

The Brick Repair Handbook

What Every Texas Homeowner Should Know

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Chapter 1: Your Home's Brick Skin — How Veneer Really Works

Most homeowners are surprised to learn that the brick on their house is not holding the house up. That beautiful brick exterior is what builders call a veneer. Think of it like a skin. The real structure of the home — the wood framing, the foundation, the roof trusses — sits behind it. The brick is cladding. It gives the home its look, it sheds weather, and it protects what is behind it. But it is not the structural backbone of the house.

Understanding this one fact changes the way you look at every crack, every crumbling joint, and every stain on your walls. It also changes the way you hire repair work. A contractor who treats brick veneer like it is a structural wall will recommend the wrong fix. A contractor who understands veneer will fix the problem where it actually lives.

Let us walk through how a brick veneer wall is built, from the inside out.

The framing and sheathing

Behind your brick sits the framed wall of the house. In modern Texas construction, this is typically wood studs covered with a sheathing material, often oriented strand board or plywood. Over the sheathing goes a weather-resistant barrier — house wrap, felt paper, or a similar product. This barrier is a critical part of the system. It is the last line of defense against water that gets behind the brick.

The air gap

Between the back of the brick and the face of the sheathing, builders leave a gap, usually about one inch wide. This air space is not wasted space. It is one of the most important parts of the whole wall. Brick

absorbs water. When rain hits a brick wall, the brick drinks some of it in. That water has to go somewhere, and it has to dry out somehow. The air gap gives water a path downward and gives air a path to circulate. Without that gap, moisture would sit trapped against the sheathing, and trapped moisture is what rots wood framing and breeds mold.

I have opened up veneer walls where the air gap was missing or packed with mortar droppings, and the damage behind them tells the whole story. Rotted sheathing. Stained framing. Problems that cost ten times what the original brick repair would have cost. The air gap is small, but it does heavy work.

Wall ties

The brick veneer is connected to the framed wall behind it with metal wall ties. These are small strips or wires, usually galvanized steel, nailed or screwed to the studs and embedded in the mortar joints of the brick every couple of feet. The ties keep the veneer from tipping away from the house, but they are designed to let the brick and the framing move independently.

That last part matters. Brick and wood expand and contract at different rates when the temperature changes. Brick also grows slightly over its lifetime as it absorbs moisture — a process masons call irreversible moisture expansion. If the brick were rigidly glued to the framing, something would have to give. The ties flex. They hold the wall in place while letting each material do what it does.

In older homes, you may find corrugated ties that have corroded over the years, especially if water has been running down the inside of the wall. Rusted ties lose their grip. A veneer that bulges outward in a section is often a veneer whose ties have failed. This is not a cosmetic problem. A bulging wall section can detach and fall, and it needs a mason who understands how to rebuild and re-tie it properly.

Weep holes

Look at the bottom of your brick walls, just above the foundation. Every few feet, you may see a small vertical gap in a mortar joint, sometimes with a little plastic tube or just an open slot. Those are weep holes. They are the drainage system of your veneer wall.

Water that gets behind the brick — through the brick itself, around windows, through a failed flashing — runs down the inside face of the brick and hits the flashing at the base of the wall. The flashing directs it out through the weep holes. If those holes are plugged with mortar, painted shut, clogged with dirt, or buried under mulch, the water has no exit. It sits in the wall and works its way into the sheathing and framing.

Weep holes are small and easy to overlook, and they are one of the first things I check on any house. Homeowners sometimes fill them on purpose, thinking they are defects or entry points for insects. They are neither. Leave them open and clear.

Brick manages water; it is not waterproof

This is the core idea of the whole chapter, and it is the idea that explains almost every problem in this book. Brick is porous. It absorbs water when it rains and releases it when the sun comes out. A healthy brick wall goes through this wet-dry cycle constantly. The wall is designed to manage water — to let it in a little, move it down, drain it out, and dry. It is not designed to be waterproof, and no sealant or paint will change that fundamental fact.

