

Tuckpointing vs. Repointing: Which One Your House Actually Needs

Two Different Jobs Sold Under One Name

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Chapter 1: Two Jobs, One Name — The Confusion That Costs Homeowners Money

If you own a brick home, sooner or later somebody is going to say one of two words to you: "tuckpointing" or "repointing." It might be a contractor at your door. It might be a home inspector's report. It might be your neighbor telling you what he just paid for. And here's the problem nobody warns you about: those two words describe two different jobs, but in America they've been used interchangeably for so long that most of the people saying them don't know the difference either.

This confusion costs homeowners real money. I've watched people pay a premium price for "tuckpointing" and receive plain repointing — which, to be fair, is usually what they needed, but they paid for artistry they didn't get. I've watched people hire a "tuckpointing specialist" for a wall with crumbling joints, and get a cosmetic ribbon over mortar that was still failing underneath — lipstick on a structural problem. And I've watched bid after bid where the word on the paper didn't match the work being described, and the

homeowner had no way to know.

So let's settle it, once and for all, in plain Texas English.

Repointing is the structural repair. Your mortar joints are deteriorated — crumbling, cracked, falling out — and the mason cuts out the bad mortar and packs in new mortar. That's it. It's maintenance, it's structural, and it's what ninety-five percent of brick homeowners actually need when somebody tells them their mortar is shot.

Tuckpointing — true tuckpointing, the original meaning — is a decorative art laid on top of sound joints. The mason fills the joints with mortar tinted to match the brick itself, then cuts a thin groove down the center and tucks in a fine ribbon of contrasting mortar — usually white or cream — just a few millimeters wide. From the street, the wall looks like it was built with impossibly fine, crisp joints. It's jewelry. It was invented in late-1700s England to imitate expensive hand-rubbed brick without paying for it, and it's still done today on high-end restoration work.

Two different jobs. Two different purposes. Two different prices. One tangled-up name.

Here's the sentence that untangles it: **in Texas residential**

work, when a contractor says "tuckpointing," he means repointing ninety-nine times out of a hundred. The broad usage has swallowed the precise one. The whole trade talks this way now — supply houses, bid sheets, inspectors, everybody. I'm not fighting that; language is what people use. But you, the homeowner writing the check, need to know which job you're actually buying, because the words on the bid determine what shows up at your house.

This book is your decoder ring. What each job really is. What each one costs in 2026. How to tell which one your wall actually needs before you pay for the wrong one. And how to read a bid so the word on the paper can't surprise you.

Chapter 2: Repointing — The Structural Job Your Wall Probably Needs

Let's start with the job that matters most, because it's the one your house is most likely asking for.

Repointing is the renewal of failed mortar joints. The process, done right, goes like this: the mason identifies which joints have deteriorated, cuts or rakes the old mortar out to a proper depth — at least half an inch to an inch, deeper where the deterioration runs deep — cleans the joints of dust and debris, dampens the work so the old brick doesn't suck the moisture out of the new mortar too fast, packs fresh mortar in tight in layers, and tools the joints to match the original profile. Then cleanup: mortar haze brushed off the brick faces before it sets, protection removed, the wall walked with the homeowner.

That's the whole job. No ribbon. No contrasting colors. No artistry beyond the quiet craft of making new mortar disappear into old brickwork. It's maintenance in the truest sense — like replacing the shingles or servicing the AC. Mortar is the sacrificial part of the wall by design: softer than

the brick, so it absorbs the wall's movement and weathers instead of the brick cracking. After twenty-five to thirty years of Texas sun, rain, and clay-soil movement, it's done its duty and it needs renewal. Repointing is how you give the wall its next thirty years.

The purpose is structural and protective, in that order. Structurally, sound mortar keeps the wall acting as one unit — bricks bonded, loads distributed, nothing shifting. Protectively, intact joints are the wall's raincoat: they keep water out of the wall assembly, where water does its slow, expensive damage to everything behind the brick — the sheathing, the framing, the interior finishes. Failed mortar isn't just ugly. It's an open door for water, and water is the most patient destroyer your house will ever meet.

