

So You Want to Be a Mason: The Trade Handbook

Fifty Years of Trade Wisdom for the Next Generation

by Travis Nech

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Chapter 1: The Letter I Wish Someone Had Handed Me at 18 — How to Become a Mason

If you're reading this because you're thinking about learning how to become a mason, sit down and let me talk to you like somebody who's been where you're standing. I've been in this trade fifty years. I started young, the way most of us did — somebody's crew needed a hand, and I showed up. Nobody handed me a manual. Nobody sat me down and told me what the work really costs your body, what it pays your wallet, or what separates the man who lays brick for a living from the man who is a mason.

I'm writing the book I wish I'd been handed at eighteen.

First, the honest headline: masonry is one of the oldest skilled trades on earth, it still puts real money in the hands of people who get good at it, and Texas is one of the best places in America to learn it. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics counts about 277,700 masonry workers employed nationally as of 2025, with a median pay of \$58,270 a year — about \$28 an hour. In Texas, entry-level brickmasons show a median around \$50,466 a year, and the state projects roughly 494

openings a year. Those openings aren't coming from the industry exploding in size — projected growth is only about 1 percent through 2035. They're coming from the same thing that keeps every skilled trade alive: old hands retiring. About 18,400 openings a year nationally, and most of them are replacement openings — somebody's slot on a crew that needs filling by a younger back and a willing mind.

That is the opportunity, stated plainly. The trade needs you. But it doesn't need warm bodies. It needs people who will learn the work right.

Now here's the part nobody recruiting you will say out loud. This work is hard in a way that office jobs never will be. You will lift block until your forearms burn. You will work in Texas August heat with a trowel in your hand and mortar drying on your line faster than you can lay. You will kneel on concrete, bend at the waist a thousand times a day, and climb scaffolding with a hod of mortar on your shoulder. The BLS itself will tell you straight: this work is physically demanding, with heavy lifting and long periods of standing, kneeling, and bending, mostly outdoors, in dust and mud and weather that doesn't care about your schedule.

If that paragraph scared you off, good. It did its job. The trade

doesn't need people who quit in the first summer. It needs people who read that paragraph and thought, "Okay — so what do I need to get through it?" That's who this book is for.

Here's what I want you to take from this first chapter. Learning how to become a mason is not like learning a desk skill. There is no shortcut around the hours. The standard registered apprenticeship path is three years and 6,000 hours of on-the-job work plus classroom time — blueprint reading, measurement math, code requirements, safety and first aid. At the end of it, you're a journeyman: somebody who can do the work on his own and be trusted with a wall. Before that, you're an apprentice, and your job is to watch, listen, carry, mix, clean, and learn. There is no shame in that. Every mason you will ever meet started as the kid holding the line.

You don't strictly need an apprenticeship to get in — many masons learn on the job, hired straight onto a crew as a laborer or helper and taught by whoever's running the wall. In Texas, most of the residential masonry world runs non-union, and that door is wide open. A helper in Texas makes a median of about \$38,530 a year — roughly \$18.50 an hour — and that is the bottom rung. It is also, if you use it right, the doorway. The kid who mixes mortar like he cares, who

watches the journeyman's hands instead of his phone, who asks why the line is set the way it's set — that kid gets taught. The kid who just carries block gets to keep carrying block.

So the first decision is yours: are you going to treat the entry level as a job, or as a classroom? The pay is the same either way at first. The difference shows up in year three.

One more thing before we get into the meat of this book. People will ask you why you'd choose a trade that breaks your body when you could sit in air conditioning. I have an answer that has held up fifty years: at the end of the day, the wall is there. You can put your hand on it. Nobody can take it away from you, nobody can outsource it, and a machine still can't do it right. The work you do will outlive you. There's not a desk job on earth that can say that.

Chapter 2: Bricklayer vs. Mason — They Are Not the Same Thing

Ask ten people on the street and they'll use "bricklayer" and "mason" like they're the same word. They aren't. The difference between them is the whole subject of this book, so let's get it right early.

A bricklayer lays brick. He — or she — can keep a wall plumb, keep the joints even, keep up with the crew, and go home with clean-looking work behind them. That's a real skill and an honest living, and I don't knock it. The world needs bricklayers.

