why the wrong one in the wrong hand can wreck a wall.

The angle grinder with a tuckpointing blade. This is the workhorse. A 4-inch or 4.5-inch angle grinder fitted with a diamond tuckpointing blade — a thick diamond blade made for raking out mortar joints. It's the fastest way to open failed joints to a uniform depth, and on a big job it's the only practical way. But it's also the tool that does the most damage in unskilled hands: a grinder will slice right through a brick face and scar it forever if the operator wanders. The blade should have a depth guard or the mason should be running steady at a controlled depth — never freehand deep enough to nick the brick.

The dust shroud and vacuum. Grinding mortar makes dust — clouds of fine silica dust that coats everything within fifty feet and gets in the lungs of everybody downwind. A dust

shroud (a cover over the grinder blade) connected to a HEPA vacuum catches most of it at the source. This isn't a luxury; in my view it's basic professionalism. A mason who grinds without dust control is coating your windows, your car, your neighbor's patio, and his own lungs. Ask about it. If he doesn't have one, that's a strike.

Cold chisels and a raking hook. For joints too tight for the grinder, for delicate work around historic brick, or for finishing out the corners where the blade can't reach, nothing beats a hand chisel. A narrow cold chisel and a light hammer — or a raking hook, which is exactly what it sounds like — gives the mason fingertip control. On soft old brick, hand tools aren't just preferred, they're mandatory: a grinder chews up soft brick faces, and once a brick face is ground, it can never be un-ground.

The mortar bag (grout bag). Looks like a big canvas pastry bag. You fill it with mortar, squeeze it like you're decorating a cake, and it lays a bead of mortar right into the joint. For standard brick joints, this is the fastest, cleanest way to fill. It keeps mortar off the brick faces, which saves a ton of cleanup. The catch: the mortar has to be mixed a little wetter than normal to flow through the bag — and that extra water

has to be managed in the curing step.

The pointing trowel. The flat steel blade with the narrow point — the signature tool of the trade. The mason holds a hawk (a square flat plate) of mortar under the joint and slices small ribbons of mortar off with the pointing trowel, packing them into the joint by hand. Slower than the bag, but it gives the finest control, especially on irregular or wide joints and on stone. A mason who's good with a pointing trowel is an artist with a steel blade.

The brick jointer. This is what shapes the joint profile. The classic one is a curved steel bar — you drag it along the finished joint and it presses a smooth concave groove into the mortar. Straight ones, V-shaped ones, round ones — they match whatever profile the original wall has. We'll get to profiles in Chapter 8, but know this: the jointer is the difference between a joint that looks finished and one that looks smeared.

The margin trowel. A small flat trowel for mixing small batches, buttering bricks, and cleaning up. Every mason carries two.

The wire brush and the burlap. A stiff brush for cleaning

joints before and after. A damp burlap sack for the finishing touches — wiping the joint lightly after tooling to soften the look and help it match the weathered joints around it. Old trick, works beautifully.

The sprayer. A pump sprayer or a garden hose with a fine nozzle. Used to dampen the joints before mortar goes in and to mist the fresh work during curing. Water is a tool in this trade — applied at the right time and in the right amount, and a disaster in the wrong hands.

The safety gear. Respirator or dust mask, safety glasses, ear protection, gloves. Grinding mortar without a respirator is asking for lung damage — silica dust is no joke. A crew that doesn't wear gear doesn't understand their own trade, and if they don't respect the dust, they won't respect your property either.

Scaffolding and planks. Any work above eight feet should be done off scaffold or a lift, not a ladder. You can't do careful joint work while balancing on a ladder rung. If a contractor plans to repoint your second-story chimney off an extension ladder, the quality of the work is going to show it — and the price should too, because he's skipping the access cost a legitimate bid includes.

One more thing about tools: watch for what's missing. A "mason" who shows up with a caulk tube of gray goop and a putty knife isn't tuckpointing anything — he's smearing. Real tuckpointing tools make real dust and take real time. The tools don't lie.