Repointing is also the job with the non-negotiable technical requirements. The new mortar must match the old in strength — and must never be harder than the brick. On modern Texas brick veneer, that's usually a standard Type N mortar. On older, softer brick, it's a softer lime-rich mix. Get this wrong and the "repair" destroys the brick within a few years — the hard mortar refuses to give, so the brick gives instead, spalling and cracking. The color and sand need

matching too, or you get the striped wall — but strength is the one that can kill the wall, so it comes first, always.

How long does repointing last? Done right — deep cut, matched mortar, proper tooling — twenty-five to thirty years on standard mortar in Texas conditions. The chimney goes first, always; budget it on a shorter cycle than the walls. Thirty years is a good run for any building maintenance. It's the reason repointing is one of the most cost-effective things you can do for a brick house: one job, three decades of protection.

Here's the bottom line on repointing: it's not glamorous, it's not decorative, and it's what your wall is almost certainly asking for when the joints start failing. Everything else in this book is about making sure that's actually the job you buy — and recognizing the rare case where you want the other one.

Chapter 3: True Tuckpointing — The Decorative Art Most People Have Never Seen

Now the other job — the real one, the original, the thing the word actually meant for two hundred years before America blurred it.

True tuckpointing is a finishing art, and it starts where repointing ends. The joints are already sound — or they've just been repointed — and now the mason does something purely aesthetic. He fills the joints with mortar tinted to closely match the color of the brick itself — not the usual gray or buff joint color, but a mortar that visually disappears against the brick faces. Then, while that mortar is still workable, he cuts a thin, precise groove down the center of each joint and presses in a fine ribbon — a fillet — of contrasting mortar, traditionally white or cream, just a few millimeters wide. The ribbon is tooled smooth and sharp.

Step back and look at what he's made: a wall where the brickwork appears to have impossibly fine, crisp, uniform joints — thin white lines of perfect regularity between rich brick faces. It's an illusion, and it's a beautiful one. The actual

joints are standard width. The eye sees jewelry.

The technique was born in late-18th-century England, and the reason is wonderfully practical. The finest brickwork of the era used "rubbed" or "gauged" brick — bricks made slightly oversize, then individually rubbed or cut by hand after firing to precise dimensions, laid with hairline joints of white lime mortar. It was stunning. It was also ruinously expensive — the labor of hand-finishing every brick put it out of reach for anyone but the wealthy. Tuckpointing was the clever workaround: build with ordinary, cheaper brick, fill the joints with brick-colored mortar so the real joints vanish, and tuck in the fine white ribbon to fake the crisp gauged look. Same visual effect from the street. A fraction of the cost. The name comes from the "tuck" — the ribbon tucked into the joint.

You can still see original tuckpointing on historic buildings — it's a hallmark of high-style 19th-century brickwork, and preservation masons still practice it on restoration projects where the original had it. Done well, it's exquisite. The ribbon lines are dead straight, the color contrast is crisp, and the whole wall has a tailored, formal quality that plain repointing never achieves.

But understand what it is and what it isn't. True tuckpointing is **cosmetic**. It adds zero structural life beyond what the underlying repointing already provided. The wall doesn't get stronger, doesn't shed water better, doesn't last longer — the ribbon is a second, thinner application of mortar sitting in a groove, and if anything it's the first thing to weather. In traditional practice, the ribbon weathers before the base joint, and eventually you're left with the brick-colored mortar joint underneath — which is fine, because that was sound repointing all along. The artistry is temporary by nature. That's not a flaw; it's the honest character of decorative work.

It also costs meaningfully more. True tuckpointing is two mortar applications instead of one — the base fill plus the ribbon work — and the ribbon demands a steady hand, sharp tools, and patience. The labor premium over plain repointing typically runs thirty to sixty percent, sometimes more on intricate work. You're paying for an artist's time, and artists bill accordingly.