A mason knows *why* the wall goes up the way it does. A mason reads the mortar like a language — knows when the mix is too rich, when the sand's wrong, when the brick is sucking the water out of the joint too fast in July heat and you need to wet it or slow down. A mason reads a blueprint and sees the building before it's built. A mason knows that the mortar has to be softer than the brick, because the joint is designed to give so the unit doesn't crack. A mason can look at a hundred-year-old wall and tell you what mortar it was

laid with, what went wrong, and how to fix it without destroying the brick.

The bricklayer knows the motions. The mason knows the materials. The bricklayer can build you a wall. The mason can tell you whether the wall *should* be built that way.

I'll put it the way an old hand put it to me when I was green: anybody can be taught to lay brick straight in six months. It takes years to learn when *not* to lay it straight — when the foundation's moving, when the lintel's failing, when the wall is telling you something's wrong underneath. That judgment is what makes a mason.

The path from one to the other isn't a certificate. It's curiosity plus time. The bricklayer who asks "why this mortar and not that one" is on the road. The one who never asks stays a bricklayer. Both eat. Only one of them ever gets called when the hard job comes in — and the hard job is where the real money lives.

If you're starting out, here's your target: be the best bricklayer on the crew first. Speed and straightness earn you the right to be taught the deeper stuff. Nobody teaches the why to a kid who can't keep a line. Master the motions, then

chase the understanding. That's the order. It's always been the order.

Chapter 3: The Honest Truth About the Work

Before we talk about training paths and money, you need the unfiltered picture of what the days actually feel like. Not the recruiting brochure. The real thing.

The physical cost. Masonry is one of the most physically demanding trades in construction, and construction is already physical. You're lifting concrete block that runs 30 to 40 pounds a unit, all day. You're bending, kneeling, standing, reaching. You're working on scaffolding — and the related trade of pointing and caulking can put you on swing staging twenty stories up, which is not a place for anyone with a fear of heights. Cuts are common. Falls happen. Things fall on you. The trade will tell you to wear the hardhat, the glasses, the harness — wear them. The old-timers who didn't are the ones with the scars and the bad knees telling you to wear them.

I'm not going to lie to you about the long term, either. Fifty years of this has a price, and it's paid in joints — yours, not the wall's. Knees, back, shoulders, hands. The masons who last take care of themselves: they lift right, they don't show off, they drink water in the heat, and they learn the

difference between working hard and working stupid. Working hard builds the wall. Working stupid builds the wall and a doctor bill.

The weather. Most masonry is outdoors. In Texas, that means you work in heat that will test you. Mortar dries fast in August — too fast, sometimes, and a good mason learns to manage it: smaller batches, shaded mixing, wetting the brick, starting early. Winter brings its own rules: mortar doesn't cure right in freezing weather, and there are real temperature thresholds below which you don't lay. Rain stops work. Wind steals your mortar water. The schedule belongs to the sky as much as to the foreman.

The hours. Most masons work full time, and overtime happens when a deadline's looming. This is not a trade with a lot of remote-work flexibility, to put it mildly. You go where the wall is.

The satisfaction. Now the other side, because there is one and it's big. You build things that last longer than you will. I've driven past walls I laid forty years ago and they're still standing straight, still doing their job. Try getting that from a spreadsheet. There's a pride in this trade that doesn't wash off — literally; the mortar dust gets in everything you own —

and the brotherhood of a good crew is real. The men and women I've worked beside for decades are the best people I know.

Who this trade fits. It fits people who like working with their hands and don't mind weather. It fits people with patience — because the first year you're slow and everybody knows it, and you have to be okay with that. It fits people who can take correction without sulking, because a journeyman correcting your joint is doing you a favor. It fits people who notice details — a wall that's an eighth of an inch out at the bottom is a foot out at the top, and the mason's eye catches it early. And it fits people who want to earn their money with their body and their skill rather than their credentials, because this trade does not care where you went to school. It cares what your wall looks like.

Chapter 4: The Apprenticeship Path — Earn While You Learn

This is the chapter that answers the question in the title's keyword: how to become a mason, step by step, through the formal route.