Chapter 4: Cutting Out the Bad Mortar

This is where the wall changes. Everything before was looking; everything after is building. The grind-out is the step most homeowners never watch, and it's the step where the most cheating happens — because once the new mortar's in, nobody can see how deep the cut was. Remember that when you read the chapter on judging a contractor.

The standard: failed mortar gets cut out to a uniform depth of about half an inch to three-quarters of an inch, with a clean, square-backed cavity. That means the back of the cut is flat and square, not rounded or ragged, so the new mortar has something solid to bond against across the full face of the joint. On badly deteriorated walls, some masons cut deeper — an inch or more — where the mortar is powder all the way back. The rule is simple: cut until you hit sound mortar, and leave a clean bed for the new work to sit in.

The technique matters. Working masons cut the horizontal joints first, then come back for the verticals. There's a reason: when you cut a vertical joint after the horizontals are done, the blade drops into a pocket at each intersection — you feel

it stop before it hits brick. That pocket keeps you from over-cutting into the brick below. Cut the verticals first and there's nothing to stop the blade; you plow right into the brick face. Watch for this. A mason who grinds verticals first is telling you he never learned the sequence.

Depth control is the craft. The blade should remove mortar without touching brick. Nicked brick faces — those little ground-out scars along the joint edges — are permanent. On a house with hard modern brick, a careful grinder man can work clean. On soft, older brick, the margin is thinner than a credit card, and this is where hand tools earn their keep. A good crew uses the grinder where the brick can take it and switches to chisels where it can't. A bad crew uses the grinder everywhere because it's fast.

Dust control isn't optional on this step. This is the dustiest part of the whole job. The shroud and vacuum should be running the entire time. Windows near the work should be closed, landscaping covered, cars moved. On a Texas summer day, the dust hangs in the still air and settles on everything within sight. A crew that protects your property before they start grinding is a crew that cleans up after themselves — those two things always go together.

Here's what I watch for as the cuts go in:

Uniform depth. Every joint on the wall should be cut to the same depth. Ragged, shallow-in-spots cut-outs mean the new mortar has thin spots, and thin spots fail first. You can check this yourself — run your finger along the cut joint. It should feel like a consistent channel, not a wavy trench.

No feathered edges. The new mortar should never be feathered — smeared thin over the face of the brick at the edges of the joint. Feathered edges dry out fast, crack off, and leave a jagged line. The cut should have a clean shoulder where brick meets mortar.

Sound mortar stays. A good mason doesn't cut out mortar that's still good. If the joint is sound — the screwdriver test from Chapter 2 says it's tight — it stays. Cutting out sound mortar to inflate the square footage is a way to pad a bill. Conversely, a mason who "repairs" a wall by skimming new mortar over failed mortar without cutting anything out hasn't repaired anything. He's painted a wall with mortar. It'll look fine for a season. Then it pops.

The back of the joint gets checked. After cutting, I look into the joints — really look. Sometimes the mortar is gone all the

way back to the other face of the wall, and you can see daylight. That's a deeper problem than repointing alone: the joint has to be packed full depth, sometimes in multiple passes, and the wall needs checking for stability. You don't know this until you open the joint up. This is one of the reasons a fixed-price bid written before the wall is opened can change — and why an honest contractor tells you that upfront.

By the end of this step, the wall should look like a brick wall with neat, even channels cut wherever the mortar failed — honest channels, uniform depth, clean shoulders, brick faces untouched. If it looks like somebody attacked your house with a chainsaw, stop the job.

Chapter 5: Cleaning and Prepping the Joint

Fresh-cut joints are full of dust and loose grit. If you pack new mortar into a dusty joint, the dust becomes a bond-breaker — a thin layer of powder between the new mortar and the old, and the new mortar bonds to the powder instead of the wall. A year later you can peel the new pointing out with your fingernail.