So who actually wants this? Almost nobody in Texas residential work — and that's fine. True tuckpointing belongs on historic buildings that originally had it, on high-end restoration where the architecture demands the crisp formal

look, and on the occasional homeowner who simply loves the aesthetic and is willing to pay for artistry. For a 1985 brick veneer home in Arlington, it's money spent on looks the wall doesn't need. There's no shame in wanting beautiful things — just know you're buying beauty, not structure, and price it accordingly.

Chapter 4: Why America Forgot the Difference

If true tuckpointing is a decorative art and repointing is the structural repair, how did one word come to mean both? The story is part immigration, part marketing, and part plain linguistic drift — and it's worth knowing, because it explains why the confusion is so deeply baked into the trade.

The drift started with the masons themselves. As British and European masons brought their craft to America, the precise vocabulary came along — but on the American job site, "tuckpointing" started getting used loosely for any joint work. Some of it was innocent: a mason who'd done a little ribbon work in the old country used the fancier word for the plain work over here, because it sounded like more. Some of it was the natural way trades talk — the specific term broadening until it covers the general job. By the mid-20th century, across most of the United States and Canada, "tuckpointing" in common trade usage meant repointing. The dictionaries hadn't caught up, but the job sites had moved on.

Then marketing got hold of it. "Tuckpointing" sounds skilled,

specialized, European — it sounds like more than "repointing," which sounds like... pointing again. Contractors aren't fools; the fancier word differentiates the bid, justifies the price, and impresses the homeowner. Nobody ever lost a job by sounding more expert. So the word stuck to the common job, and the rare decorative art kept the same name, and now we have one word doing double duty with no sign it's ever going to stop.

The result is the landscape you're standing in: supply houses sell "tuckpointing mortar" that's just repointing mortar. Inspectors write "tuckpointing needed" when they mean the joints are failing. Contractors bid "tuckpointing" for plain cut-and-repoint work — and they're not lying, exactly, because in the trade's current dialect, that's what the word means. The only people still using "tuckpointing" in the original decorative sense are preservation masons, and they're a small tribe.

I'm not on a crusade to take the word back. Language belongs to the people who use it, and the people have voted: in Texas, "tuckpointing" means repointing. What I am on a crusade for is clarity at the moment money changes hands. When the bid says "tuckpointing," you should know whether you're buying

the structural repair, the decorative art, or — the most common case — the structural repair described in the trade's everyday dialect. The word can't tell you. The scope of work can. That's the next chapters' job: teaching you to read past the word to the work.

One practical note: because the broad usage is standard, this book follows it everywhere except where I say otherwise. When I write "tuckpointing" without qualification, I mean the job you're actually buying — cut out the failed mortar, pack in new matched mortar. When I mean the decorative ribbon art, I'll say "true tuckpointing" or "decorative tuckpointing," loud and clear. Same convention as the rest of the trade. Now you speak the dialect too.

Chapter 5: Reading Your Wall — Which Job Is It Actually Asking For?

Here's the chapter that earns this book its place on your shelf. Your wall needs something. The question is which of the two jobs it needs — the structural repair or the decorative art — and the wall itself will tell you if you know how to look. Fifteen minutes, a screwdriver, and honest eyes.

The wall needs repointing when the mortar is failing. This is the structural case, and the signs are physical — things you can see and feel:

- **The screwdriver test.** Drag a flat screwdriver firmly across mortar joints in several spots — the chimney, the south and west walls, anywhere sprinklers hit. Sound mortar resists; the screwdriver leaves a mark but the joint stays solid. Failed mortar powders, crumbles, flakes, or scoops out. If the mortar gives under the screwdriver, the wall needs repointing. Full stop. No decorative work fixes powdering mortar.
- **Recessed joints.** Look at the joints from an angle. If the mortar has worn back from the brick faces —

sitting in a hollow behind the brick edges — it's eroding. Some recession with age is normal. Deep, uneven recession means the mortar's protective life is spent.