When you understand that brick manages water rather than blocking it, everything else makes sense. Cracks matter because they change how water moves through the wall. Mortar matters because it is part of the drainage system. Flashing matters because it directs water to the exits. And painting brick — something we will discuss in detail later

— is so damaging precisely because it traps the water that the wall was designed to release.

Your brick is a skin, not a shell. Treat it like skin: keep it clean, keep its drainage working, watch for changes, and call a professional when something looks wrong. ### Brick needs room to move

One more piece of the system deserves mention: brick grows. As brick absorbs moisture over the years, it expands slightly — a one-way growth that never fully reverses. On a long wall, that growth adds up. Without somewhere to go, the expanding brick pushes against windows, corners, and itself, and something eventually cracks or bows.

The answer is the expansion joint: a vertical gap built into long runs of brick, filled with a flexible backer rod and sealant instead of mortar. It looks like a clean vertical line in the wall, often near corners or every twenty to twenty-five feet on long walls. The joint compresses as the brick grows and stretches as temperatures change, absorbing movement the rigid wall cannot.

Many older Texas homes were built without expansion joints, and long walls on those homes often develop the vertical cracks described in Chapter 7. You cannot easily add expansion joints to an existing wall — but you can understand what the cracks mean and keep them sealed and repointed so water stays out.

On two-story homes, you may also encounter a shelf angle: a steel angle iron bolted to the structure at the floor line that carries the weight of the brick above, so the lower brick does not have to carry the whole wall. Where a shelf angle exists, there should be a soft joint — not mortar — between the brick below and the angle above, so each section can move independently. When that joint gets filled with rigid mortar during a sloppy repair, the wall loses its ability to flex, and cracks follow. If your two-story home has a horizontal line in the

brick at the second-floor level, that is likely the shelf-angle joint. Keep it flexible, keep it sealed, and do not let anyone mortar it solid.

In the next chapter, we will look at the ground under your home, because in Texas, the soil moves — and when it moves, the brick tells the story.

Chapter 2: The Ground Moves — Texas Clay and Your Walls

Texas is built on clay, and clay moves. If you live in the Dallas–Fort Worth area, your home almost certainly sits on expansive clay soil. This is the single most important geological fact a Texas homeowner can know, because it explains so much of what happens to brick walls, foundations, doors, and windows over the years.

What expansive clay does

Clay soil expands when it gets wet and shrinks when it dries out. This is not a small, subtle effect. Depending on the type of clay, the ground under your home can move several inches between a wet spring and a dry summer. The soil does not move evenly, either. One corner of your house may sit on soil that stays damp while another corner bakes in the sun. Trees pull moisture from the soil on one side. A leaking gutter soaks the soil on another side. The result is differential movement — different parts of the foundation rising and falling at different times and by different amounts.

Engineers describe clay with a number called the plasticity index, which is a measure of how much a soil can swell and shrink. You do not need to memorize the term, but it helps to know the idea: higher plasticity means more movement. Much of the Dallas–Fort Worth metroplex sits on clays with high plasticity. The Blackland Prairie soils east of Dallas are famous for it. Homebuilders know this, and modern foundations are engineered to handle it, but engineered does not mean immune. Foundations still move, and movement still shows up in the brick.

The seasonal cycle

A typical year in North Texas runs the soil through a full cycle. Spring rains swell the ground. Summer heat bakes it dry, and the clay shrinks and pulls away from the foundation. You may be able to see a gap between the soil and the foundation wall in late August — that is the clay at its driest. Fall brings some moisture back, and winter rain swells things again, though winter movement is usually gentler.

This cycle repeats every year. It is normal. The foundation is designed to ride it out. But over years and decades, the repeated rising and falling works on the structure. Concrete develops hairline cracks. Mortar joints flex and sometimes crack. Doors that stuck in August may swing free in March. If you are a new homeowner in Texas, this seasonal rhythm can be alarming at first. Some of it is simply the house breathing with the ground.