So the next step is cleaning. A stiff wire brush first, working the joint to knock loose everything the grinder left behind. Then compressed air or a blower to drive the fine dust out of the cavity. Work top to bottom — always top to bottom — so the dust you're knocking down doesn't land on joints you've already cleaned.

Then comes water. And water, in this step, is doing one of the most important jobs in the whole tuckpointing process.

Brick is thirsty. Old brick and old mortar are porous — they suck water like a sponge. If you pack fresh mortar into a bone-dry joint on a Texas afternoon, the dry masonry pulls the water right out of the new mortar before the cement in it can hydrate. The technical term is that the mortar "flash-

dries." What it looks like: mortar that crumbles, shrinks, cracks, and never bonds. The joint fails from the inside out, and from the outside it looks like the mortar was just weak.

The fix is simple: dampen the joint before the mortar goes in. Spray it with clean water until the masonry is moist but surface-dry — darkened by water, but not dripping, not puddled. You're giving the old masonry its drink first so it doesn't steal the new mortar's.

In Texas heat, this step needs timing. On a 100-degree day, a dampened joint can dry back out in twenty minutes. So you dampen in sections — only as much wall as you're going to point in the next half hour — and you re-dampen if it dries. Working in the morning shade, following the shadow around the house, isn't just comfort; it's chemistry. Mortar that goes into a properly dampened joint in the shade cures differently than mortar packed into a sun-baked joint at 3 PM. The afternoon mortar will be weaker, every time.

A note on washing: the joints get water, not chemicals, at this stage. No muriatic acid wash before pointing — acid belongs to the cleanup stage after the work is done, if it's used at all, and it can stain and weaken fresh mortar. Clean water, applied with a sprayer or a hose nozzle, top to bottom. That's

it.

When the joints are clean, damp, and ready, the wall is holding still, waiting. This is the moment the job turns from demolition to craft. The next chapter is where walls get made.

Chapter 6: The Mortar Mix

Ask a hundred masons what makes or breaks a tuckpointing job, and ninety of them will tell you the same thing: the mix. You can cut perfect joints, clean them perfectly, pack them perfectly — and if the mortar is wrong, the job fails. The mix is the heart of the work.

The first rule: the new mortar must never be harder than the brick. Mortar is the sacrificial element in a wall — it's supposed to be the weak link, the part that gives when the wall moves, so the brick doesn't crack. This is by design. Put a hard, Portland-heavy mortar against a soft old brick and the brick loses: the mortar won't flex, so the brick face spalls off instead. I've seen walls ruined this way — beautiful old soft brick, faces popped off like scabs, because somebody pointed them with the hardest mortar on the shelf. On modern Texas brick veneer, standard Type N mortar is the right strength for the job. On older, softer brick — pre-war, handmade, or historic — you step down to a softer, high-lime mix. If a contractor can't tell you what mortar type he's using and why, that's your sign to keep looking.

Matching the old mortar. The new mortar has to match the old in strength, color, and texture — and color is what the homeowner sees. Here's how a real match is done: the mason makes small test batches and lets them cure, then compares the cured sample against the original mortar. The trade trick is that if the samples match when wet, they'll match when dry — so you wet the original mortar and the test sample side by side. Sand is half the color story: the same cement with a different sand gives a different color, so the sand source matters as much as the mix. Mortar pigments exist, but they're a spice, not the meal — a little goes a long way, and too much weakens the mortar. Get the sand right first.

Consistency: like peanut butter, on the stiff side. Repointing mortar gets mixed drier and stiffer than the mortar you'd use to lay brick. The old-timers say peanut butter, and that's about right — it should hold its shape on the trowel, not slump, not run. If you're using a mortar bag, it goes a touch wetter so it flows — but "a touch" is the operative phrase. Mortar that's too wet shrinks as it dries, cracks, and loses bond. Mortar that's too dry crumbles and won't compact. The mason adjusts by feel, adding water a splash at a time. You can always add water; you can't take it out.