- **Mortar on the ground.** Crumbs and grit piled at the base of the wall are the wall telling on itself. A little grit is aging. Piles are active deterioration.
- **Cracking through joints.** Hairline cracks stair-stepping through mortar joints. A few with age are normal. Widespread or fresh cracking — especially stair-step patterns — means the mortar has lost its integrity. (Note: long stair-step cracks can also signal foundation movement, which is a different problem — repointing over active movement is painting a sinking ship. If the cracking looks structural, get that evaluated first.)
- **White staining that keeps coming back.** Efflorescence — mineral salts carried out of the mortar by water. A little is cosmetic. Heavy, recurring white staining means water is moving through the wall and the joints are the highway. The joints have failed at their water-shedding job.
- **Loose or spalling brick.** Bricks that wiggle, or brick

faces popping off — sometimes the mortar's failure has progressed to the units. This is repointing plus brick replacement, and it's urgent: every season it waits, more units go.

If you found any of these, your wall needs repointing. Not tuckpointing-the-art. Repointing-the-repair. The wall has a structural maintenance need, and no amount of decorative ribbon changes that.

The wall is a candidate for true tuckpointing when the joints are sound but you want the look. This is the aesthetic case, and it's a short list:

- The mortar is solid — passes the screwdriver test everywhere — but it's stained, discolored, or patchy from decades of weather, and you want the brickwork to look crisp and formal again.
- The building is historic and originally had tuckpointing — the preservation-correct move is to restore what was there.
- You simply love the fine-white-joint look and you're willing to pay the artistry premium for it.

Notice what's not on the list: failing mortar. True

tuckpointing over deteriorated joints is the classic wrong-job scenario — the ribbon goes onto a foundation that's still crumbling. Some contractors will sell it that way, because the decorative work is higher-margin and the homeowner doesn't know the joints underneath are still shot. If a contractor proposes decorative tuckpointing and hasn't done the screwdriver test in front of you, he's selling, not diagnosing.

The decision, in one paragraph: If the mortar is failing, you need repointing — the structural job — regardless of what anybody calls it. If the mortar is sound and you want the crisp decorative look, you can buy true tuckpointing as an artistry upgrade on top of sound joints. If the mortar is sound and you don't care about the look, you need nothing — go enjoy your weekend. The wall will tell you which paragraph you're in. Listen to it before you listen to the salesman.

Chapter 6: What Each Job Costs in 2026

Let's talk money — honestly, in ranges, with the "depends on" framing, because any contractor who gives you a single number for masonry work without seeing your wall is guessing.

Repointing — the structural job. The 2026 national data puts repointing at roughly \$4 to \$25 per square foot, with most residential work landing around \$14 to \$15 per square foot — about \$400 to \$2,500 per hundred square feet, averaging near \$1,450. A standard chimney runs \$500 to \$2,500. Repointing a whole 2,500-square-foot single-story brick house runs \$5,000 to \$25,000; two-story, \$7,000 to \$38,000. Masons bill \$50 to \$100 an hour for this labor.

Texas sits in the middle of those ranges for straightforward work — our mason labor rates run with the national middle. What moves a Texas job inside the range: height and access (second-story work and chimneys cost more — scaffolding alone runs \$200 to \$600), how much joint is actually failed (20% of joints vs. the whole wall), depth of cut, mortar matching difficulty, and brick condition. A bid under \$5 a

square foot for real cut-and-repoint work is skipping something — usually depth of cut or matching. A bid at the top of the range should come with an explanation of what's hard about your job. "Depends on" isn't evasion here. It's the truth.

True tuckpointing — the decorative art. Take the repointing number and add the artistry premium: typically thirty to sixty percent more in labor, because it's two mortar applications and fussy handwork. On a per-square-foot basis, where plain repointing runs \$5 to \$25, true decorative tuckpointing runs toward the top of that range and beyond — \$7 to \$25-plus per square foot depending on intricacy. The premium is all labor: the base repointing has to happen first (or the joints have to already be sound), then the ribbon work — cutting the groove, mixing the contrasting mortar, tucking the fillet, tooling it sharp — joint by joint, foot by foot. It's slow. Slow is expensive. That's the deal, and it's an honest one when you know what you're buying.