What an apprenticeship is. A registered masonry apprenticeship is a structured program, usually about three years, combining paid on-the-job work with classroom instruction. The federal standard for the bricklayer trade calls for 6,000 hours of on-the-job learning — roughly three years of full-time work — supplemented by a minimum of 144 hours of related classroom instruction per year. In the classroom you learn the things the jobsite doesn't have time to teach properly: blueprint reading, the math of measurement and material estimating, building code requirements, and safety and first-aid practices. On the job, you learn everything else — by doing it, next to somebody who already can.

Who sponsors them. Apprenticeship programs are sponsored by unions — the Bricklayers and Allied

Craftworkers — and by contractor associations, including the Mason Contractors Association of America, which supports both pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs and helps local training programs expand. In Texas, the landscape is mixed: there are union programs in the big metros and plenty of non-union merit-shop training through contractor associations. The Texas Education Agency even runs masonry as a statewide career-and-technical-education program of study, which means high school students in Texas can start the pathway before they graduate.

How the pay works. This is the beautiful part of the apprenticeship model: you earn while you learn. Apprentices are paid on a progressively increasing scale tied to the journeyman's rate — the standard schedule starts at 50 percent of journeyman pay for the first thousand hours and steps up through 60, 70, 75, 85, and 90 percent as you complete each thousand-hour block. Every period you complete is a raise, provided you've done the classroom hours too. You're not paying tuition to learn the trade. You're getting paid to learn it, and the pay goes up as your skill does.

What it takes to get in. The standard requirements: 18 or older, high school diploma or equivalent, able to do the

physical work — the California program, for example, asks that you can lift 50-plus pounds continuously and work on staging above ground. No prior masonry experience required. What programs actually select for, beyond the paper requirements, is attitude: show up, work hard, take instruction. The programs that run pre-apprenticeship "tender" training — sometimes as short as a free week — are explicitly screening for willingness. Come prepared with a positive attitude and a willingness to learn, as one program flyer puts it, and the door opens.

The Texas angle on apprenticeship. Here's the straight Texas truth: this state builds with brick. Brick veneer is the standard skin on homes across DFW and most of the state, and commercial masonry is everywhere. Texas employs thousands of masons and projects hundreds of openings a year. But Texas is also largely non-union in residential work, which means the most common path here isn't a formal registered apprenticeship — it's getting hired as a helper or laborer on a masonry crew and learning on the job. Both paths are legitimate. The formal apprenticeship gives you structure, classroom theory, and a journeyman card at the end. The crew path gives you speed — you're earning from day one and learning the real work immediately — but the

theory comes slower, and only if you chase it. My advice: whichever door opens first, walk through it. Then supplement what the path doesn't give you. On a crew? Read. Study mortar types at night. Ask the old hands why. In an apprenticeship? Volunteer for the hard assignments and learn the field tricks the classroom doesn't teach.

Pre-apprenticeship and Job Corps. If you're young and starting from zero, know that there are on-ramps. Job Corps centers offer bricklayer pre-apprenticeship training with industry-recognized credentials and OSHA safety certification. The MCAA supports pre-apprentice programs aimed at getting young people ready for the real apprenticeship. A week of tender training that ends with interviews with contractors who are hiring — that's a real thing, and it's free. If you're 18 to 24 and broke, that path exists. Use it.

Chapter 5: Bricklayer Training — What They Actually Teach You

Whether you go the apprenticeship route or learn on a crew, there's a body of knowledge every mason has to absorb. This is the curriculum — the stuff that separates somebody who can stack units from somebody who understands the craft. If you're evaluating a bricklayer training program, a technical school course, or just sizing up what you need to learn on your own, this is the checklist.

Mortar. This is the first and most important subject, and the one most beginners underestimate. Mortar isn't just "the gray stuff." It's a designed material: Portland cement, lime, sand, and water in proportions that determine its strength, workability, and durability. You'll learn the types — M, S, N, O — and what they're for. Type N is the general-purpose workhorse of residential brick veneer. Type S is stronger, for structural and below-grade work. Type O is softer, for historic and delicate masonry. The cardinal rule you'll hear until you're sick of it: the mortar must be softer than the brick. Mortar is the sacrificial element — it's *supposed* to be the

weak link, so the wall moves in the joints instead of cracking the units. Get this backwards — hard mortar on soft brick — and you'll destroy a wall trying to save it. You'll learn to mix by feel: the right consistency holds its shape on the trowel but spreads smooth. Too wet and it slumps; too dry and it won't bond. In Texas summer, you'll learn to read the heat in your mortar and adjust — smaller batches, more frequent mixing, because a batch that's gone stiff is a batch you throw away, not a batch you retemper with extra water and hope.