Small batches, used fresh. Mortar has a working life. Once it's mixed, the clock starts — a batch that's been sitting in the tub for an hour has started its chemical set, and re-tempering it (adding water and remixing) makes a weaker mortar. The rule: mix only what you can use in about thirty minutes. On a big wall, that means many small batches through the day, not one big tub in the morning. Watch for the mason who mixes a wheelbarrow full at 7 AM and is still pointing out of it at noon. That afternoon mortar is dead mortar.

The Texas heat problem, again. Heat accelerates the set. On a 100-degree day, mortar stiffens fast — your thirty-minute working window shrinks. Masons work around it: smaller batches, shade, cooler water in the mix, and sometimes an admixture that retards the set. What you never want to see is a mason adding extra water to a stiffening batch to bring it back — that's re-tempering, and it's the same as using weak mortar. When a batch goes, it goes in the trash. A good mason throws away more mortar on a hot day than a cheap one, and that's one of the things you're paying for.

No surprises in the mix. The mortar for your wall should be the mortar from your test sample — same type, same sand, same color. Some contractors bid with a match in mind and

then point the whole house out of a single bag of gray premix. Your 1990s buff-colored joints get gray racing stripes. The mix in the wall should be the mix that was agreed on. If you see the crew pouring a different bag than what was discussed, ask about it — politely, but ask.

Get the mix right and everything downstream gets easier. Get it wrong and nothing downstream can save it. That's why this chapter is the longest in the book — and why, if you remember one thing from it, it should be the first rule: never harder than the brick.

Chapter 7: Packing the Joint

With the joints clean and damp and the mortar mixed right, now comes the part that looks like the job: putting the new mortar in. This is the step the homeowner watches, and it's the step where the difference between a thirty-year repair and a three-year repair gets made — in work you can barely see once it's done.

Top to bottom, always. You point the top of the wall first and work down. Mortar crumbs and dust fall as you work; if you start at the bottom, everything you drop lands on finished joints. Top-down means the mess falls on work you haven't done yet. It's a small discipline, and it tells you the mason was trained.

Bag or trowel — both work, done right. With a mortar bag, the mason fills the bag, twists the top closed, and squeezes a bead of mortar into the joint, working it in with the tip. It's fast and it keeps the brick faces clean. With a pointing trowel and hawk, he slices mortar off the hawk and presses it into the joint by hand. It's slower and it takes more skill, but it gives the finest control — on irregular joints, on stone, on

anything the bag can't reach. A good crew uses the bag on the long straight runs and the trowel on the fussy work. Either way, the goal is the same: the joint filled solid, end to end.

In layers, packed tight. Here's the part you can't see from the yard, and it matters more than anything else in this chapter. The joint doesn't get filled in one pass. The mason places the mortar in layers — roughly a third of an inch at a time — and packs each layer firmly into the joint before placing the next. Packing means pressing the mortar hard against the back and sides of the cavity, squeezing out air pockets and voids. A void behind the face of the joint is a pocket where water collects and freezes. Packed tight, the joint is a solid plug of mortar from face to back. Packed loose, it's a shell with hollow spots.

How do you know it's packed? You watch the mason's hands. Packing is physical — you can see the pressure, the repetition, the way he works the trowel or the bag tip into the joint. A man who's smearing — laying a thin skin of mortar over the face of the joint without filling behind it — moves fast and light. The smear looks finished from ten feet away. Up close, you can see it's a veneer over a hollow. Smearing is the number-one cheat in this trade, because it's fast and it

photographs well. Packing is slow and invisible. Guess which one the cheap bid is doing.

The thumbprint test. Between layers — and before tooling — the mason checks the mortar with his thumb. Press your thumb into the mortar: if it leaves a clean print without the mortar sticking to your thumb, it's at thumbprint hardness — firm enough to hold the next layer, soft enough to bond to it. Too wet and the layers slump together into mush; too hard and the layers don't bond and you get a cold joint — a seam between layers that can separate. The thumbprint test is the mason's clock. He doesn't set a timer; he feels the mortar.