The comparison that matters. For the same wall: plain repointing buys you thirty years of structural protection. True tuckpointing buys you the same thirty years of protection plus the decorative ribbon — which will weather

and need refreshing sooner than the base joints. You're paying 30–60% more for looks, not longevity. Sometimes that's worth it — historic buildings, formal architecture, personal taste. Usually, for a Texas family home, the repointing alone is the smart money. The wall doesn't care about the ribbon. Your eyes might. Price the difference with open eyes.

What the bid should show. For repointing: square footage of joint to be cut, depth of cut, mortar type and matching method, access equipment, protection and cleanup, schedule, warranty in writing. For true tuckpointing: all of that, plus an explicit description of the decorative work — the ribbon, the contrasting mortar, the fact that it's a second application. If a bid says "tuckpointing" at plain-repointing prices with no mention of ribbon work, you're buying repointing under the trade's everyday name. That's fine — it's probably what you need — but the price should be the repointing price, not a premium. The word doesn't cost extra. The ribbon does.

Chapter 7: Reading the Bid — What the Words Actually Promise

The bid is where the two-jobs-one-name confusion either gets resolved or gets expensive. Here's how to read it like somebody who's done this for fifty years.

Step one: ignore the headline word. "Tuckpointing," "repointing," "mortar repair," "joint restoration" — in Texas residential bids, these almost always describe the same job: cut out failed mortar, pack in new. The headline word tells you about the contractor's vocabulary, not his scope. Read past it to the line items. The line items are the bid. Everything else is marketing.

Step two: find the scope in numbers. An honest bid specifies: how many square feet of joint are being cut (not the wall's square footage — the joint area being worked), the depth of cut, the mortar type, and how the color is being matched. "Repoint front elevation, approximately 120 square feet of joint, cut to 3/4-inch minimum depth, Type N mortar color-matched to existing" — that's a scope. "Tuckpoint front of house" — that's a wish. If the numbers aren't there, the

contractor hasn't measured, and a contractor who hasn't measured is guessing at your expense.

Step three: check which job the line items describe. Does the bid mention a contrasting ribbon, a second mortar color, groove-cutting, fillet work? If yes, you're being offered true decorative tuckpointing — and the price should carry the 30–60% artistry premium. If no — if it's cut, pack, tool, clean — you're being offered repointing, whatever the headline says. Match the price to the work, not the word. A "tuckpointing" bid at repointing prices is repointing. A "repointing" bid at premium prices with ribbon line items is decorative tuckpointing. The line items decide. Always.

Step four: spot the mismatches. These are the tells that something's off:

- **Premium price, no ribbon.** The bid says "tuckpointing," prices 40% above the other bids, and the line items describe plain cut-and-repoint. You're being charged the artistry premium for the everyday job. The word is doing the upselling.
- **Ribbon price, failing joints.** The bid describes decorative ribbon work but says nothing about cutting out deteriorated mortar to depth. The contractor plans

to decorate over failure. The ribbon will look great for a season and the wall will keep deteriorating underneath.

- **No mortar spec.** Any bid — either job — that doesn't name the mortar type and the matching method is incomplete. On old brick, an unnamed mortar is a dangerous mortar: if it's harder than the brick, it destroys the wall. "Matching mortar" with no method means one bag for the whole house and striped walls.
- **No depth of cut.** The single most skipped line item and the single most important one. Shallow work — scraping the surface instead of cutting to sound mortar — looks fine for a year and fails early. If the depth isn't in writing, assume it's shallow.
- **The too-cheap outlier.** A bid dramatically under the others is cutting something: depth, matching, protection, cleanup, insurance, or the second application it claims to include. The cheapest bid in Texas is always the one with no paper — no contract, no warranty, no recourse.