Brick and block. You'll learn the units: modular brick and its dimensions, queen and king size, concrete block — 8-inch, 12-inch, the whole family — and stone, natural and manufactured. You'll learn to read a brick the way a carpenter reads lumber: absorption rates matter, because a thirsty brick in July will suck the water out of your mortar before it bonds, and the fix is wetting the brick first. You'll learn to cut — with a brick hammer, with a masonry saw — and to cut clean, because a ragged cut shows in the finished wall.

The fundamentals of the wall. Level, plumb, and straight — the holy trinity. You'll learn to set up a line: the mason's line stretched tight between corner leads, which is how every

course stays straight and level. You'll learn to build corners first — the leads — and fill between them. You'll learn to check your work constantly, because errors compound upward. You'll learn joint profiles: concave, V-joint, struck, weathered — and when each is appropriate. (Concave is the standard for exterior work in most of Texas — it sheds water.) You'll learn coursing, bonding patterns — running bond, common bond, stack bond — and why the pattern matters structurally, not just visually.

Blueprint reading and layout. You'll learn to read plans: elevations, sections, details, schedules. You'll learn the math — and it's real math, not decoration. Estimating material quantities: how many brick per square foot for a given wall (roughly seven modular brick per square foot of wall area, before waste), how much mortar, how many block. A mason who can't estimate can't bid, and a mason who can't bid works for somebody else forever. You'll learn to lay out from a benchmark, to transfer elevations, to set up batter boards and string lines. This is the classroom half of the trade, and it's what turns a laborer into a craftsman.

Codes and standards. You'll learn that masonry is governed by real codes — the International Building Code, the TMS

402/602 masonry standards — and by manufacturer specs and good-practice guides like the Brick Industry Association's technical notes. You don't need to memorize them starting out. You need to know they exist, know where to look, and develop the habit of checking. The mason who says "we've always done it this way" instead of checking the spec is the one who builds the wall that fails.

Safety. OSHA construction safety, fall protection, scaffold safety, silica dust — cutting and grinding masonry generates respirable crystalline silica, and the exposure rules are real and enforced. Heat illness prevention, which in Texas is not a formality. First aid. You'll get the certifications — OSHA 10 at minimum — and you'll learn that the old-timers who skipped the harness were lucky, not smart.

The intangibles. Here's what no curriculum lists but every good program teaches by example: pace. A mason's rhythm — butter, lay, cut, strike, move — is a physical meditation once it clicks, and it's the difference between 400 brick a day and 800. Cleanup: a mason's site is clean, because mortar on finished work is a callback. Respect for the next trade: your wall is somebody's substrate. And pride: the refusal to leave a bad joint in the wall because "nobody will see it." Somebody

always sees it. Usually it's you, every time you drive past.

Chapter 6: Tools of the Trade

Every trade has its kit, and masonry's is beautifully simple — which is part of the point. You can carry everything that makes you a mason in two hands. But simple doesn't mean casual. A mason's tools are extensions of his hands, and the good ones are chosen with care and kept like they matter.

The trowel. This is the one. The brick trowel — typically 10 to 11 inches, Philadelphia or London pattern — is the mason's signature tool, the thing you'll hold for thousands of hours. You'll learn to butter a brick with it: pick up mortar, spread it on the unit in one smooth motion, with the right thickness, no waste. Beginners fight the trowel. Journeymen don't think about it. Buy a good one — Marshalltown is the name you'll hear most, and there's a reason — and take care of it. A trowel wears to your hand over the years. Old masons can tell you stories about their trowels the way fishermen talk about rods.

The supporting hand tools. A brick hammer for cutting — the chisel end scores, the square face strikes. A 4-foot level and a torpedo level — because trust but verify, constantly. A

mason's line and line blocks, or line pins — the line is your truth on a long wall. A joint striker or jointer for finishing joints — the concave jointer is the Texas exterior standard. A pointing trowel and margin trowel for repair and detail work. Brushes — a soft brush for cleaning joints before they set too hard. A story pole or modular ruler for checking coursing height.