Keep it off the faces. Mortar smeared across the brick faces is mortar haze — and on some brick, especially rough or porous brick, it's nearly impossible to remove completely once it's set. The bag technique avoids most of this. With the trowel, a steady hand and a light touch keep the faces clean. What does get on the faces gets brushed off while it's still soft — a soft brush, light strokes, not grinding it into the brick. The cleanup chapter covers the rest, but the best cleanup is not making the mess in the first place.

The final layer comes flush. The last layer of mortar gets brought flush with the face of the brick — level with it, not

proud of it, not recessed behind it. Proud mortar (sticking out past the brick face) catches water and looks amateur. Recessed mortar (sunk behind the face) leaves a shelf where water sits. Flush is the starting point for tooling, which is the next chapter — and tooling is what gives the joint its finished shape.

By the end of this step, every cut joint is full — solid to the back, flush at the face, brick faces reasonably clean. The wall looks almost done. It's not. The next two chapters — tooling and curing — are where the job's lifespan gets decided.

Chapter 8: Tooling the Joint Profile

Tooling is the step that makes a repointed wall look like it was always that way. It's the mason dragging a jointer along each joint, pressing the mortar into its final shape. It takes minutes per joint and it lasts decades. Skip it — or do it at the wrong time — and the wall tells on you.

The profile that sheds water. The most common profile in Texas residential work is the concave joint — a smooth, shallow curve pressed into the mortar, slightly recessed from the brick face. There's a reason it's the standard: the curve sheds water. Rain hits the joint and runs off instead of sitting in it. The tooling also compresses the surface of the mortar, densifying it — a tooled joint is harder and more weather-resistant at its face than an untooled one. That's not cosmetic; that's the joint's armor.

Other profiles exist — flush, weathered (sloped), V-joint, grapevine, extruded — and on some walls the right move is matching whatever the original wall has. On a historic or decorative wall, the profile is part of the architecture, and a good mason matches it. On a standard Texas brick veneer

home, concave is the workhorse: it looks right, it weathers right, and it's what the neighbors' walls have.

Timing is everything. You tool when the mortar is at thumbprint hardness — firm enough to hold its shape under the jointer, soft enough to take the impression. Too early and the jointer drags the mortar, smearing it and pulling it out of the joint. Too late and the mortar has set — the jointer skates across the surface without shaping anything, and you get a joint that looks tooled but isn't compressed. The window moves with the weather: on a hot day it can be twenty minutes; on a cool morning, over an hour. The mason checks with his thumb, joint by joint. There's no shortcut for this — you feel it or you don't.

The technique. The jointer gets run along the joint in one smooth pass — or as few passes as possible — with steady, even pressure. On the horizontal joints, the mason works the tool along the full length; on the verticals, short controlled strokes. The motion is confident and consistent. A shaky, stop-and-start tooling job leaves a wavy joint that catches the eye from the street.

Direction matters. Tool the joints so the profile sheds water outward and down — the top edge of the joint shouldn't form

a lip that catches water. This is a small thing that separates trained hands from untrained ones.

The burlap finish. After tooling, while the mortar is still green, a light pass with a damp burlap sack or a soft brush softens the tooled surface just slightly — takes the fresh-tooled shine off and helps the new joints blend with the weathered ones around them. Fresh mortar has a smooth film on its face that weathered mortar doesn't; a few months of rain will remove it naturally, but the burlap gets you there on day one. It's the difference between a repair that screams "new work here" and one that disappears into the wall.

What bad tooling looks like. Smeared joints — the mason wiped the joint with a wet sponge or his finger instead of tooling it, leaving a soft, porous surface that soaks up water. Over-tooled joints — worked too long, bringing too much water and fine cement to the surface, which dries into a weak, dusty skin that flakes off. Under-tooled joints — barely touched, rough and open, catching water in every pore. And the classic: joints that were never tooled at all, just struck roughly with the trowel and left. From the street they look fine. In the rain, they drink.