Step five: interview the middle. Throw out the outliers, sit down with the middle bid, and ask the questions: What mortar, and why is it right for my brick? How deep are you

cutting? How are you matching the color? What profile are you tooling? (If you want the full education on joint profiles, that's a subject for its own book — but your bid should name one.) The answers should be specific. Specific is honest. Vague is a warning.

The bid-reading skill transfers to every contractor you'll ever hire, but it matters most here — because this is the trade where the words are the slipperiest. When the vocabulary can't be trusted, the line items are the truth. Read them like a detective and you'll never pay for the wrong job.

Chapter 8: The Wrong-Job Scenarios — What Happens When You Buy Wrong

People buy the wrong job more often than you'd think, usually because the words steered them. Here are the four scenarios I see, what each one costs, and how each one could have been prevented.

Scenario 1: Paying the artistry premium for plain repointing. The bid said "tuckpointing." The price was 40% above the others. The work was cut, pack, tool — competent repointing, no ribbon, no second application. The homeowner paid the decorative price for the structural job. Cost of the mistake: the premium — hundreds to thousands depending on job size — paid for nothing. Prevention: Chapter 7's step three. If there's no ribbon in the line items, there's no premium in the price. The word "tuckpointing" on a repointing scope is dialect, not a price tier.

Scenario 2: Decorative work over failing joints. The homeowner wanted the crisp white-ribbon look. The contractor obliged — grooved the existing joints, tucked the ribbon, made it beautiful. But the underlying mortar was

powdering, and nobody cut it out. Within two years the ribbon is cracking along with the failing base, sections are popping, and the wall looks worse than before — because now there's decorative work failing on top of structural failure. Cost of the mistake: the full decorative price, wasted, plus the repointing that still has to happen — and the repointing now includes cutting out the failed ribbon work first. Prevention: the screwdriver test before any decorative conversation. Sound joints first, artistry second. In that order, always.

Scenario 3: Repointing when the wall needed more. The joints were failing, the contractor repointed beautifully — and missed that the real problem was water coming from above: a failed chimney crown, missing flashing, a roof leak saturating the wall from the top down. New mortar in a wall that's being waterboarded from above fails early, and the homeowner concludes "repointing doesn't last" when the actual lesson is "diagnose before you repair." Cost of the mistake: a repointing job that fails in five years instead of thirty, plus the crown/flashing repair that should have come first. Prevention: when the mason is scoping the job, ask what's putting water into the wall. A good mason looks up — at the crown, the flashing, the roofline — before he looks at

the joints. Hire the one who does.

Scenario 4: The full repoint when a partial would do. The flip side of under-buying: the contractor quotes the whole house when only the chimney and the west wall are failing. Full-house repointing on sound joints is money spent with no return — the good mortar gets cut out and replaced with equally good mortar, at full price. Cost of the mistake: thousands for work the wall didn't need. Prevention: the screwdriver test, wall by wall, before the bid. Repoint what's failing. Leave what's sound. A contractor who quotes the whole envelope without testing section by section is selling square footage, not diagnosing your wall. (The honest exception: on a 30-year-old house where the mortar is failing everywhere, whole-house in one mobilization beats piecemeal over five years. That's a real calculation — just make sure the "everywhere" was actually measured.)

Every one of these scenarios comes back to the same root: the homeowner didn't know which job the wall needed before the bidding started. That's what Chapter 5 was for. Diagnose first, then bid. The fifteen minutes with the screwdriver is the highest-paid quarter hour in home maintenance.

Chapter 9: Timing and Lifespan — How Long Each Job Lasts

Mortar work isn't forever, and honest expectations about lifespan are part of buying the right job. Here's what each one gives you.