Power tools. The angle grinder with a diamond blade — for cutting brick, block, and stone, and for grinding out old mortar joints in repair work. The masonry saw — wet saws for clean cuts. Drills and drivers for anchors and ties. On bigger jobs, mixers — though plenty of repair work is still mixed by hand in a wheelbarrow or on a mortar board, and every mason should know how to mix by hand before touching a mixer.

Scaffolding and access. Frame scaffolding, properly erected with guardrails — and the discipline to erect it properly every time, because scaffold falls kill masons. Ladders, staging planks. On repair work, sometimes a lift. The rule is simple: the access has to be safe before the first brick goes up. No wall is worth a fall.

What tools cost starting out. Here's the honest math for a

beginner: a good brick trowel, a level, a line setup, a brick hammer, jointers, brushes, and a tool bag or bucket will run you a few hundred dollars — typically in the range of \$200 to \$500 for a solid starter kit, depending on brands. That's it. That's the buy-in for a trade that can pay you \$50,000-plus within a few years. Compare that to a college degree or a trade that needs a \$30,000 truck full of equipment. Masonry's barrier to entry is low in dollars and high in willingness. Employers and apprenticeship programs often provide the big stuff — scaffolding, saws, mixers. Your hand tools are yours. Buy good ones once instead of cheap ones three times.

Caring for tools. Clean your trowel every day — dried mortar ruins the face. Oil the steel lightly. Keep your levels true — a level that's been dropped hard is a liar, and a liar level builds crooked walls. This sounds fussy until you've torn down a course because your level was off. Then it's religion.

Chapter 7: The Money — What Masons Really Make in Texas

Let's talk money honestly, because this is where recruiting pitches lie and where you need the truth.

The national picture. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported a median annual wage of \$58,270 for masonry workers in May 2025 — about \$28 an hour. That's the middle: half make more, half make less. The range is wide because the trade is wide — it covers everything from first-year helpers to specialized restoration masons to foremen running commercial crews.

Texas specifically. Texas numbers run a little under the national median but the cost of living runs under it too. The Texas Education Agency's labor data puts entry-level brickmasons in Texas at a median around \$50,466 a year, with roughly 494 annual openings statewide. Helpers and tenders — the entry rung — show a Texas median around \$38,530 a year, about \$18.50 an hour. Those are medians, not ceilings. A fast, skilled journeyman mason on a production residential crew in DFW, paid by the piece or by the day at

production rates, can out-earn the median substantially. A foreman running a crew makes more. A mason who goes into business for himself — and plenty do — trades the ceiling for the risk.

How masons actually get paid. This varies, and you should understand all three models. Hourly is the standard on commercial work and in apprenticeships. Day rate is common on residential crews — a flat rate per day, which rewards speed and punishes dawdling. Piece rate — pay per brick laid, per block set, per square foot — is where the real production earners live. Piece rate is honest in a brutal way: your paycheck is a direct measure of your output. The fast, clean mason thrives on piece rate. The slow one starves on it. Most beginners start hourly or day rate and graduate to production pay as their speed comes.

The apprentice ladder. As covered in Chapter 4: you start around 50 percent of journeyman scale and climb to 90 percent by the end. Every thousand hours, a raise. It's the fairest pay structure in the working world — your wage is a receipt for your skill.

What "good money" really means here. I'll give it to you straight the way I'd give it to my own kid. Masonry will not

make you rich quick. What it will do — if you get good — is pay you a solid middle-class living with no college debt, starting from the day you're eighteen. A journeyman mason in Texas making \$50,000 to \$65,000 a year with full benefits in a union shop, or production earnings beyond that on a hot residential crew, is a normal outcome for somebody who stuck with it and got skilled. The mason who learns the specialty work — restoration, historic lime mortar, decorative stone, chimney work — commands premium rates because few people can do it. The mason who learns to estimate and sell starts a company, and then the ceiling is whatever the market will bear. I've watched helpers become foremen become owners. It's a real ladder. But every rung is earned with a trowel, not with a credential.