When the tooling is done right, run your eye down the wall.

Every joint should have the same profile, the same depth of curve, the same clean line. The wall should look like it grew that way. That's the craft showing.

Chapter 9: Curing — Where Good Jobs Go Bad

Here's the cruelest truth in this book: a mason can do every step perfectly — the cut, the clean, the mix, the pack, the tooling — and still deliver a failed job, if he walks away and lets Texas weather cure the mortar for him.

Mortar doesn't dry. It cures. Drying is just water evaporating; curing is a chemical reaction — the cement hydrating, forming the crystalline structure that gives mortar its strength. That reaction needs water, and it needs time. Take the water away too fast and the reaction stops halfway. The mortar looks done. It isn't. It's weak, powdery, and it will fail years before its time.

The enemy is rapid moisture loss. Texas gives you three versions of it: heat, wind, and low humidity. A 100-degree afternoon with a dry wind can pull the water out of fresh mortar in hours. The surface goes white and dusty — that's the cement that never hydrated, sitting dead on the surface. Underneath, the joint is weaker than it should be, and no amount of wishing puts the strength back.

The fix is misting and shade. For the first couple of days after pointing — typically 24 to 72 hours depending on conditions — fresh mortar wants to stay damp. A fine mist from a sprayer, several times a day, keeps the surface moist without washing it. Shade helps enormously: a wall in direct Texas sun cures badly and a wall in shade cures well, all else equal. Some masons hang damp burlap or sheeting over fresh work on hot days. It looks fussy. It works.

Protect from rain, too. A hard rain on green mortar — mortar that's been placed but hasn't set — will wash the cement right out of the joint, leaving sand behind. Fresh work needs cover if a storm's coming. This is one of the reasons good masons watch the sky as closely as they watch the mortar: a surprise thunderstorm on day one can undo a day's pointing.

Cold matters less in Texas, but it matters. Mortar shouldn't freeze before it's cured — freezing water expands and shatters the fresh bond. In a North Texas winter, fresh work on a night that's dropping below freezing needs covering. Most Texas repointing happens in the warm months, but the shoulder seasons can surprise you.

What proper curing looks like. After a few days, the mortar

should be uniformly firm — the thumbprint test now leaves no print at all. The color should be even across the wall, darkening and lightening uniformly as it dries. Patchy color — some joints dark, some light — often means uneven curing: the dark ones stayed damp, the light ones flash-dried. The light ones are the weak ones.

Here's what I want you to take from this chapter: when a contractor finishes your wall and drives away, the job isn't over. Ask him what his curing plan is. "It'll be fine" is not a plan. A mason who mists his work, who tells you to keep the sprinklers off it for a few days, who schedules around the heat — that mason understands that the last step is as important as the first. The tuckpointing process steps don't end when the trowel goes down. They end when the mortar is cured.

Chapter 10: Cleanup and the Final Walk-Around

The mortar is cured, the tools are packed. Now the wall has to look like a wall again — not a construction site.

Mortar haze. Even careful work leaves some haze — a thin film of mortar on the brick faces near the joints. The first line of defense is plain water and a stiff brush, while the haze is still fresh. Most of it comes off that way if you don't let it bake on.

If water and brushing don't cut it, the trade reaches for acid — usually a diluted muriatic acid wash or a proprietary masonry cleaner. This is effective and it's also the step where walls get damaged by people who don't respect the chemistry. Acid that's too strong, left on too long, or used on the wrong brick will burn the brick face, bleach the color, and eat the fresh mortar in the joints you just paid to have pointed. On soft, historic, or light-colored brick, acid is risky — sometimes the right call is to live with a faint haze rather than risk the brick. A careful mason tests in an inconspicuous spot first, keeps the wall wet before and during the wash so

the acid doesn't soak in deep, and rinses thoroughly. If a contractor wants to acid-wash your whole house on day one without a test spot, slow him down.