Repointing: twenty-five to thirty years. That's the honest number for properly executed repointing with standard mortar in Texas conditions — deep cut, matched mortar, correct profile, proper tooling. Thirty years is a full generation of homeownership. The chimney runs on a shorter cycle — it takes the worst weather on the house, full sun and driving rain and thermal cycling from the flue, so budget chimney repointing more like every fifteen to twenty years. Walls in sheltered spots can go longer. Nothing about this number is guaranteed — sprinklers spraying the wall, foundation movement, or water intrusion from above all shorten it — but thirty years is what the job is worth when it's done right.

True tuckpointing's ribbon: shorter than the base. Here's the part the decorative brochures skip: the ribbon is a thin

application of mortar in a shallow groove, more exposed than the base joint. It weathers first — that's the traditional behavior, documented on historic buildings for two centuries. The ribbon might need refreshing in ten to fifteen years while the underlying repointing is still going strong. That's normal. It's not failure; it's the nature of decorative work. When you're pricing true tuckpointing, price the ribbon refresh into your long-term thinking. The base job lasts thirty years. The jewelry needs polishing sooner.

What shortens any mortar job: The Texas accelerators. Sprinklers spraying brick walls daily — constant wet-dry cycling destroys joints; redirect them and you add years. Foundation movement cracking fresh mortar — repointing a moving wall is money on a moving target; stabilize first. Water from above — crowns, flashing, roofs — saturating the wall; fix the source or the new joints drown. Extreme heat curing — August repointing without heat management weakens the mortar from day one; hire the mason who talks about curing without being asked. And the workmanship factors: shallow cuts, wrong-strength mortar, bad tooling timing. A job done wrong doesn't get thirty years. It gets five to ten, and the wall looks tired the whole time.

When to schedule. Spring and fall are the sweet spots in Texas — moderate temperatures, mortar cures at the right pace. Summer is doable with heat management: early mornings, shaded materials, misted work. Winter brings the freeze risk — fresh mortar can't freeze before it cures, so January jobs need cold-weather protection. But here's the real answer: the best time is when the mortar needs it and you've found the right mason. Don't let failing joints wait a year for perfect weather — water getting in does more damage in a year than a summer cure ever will. Urgency beats seasonality when the wall is open to water.

The maintenance rhythm for a brick homeowner. Walk your walls once a year — fifteen minutes, screwdriver in hand, Chapter 5's checklist. Catch failing joints early and you're repointing sections. Ignore them for a decade and you're repointing the house. The chimney gets its own look every couple of years — it's the canary, and it fails first. This isn't a big program. It's a habit. The homeowners with the lowest lifetime masonry bills aren't the ones who found the cheapest mason. They're the ones who looked at their walls every spring.

Chapter 10: Questions Homeowners Ask Me

My contractor's bid says "tuckpointing" but the price seems low. Am I getting a deal? You're getting repointing under the trade's everyday name — which is probably what you need, at the repointing price, which is fair. The "deal" framing only matters if you were expecting the decorative ribbon art: at a low price, there's no ribbon in the scope, so don't expect one to appear. Read the line items (Chapter 7). If they describe cut, pack, tool, and clean — that's the job, that's the price, and it's honest as long as the scope is complete. The word on the headline isn't a discount or a premium. It's dialect.

Can I get true decorative tuckpointing on just one wall — like the front? You can, and people do — usually the street-facing elevation, where the crisp ribbon look shows. Technically there's no problem with it: the front gets the artistry, the other walls get plain repointing. Aesthetically, think it through: the front will have fine white ribbon joints and the sides will have standard joints, and the difference is visible at the corners. Some homeowners love the formal front. Some find the mismatch bothers them more than they

expected. There's no wrong answer, but look at a house that's done it before you commit — your mason should be able to show you one.

Is the decorative ribbon just painted on? No — and if a contractor proposes painting the ribbon, that's not tuckpointing, that's paint, and it's a different (much shorter-lived) thing. True tuckpointing's ribbon is real mortar — a contrasting mortar fillet pressed into a groove and tooled. It weathers like mortar, ages like mortar, and lasts like mortar. Painted lines peel, fade unevenly, and look wrong within a couple of Texas summers. If the bid says tuckpointing and the method is paint, the bid is mislabeled. Ask for the method in writing: groove-cut ribbon, or paint. They're not the same job at any price.