The honest caveats. Work can be seasonal and cyclical — construction slows, and masonry slows with it. Texas is steadier than most states because people keep moving here and the building rarely stops, but no trade is recession-proof. Benefits vary enormously: union shops typically bring health, pension, and training funds; small non-union residential crews may offer a paycheck and not much else, which means you're managing your own safety net. And the physical toll is a real economic factor — a mason's earning years are finite

in a way a desk worker's aren't, which is one more reason the smart ones save, and the smartest ones move into estimating, foreman work, or ownership before their knees make the decision for them.

Chapter 8: Getting Hired — Finding Your First Crew

Knowing the trade exists and getting somebody to pay you to learn it are two different things. Here's how the door actually opens.

Start with the associations. The Mason Contractors Association of America supports pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs — their [Mason Contractors Association of America careers](<https://www.masoncontractors.org>) resources are aimed at exactly you: students, parents, and young workers looking at the trade. Look up your local or state mason contractors association in Texas. Call them. Ask about apprenticeship openings, pre-apprenticeship programs, and contractors who hire trainees. This is the highest-percentage move a beginner can make, because you're calling the people whose job includes bringing new blood into the trade.

The union route. The Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers locals in Texas run apprenticeship programs. The pitch is straightforward: structured training, rising wage scale,

benefits, a journeyman card. The trade-off is process — applications, interviews, waiting lists in some areas. If you're in Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, or Austin, there's a local to call. Ask about the application windows and what they're screening for. Then show up prepared.

The direct route: walk onto a crew. In Texas residential masonry, this is how most careers actually start. Masonry contractors are almost always looking for reliable help — the trade's chronic complaint is not lack of work but lack of workers who show up. Here's how to do it right: show up in person, early in the morning, work boots on, ready to work that day. Not in an email. Not "I'll start Monday." Today. Bring ID, bring a willingness to do the grunt work — carrying, mixing, cleaning — and make it clear you want to learn the trade, not just collect a check. The foreman has seen a hundred kids come and go. Be the one who comes back tomorrow. And the next day. Reliability is so rare it's practically a superpower.

What to say and what not to say. Say: "I want to learn masonry. I'll start at the bottom. I'll show up every day." Don't say: "How much does it pay?" in the first sixty seconds — you'll get your answer soon enough, and leading with it

marks you as a short-timer. Don't claim skills you don't have; the wall will expose you by lunch. Do ask questions once you've earned a little trust — "why'd you mix it that way?" asked respectfully at the right moment is how the teaching starts.

Technical schools. Many technical and community colleges offer masonry programs — typically a year or less — covering the fundamentals: tools, materials, blueprint reading, hands-on wall building. These programs work both standalone and alongside apprenticeships. They're a good option if you want structured learning before you hit a jobsite, or if you need the credential to get taken seriously. They're not required. But "not required" and "not useful" are different things — a year of school can save you a year of fumbling on the job.

Red flags in an employer. If a contractor wants you to work without proper safety equipment, walk away — that's not toughness, that's a preview of how he values you. If the pay arrangement is vague — "we'll figure it out Friday" — get it in writing before you lift anything. If the crew's turnover is a revolving door, ask yourself why nobody stays. And if anyone asks you to do work you're not trained for at height or with

equipment you don't understand, refuse. A good contractor trains you up to the dangerous stuff. A bad one throws you at it.

Chapter 9: How to Tell a Good Crew From a Bad One

Once you're in, your education depends enormously on *who* you're learning from. A good crew will make you a mason. A bad crew will teach you shortcuts that you'll spend years unlearning — if the shortcuts don't get you hurt first. Here's how to tell them apart in your first week.

The good crew. The journeyman's walls are straight and his joints are clean — look at the work, it's the résumé. Somebody corrects you, and the correction comes with a reason: "cut deeper here because..." The foreman checks the mortar, not just the speed. Safety gear is worn without irony. The site is reasonably clean. The old hands answer questions — maybe gruffly, but they answer. There's a pace but not a panic. And at the end of the day, somebody tells you what you did right, not just what you did wrong.