The final walk-around. This is your job as much as his. Walk the whole wall together, slowly, in good light. Here's what you're looking at:

- **Uniform joints.** Every repointed joint should have the same profile, the same color, the same finish. Stand back twenty feet — the wall should read as one surface, not a patchwork.
- **Clean brick faces.** No mortar smears, no haze ghosts, no acid burns. Look at an angle across the wall in raking light — it shows everything.
- **No damaged brick.** Check the joint edges for grinder nicks and scars. They should be minimal to nonexistent.
- **Full joints.** Run your eye along each joint — no gaps, no voids, no spots where the mortar shrank back from the brick. Press a fingernail into a few joints; cured mortar should be hard, not crumbly.
- **The details.** Around windows, doors, fixtures — the fussy spots. That's where rushed work shows.

- **Your property.** Landscaping intact, windows clean, driveway washed down, no mortar chunks in the flower beds. The crew's respect for your property is part of the job you paid for.

Six months later. The real final inspection happens half a year out. By then, the new mortar has weathered in — the tooled film has worn off, the color has settled, and the joints have been through rain and heat. Walk the wall again. What you're looking for: no cracks in the new joints, no mortar popping loose, no new efflorescence streaks telling you water found a way in. A good repointing job looks better at six months than at six days — it disappears into the wall. If joints are cracking or popping this early, call the contractor back. That's what the warranty is for — and yes, get the warranty in writing before the job starts, not after.

Chapter 11: Doing It Yourself — What's

Realistic and What Isn't

The secondary keyword for this book is "tuckpointing DIY," so let's talk about it straight. Can you repoint your own brick? The honest answer: it depends on how much wall, how high it is, and how much you care about the result.

What's realistic. A small, ground-level repair — a few square feet of failed joints on a garden wall, the bottom courses of a single-story wall you can reach standing on the ground. The process is the same one you've read in this book: cut out the bad mortar, clean and dampen, mix small batches, pack in layers, tool, cure. The tools for a small job are affordable — a grinder, a tuckpointing blade, a dust shroud, a pointing trowel, a jointer, a bag. A weekend, some patience, and this book will get you a repair that's genuinely sound. I've got nothing but respect for a homeowner who does it right.

What isn't. Anything above your head. Anything involving a chimney. Anything more than a few square feet. Here's why: the grinder work is the dangerous part — silica dust, a

spinning diamond blade inches from brick faces you can't afford to scar, and the physical reality of holding a grinder steady overhead while standing on a ladder. The pros make it look easy because they've done it ten thousand times. Your first hundred feet of joint will be slow, dusty, and uneven — and uneven joints are visible from the street for the next thirty years.

The time math. A working mason points somewhere in the neighborhood of 50 to 100 square feet of joint a day, depending on conditions — that's a man who does nothing else. Your first day, you'll be lucky to do 10 square feet well. A "small" 40-square-foot repair is a full weekend for a DIYer, minimum, and that's before the learning curve on mixing and tooling. There's no shame in that math — it's just the truth about craft work.

The mortar matching problem. This is where most DIY jobs visibly fail. The home center sells premixed mortar in a bag, and it's fine mortar — but it's one color, one sand, one strength. Your wall's mortar is whatever the builder used twenty or thirty years ago, weathered by decades of Texas sun. A bag of generic gray pointed into buff-colored joints looks like a repair from the day it's done and it never stops

looking like a repair. Pros match sand and color with test batches. A DIYer can do test batches too — it just takes an extra weekend of experimenting before the real work starts.

The safety reality. Silica dust from grinding mortar causes permanent lung damage. A paper dust mask from the paint aisle is not enough — you need a real respirator, sealed safety glasses, and hearing protection. And if you're working above the first floor, you need proper scaffold, not a ladder. People get hurt doing this work casually. Take it seriously or don't do it.