My house was "tuckpointed" five years ago and the mortar is already crumbling. What went wrong? One of three things, in order of likelihood. First and most common: shallow work — the contractor scraped the surface and smeared new mortar over failing joints instead of cutting to sound mortar. It looks perfect for a year, then pops. Second: wrong mortar — too hard for the brick, or a bad match that never bonded. Third: the wall is moving or taking water from

above, and the new mortar never stood a chance. The word on the old bid won't tell you which. A mason's diagnosis will — have him cut a test section and look at the depth, the bond, and the mortar. Then you'll know whether you're fixing workmanship, materials, or a water problem.

Should I repoint before selling the house? If the mortar is visibly failing, yes — it's one of the highest-return exterior fixes you can make. Bad mortar photographs terribly, every inspector flags it, and buyers read crumbling joints as "this house wasn't maintained" — which discounts everything, not just the masonry. A chimney repoint in the \$500-to-\$2,500 range can save a five-figure inspection negotiation. If the mortar's sound, leave it alone and spend the money where it shows. And don't buy decorative tuckpointing to sell the house — you'll never recover the artistry premium. Repointing is maintenance; buyers pay for maintenance. The ribbon is taste; buyers don't pay for your taste.

Does homeowners insurance cover repointing or tuckpointing? Almost never. Insurance covers sudden damage — storms, impacts, the tree that fell on the wall. Worn-out mortar is maintenance, and maintenance is the homeowner's job. The exception is when a covered event

causes the damage: hail that shatters joints, a tornado that tears flashing off and lets water destroy the mortar — the resulting masonry repair can ride along on the claim. But "my mortar is thirty years old" is not a claim, whichever word the contractor uses. Don't let anybody tell you otherwise, and be wary of the contractor who leads with insurance talk on a maintenance job.

How do I know if I need a mason or if this is something else entirely? The screwdriver test tells you about the mortar. But some wall problems aren't mortar problems: stair-step cracks running long distances, horizontal cracks, bulging or leaning walls, bricks popping across wide areas — those can signal foundation movement, lintel failure, or water trapped in the wall assembly. Repointing doesn't fix any of those. It covers them up for a season and then fails with them. If what you see looks structural — movement, displacement, widespread distress — get a structural evaluation before you get a masonry bid. The right job done on the wrong diagnosis is still the wrong job.

A Final Word Before You Call

You've now got the decoder ring. Two jobs, one name — and

you know which is which.

When your wall's mortar is failing, you need repointing: the structural repair, cut deep, matched right, tooled proper. That's the job that protects your house for thirty years. When your joints are sound and you want the crisp decorative look, you can buy true tuckpointing — the ribbon art, the 18th-century illusion — knowing it's beauty, not structure, and priced like it. And when a bid lands on your kitchen table, you read past the headline word to the line items, because the line items are the job and the word is just dialect.

The confusion around these two words has cost homeowners money for decades — premiums paid for artistry never delivered, decorative work sold over failing joints, scopes so vague the word did all the talking. It doesn't have to cost you. Fifteen minutes with a screwdriver, a bid read like a detective, and a mason who answers specific questions with specific answers. That's the whole defense, and now it's yours.

Your walls have been talking. Now you speak the language — both dialects.

If you want [brick tuckpointing services](<https://championbrickrepair.com>) in North Texas — the real

structural job, scoped in writing, matched to your brick — that's what we do every day. And if you want to keep learning what your masonry is telling you, my [free brick repair books](<https://metro-foundation-repair.web.app/free-books/>) cover the rest in the same plain talk. For the engineering standards behind everything in this book, the [Brick Industry Association](<https://www.gobrick.com>) writes the documents the whole trade builds from.

The cheapest mortar job is the one you only pay for once. Buy the right one.

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/>).