The bad crew. Nobody corrects you at all — which sounds nice until you realize it means nobody cares whether you learn. Corners are cut on materials: retempered mortar that's gone stiff, wrong mortar for the brick, joints struck sloppy

because "nobody looks up there." Safety is a joke. The foreman's main skill is yelling. Turnover is constant — learn the names fast because they'll be gone by Friday. And the work itself tells the story: wavy joints, smeared faces, walls that are out of plumb. If the finished work looks bad, the teaching is worse.

What to do on a bad crew. First, don't absorb the bad habits just because everyone's doing them — you are building *your* hands, not theirs. Learn what you can — even a bad crew teaches you what not to do, and that's an education too — while you quietly look for the exit. Then leave, professionally: give notice, don't burn the bridge, and take the lesson with you. The trade is smaller than it looks. Foremen talk. Leave every crew able to give you a reference.

Finding a mentor. The single highest-value thing in your early career is one experienced mason who decides you're worth teaching. You can't apply for this. You earn it the way apprentices have earned it for centuries: show up, work hard, listen more than you talk, ask good questions at good moments, and do the unglamorous work without being asked twice. When an old hand starts explaining things to you without being asked — when he stops you before you make a

mistake instead of after — you've got one. Listen to everything he says. Buy the coffee. And twenty years from now, when some green kid is watching your hands, pass it on. That's the whole system. That's how the trade survives.

Chapter 10: The Specialties — Where the Real Money and the Real Craft Live

General bricklaying pays the bills. The specialties pay the premiums. As you come up, keep an eye on these lanes — they're where a mason differentiates himself from the production crews and where the hourly rates climb.

Restoration and repointing. Old buildings need masons who understand old materials — lime mortars, soft historic brick, the patience to cut out failed joints without damaging the units. This is detective work as much as construction: matching mortar in strength, color, and texture, sometimes from a building a century old. It pays well because it's scarce — few masons learn it, and every city has old buildings. My own company does this work every day, and I can tell you the phone never stops for a mason who can repoint right.

Chimneys. Chimney work is its own world: high work, flashing, crowns, flue liners, and mortar taking the worst weather on the building. It's physically demanding and technically specific, and homeowners pay real money for it because a failed chimney is a water-intrusion disaster. A

mason who owns the chimney lane in his market eats well.

Stone. Natural stone — limestone, sandstone, the Texas Hill Country work — is the fine-art end of the trade. It's slower, it's harder to learn, and it commands the highest residential rates because every piece is different and the eye for it can't be faked. A stone mason's portfolio is his advertisement.

Fireplaces and outdoor living. Fireplaces, outdoor kitchens, pizza ovens, retaining walls — the residential specialty market. Homeowners spend discretionary money here, which means they pay for craftsmanship they can show off. If you have an eye for design and clean work, this lane rewards it.

Commercial and industrial. Bigger walls, bigger crews, steadier schedules, and often union scale with benefits. Refractory work — lining kilns and furnaces with firebrick — is a specialized industrial niche with its own crews and its own pay. Not glamorous. Very well paid.

Foreman, estimator, owner. The career ladder beyond the wall: foreman runs the crew; estimator reads the plans and prices the work; owner runs the company. Each step trades trowel time for responsibility and raises the ceiling. The

mason who learns to estimate — to look at plans and see labor hours and material quantities — is the mason who can start a business. I always tell young masons: learn the numbers. The trowel feeds you. The numbers free you.

Chapter 11: What I Wish Someone Had Told Me — Fifty Years in Ten Lessons

I'm going to close the teaching part of this book with the things I learned the hard way, so you don't have to.

1. Speed comes. Don't chase it. Every beginner is slow, and every beginner hates being slow. The temptation is to rush — and rushing builds bad walls. Here's the secret the old hands know: speed is a byproduct of smoothness, and smoothness comes from repetition. Do it right a thousand times and the speed arrives on its own. The mason who chases speed first ends up fast and sloppy, and sloppy doesn't last in this trade.

2. Take care of your body like it's your business — because it is. Stretch. Lift with your legs. Drink water before you're thirsty in the heat. Wear the knee pads. The twenty-year-old who thinks he's indestructible becomes the forty-year-old with the bad back. Your body is the only tool you can't replace. Maintain it.