My honest advice. If the job is small, low, and you're the kind of person who reads a whole book before picking up a tool — do it. You'll learn a craft and you'll save real money. If the job is big, high, or on a chimney — or if you just want it to disappear into the wall so nobody ever knows it was repaired — hire it done. There's no shame in knowing which jobs are yours and which ones belong to a man who's done it ten thousand times. The chapters in this book will still serve you: you'll know exactly what to watch for, what to ask, and what a good job looks like when he's done.

Chapter 12: Judging a Contractor by His Method

This is the chapter the whole book has been building toward. You now know the tuckpointing process steps — all nine of them, in order, with the details that matter. That knowledge is a tool. Here's how to use it.

Ask him to walk you through his process. Not his price — his process. "Walk me through how you'd do this job, step by step." Then listen. A real mason will give you the sequence without thinking: read the wall, set up, cut to depth, clean and dampen, mix, pack in layers, tool at thumbprint, cure, clean up. He'll mention depth — half to three-quarters of an inch. He'll mention dampening the joints. He'll mention small batches. He'll mention curing, unprompted. These are the details a trained man can't leave out because they're automatic to him.

A man who doesn't know the work will give you vagueness: "Oh, we grind it out and put new mortar in, it'll look great." No depth. No dampening. No curing plan. Vague is the warning sign. Specific is the credential.

The questions that separate the pros:

- "How deep do you cut?" — You want a number: half to three-quarters of an inch, to sound mortar, uniform depth, square back.
- "How do you keep the dust down?" — You want: dust shroud, vacuum, protection for windows and landscaping. Not a shrug.
- "What mortar are you using, and why?" — You want a type and a reason tied to your brick. "Type N, because your brick is modern hard brick" is an answer. "The gray stuff" is not.
- "How do you match the color?" — You want: test batches, sand selection, cured-sample comparison. Not "it'll match."
- "How do you fill the joints — bag or trowel?" — Either answer is fine. What you want is the follow-up: "in layers, packed tight." If he says he fills them in one pass, he's smearing.
- "When do you tool?" — You want: at thumbprint hardness. If he looks confused, he's not tooling — he's wiping.
- "What's your curing plan?" — You want: misting, shade, keeping water off for a few days, watching the

weather. "It'll be fine" is not a plan.

- "What do you do about the crown and flashing?" — On a chimney job, you want him to look at them and tell you. A mason who only sees joints is missing half the water story.

Watch the first hour. If you hire him, be there when the work starts. The first hour tells you everything: does he read the wall before cutting, or start grinding immediately? Is the dust control set up before the grinder starts, or never? Are the joints cut to a uniform depth, or ragged? Is he cutting horizontals first? A good start predicts a good job. A sloppy start never turns into a careful finish.

The bid should reflect the steps. An honest bid has: square footage of joint to be cut, depth of cut, mortar type and matching method, access equipment, protection and cleanup, a schedule, and a warranty in writing. Every line on that bid corresponds to a step in this book. If a step is missing from the bid, it's missing from the job.

You've now got something most homeowners never have: the ability to judge the method, not just the price. The cheapest bid in Texas is always the one that skips steps — shallow cuts, no dampening, one-pass fills, no tooling, no curing, no

cleanup. It looks like a bargain on paper. It's the most expensive bid you'll ever sign, because you'll pay for the job twice: once to him, and once to the man who does it right.

The method is the job. Now you know the method.

About the Author

Travis Nech has spent 50 years in Texas brick, masonry, and foundation work. He owns [Champion Brick Repair](<https://championbrickrepair.com>) — (817) 900-6324 — [Metro Foundation Repair](<https://metrofoundationrepair.com>) — (817) 670-4474 — and the [LintelLOCK](<https://lintlerepair.com>) lintel system — (469) 730-0650. All his books are free at [Travis Nech's Free Book Library](<https://metro-foundation-repair.web.app/free-books/>).

If this book helped you judge a contractor's work — or do the work yourself — pass it on. For professional tuckpointing done the way this book describes it, visit [professional tuckpointing](<https://championbrickrepair.com>). More free guides live at [free brick repair books](<https://metro-foundation-repair.web.app/free-books/>).