3. Learn the materials, not just the motions. I said it in Chapter 2 and I'll say it again: the mason who understands mortar, brick, water, and weather is worth twice the one who

just lays units. Read. Ask. Experiment on your own time. The knowledge compounds.

4. Your reputation is your real paycheck. This trade runs on word of mouth. Contractors, foremen, homeowners — everybody talks. One reputation for clean work and showing up will feed you for decades. One reputation for shortcuts or unreliability will starve you just as long. Guard it like money, because it is money.

5. Save your money. The trade has fat years and lean years. The mason who saves in the fat years sleeps fine in the lean ones. This isn't financial advice from an expert — it's survival advice from somebody who's lived through the cycles. Put something aside every week, starting now, before you think you can afford to.

6. Learn to read a blueprint early. It's the highest-leverage skill in the trade. The mason who reads plans gets the foreman's ear, the estimator's respect, and eventually the keys to his own jobs. It's just lines on paper. Learn the lines.

7. Never stop being the apprentice. I've been doing this fifty years and I still learn things — a new material, a better detail, a kid's trick with a line that I'd never thought of. The day you

decide you know it all is the day you start getting worse. Stay curious. The trade rewards it.

8. Treat the laborer like you'll be treated. You will run crews someday if you stay. The foreman you become is built from the journeymen you watched. Remember which ones you wanted to work for. Be that one.

9. Own your mistakes. Every mason lays a bad wall section sometimes — a course out of level, a joint profile wrong, a color mismatch. The good mason tears it out and does it again, on his own time if he has to. The bad mason hides it. Walls remember. So do the people who paid for them.

10. Pass it on. Somebody taught you — a journeyman who stopped and showed you the angle of the trowel, a foreman who explained the mortar instead of just yelling. You owe that forward. When the green kid shows up and watches your hands, teach him. That's not charity. That's how a fifty-year trade becomes a hundred-year trade. That's how I got here, and it's how you'll get wherever you're going.

Chapter 12: Where the Trade Goes From Here — A Masonry Trade Career in 2026 and Beyond

Let me finish with an honest look at where this trade is headed, because you're not choosing it for a year — you're choosing it for a working life.

The demand picture. The federal numbers are candid: about 1 percent employment growth for masonry workers from 2025 to 2035 — slower than average. Read that right, though. The growth number is small because the trade isn't expanding much. The *openings* number is large — around 18,400 a year — because masons retire and somebody has to pick up the trowel. This is a replacement market, not a growth market, and for a young person entering now, that's actually good news: you're not fighting for a slice of a shrinking pie, you're stepping into slots that open every year as the old hands hang it up. The work itself isn't going anywhere. Buildings still need walls. Brick veneer still skins half the houses in Texas. Restoration work grows as the building stock ages.

What could change the trade. A few honest trends to watch. Prefabrication and panelized masonry exist — brick panels built offsite and hung on buildings — and they'll take some share of commercial work, though they still need masons to make and set the panels. Mortar and material science keeps improving — better admixtures, better restoration products. And there's slow, real movement on the labor side: the industry knows it has a pipeline problem, which is why associations like the MCAA invest in pre-apprenticeship programs and skills competitions like the Fastest Trowel on the Block — they're trying to make the trade visible to your generation. Take advantage of that visibility. It was built for you.

What won't change. A robot is not laying your chimney anytime soon. The work is too varied, too site-specific, too judgment-driven. The skilled hand and the trained eye remain the technology. And the fundamental economics remain: people will always pay for a wall that's straight, a joint that's clean, and a mason who shows up.

My charge to you. If this book has done its job, you're not just thinking about a job anymore — you're thinking about a craft. Here's what I'd ask of you, from fifty years down the

road: learn it right. Respect the materials. Take care of your body. Learn the numbers so the trade can't keep you small. Build a reputation one clean wall at a time. And when you're the old hand and some eighteen-year-old is watching your trowel hand — teach him what somebody taught you.

The trade gave me a life. It'll give you one too, if you let it. Now put down the book and pick up a trowel.

If you want to keep learning the craft side — how mortar behaves, how walls fail, how repairs are really done — my [free brick repair books](<https://metro-foundation-repair.web.app/free-books/>) cover the working knowledge behind the trade, one short book at a time.

— *Travis*

About the Author

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