The problems start when the movement is not even — when one part of the foundation moves more than the rest. That is when you get the stair-step cracks in brick, the doors that will not latch, the windows that crack for no apparent reason. We will read those cracks like a map in Chapter 7.

How foundation movement telegraphs into brick

Here is the key connection: your brick veneer sits on the foundation. In most Texas homes, the brick ledge is part of the foundation — the brick's first course rests on a concrete ledge that is poured with the slab or with the perimeter beam. When the foundation moves, the brick moves with it.

But remember Chapter 1: the brick is tied to the wood framing, not rigidly attached to it. The framing sits on the foundation too, but wood flexes and brick does not. Brick is rigid and brittle. When the foundation shifts unevenly, the framing bends a little and the brick cracks. That is why brick cracks are such honest reporters of

foundation movement. The brick cannot hide what the ground is doing. It writes it on the wall in mortar and clay.

This is also why a brick crack by itself is rarely the whole problem. The crack is the symptom. The cause is below, in the soil and the foundation. A mason who fills the crack without understanding the movement underneath is painting over a warning light. Sometimes filling the crack is exactly the right repair — cosmetic cracks from minor seasonal movement happen all the time. But the decision should come from understanding the cause, not from ignoring it.

What you can do about the soil

You cannot change the clay under your house, but you can manage the moisture around it, and moisture management is the whole game. The goal is simple: keep the soil moisture as even as possible around the entire foundation, all year long.

That means a few practical things. In dry summers, many Texas homeowners run soaker hoses around the foundation to keep the soil from shrinking away. The idea is not to flood the ground — it is to replace the moisture the sun and trees are pulling out, keeping the soil volume steady. Water evenly, all the way around, and keep the hoses a foot or two away from the foundation face so water is not ponding against the wall.

It also means controlling where water goes when it rains. Gutters should carry roof water well away from the foundation. The ground should slope away from the house so rain runs off instead of pooling at the foundation line. Flower beds against the house should not be acting as bathtubs. Every one of these details affects how evenly the soil swells and shrinks, and therefore how much your foundation — and your brick — has to move.

Trees deserve a special mention. A large tree near the house can pull astonishing amounts of water from the soil, drying one side of the foundation while the other side stays damp. If you have a big tree close to the house and cracks keep appearing on that side, the tree is part of the story. You do not necessarily have to remove it, but you should know it is a factor, and you should tell your contractor about it.

When it is a foundation issue, not a brick issue

There is a line, and it matters. Some movement is normal seasonal breathing. Some movement is a foundation problem that needs a foundation specialist, not a mason. As a rule of thumb I have used for decades: if the brick cracking is minor, stable, and not getting worse, it is usually a masonry maintenance issue. If cracks are growing, if doors and windows are binding, if floors feel unlevel, or if you see the same crack pattern returning after a repair, the foundation needs an evaluation by a foundation repair company before any brick work happens.

Repairing brick over an active foundation problem is like repainting a car with a bent frame. The paint looks good for a while, and then the truth shows through. Get the foundation stable first, then repair the brick. A good masonry contractor will tell you this himself and will not take your money for brick work until the foundation question is answered. If a contractor wants to fix the cracks without asking about the foundation, that tells you something about the contractor.

Know your foundation type

Not every Texas home sits on the same kind of foundation, and the type affects how movement shows up in your brick. The most common in modern Dallas–Fort Worth construction is the slab-on-grade: a thick concrete slab poured directly on the prepared soil, often with deep perimeter and interior beams. When expansive clay moves

under a slab, the slab bends and tilts with it, and the brick — sitting on the slab's edge — cracks in the patterns this book describes.

Many newer slabs are post-tensioned: steel cables run through the concrete and are tightened after the pour, squeezing the slab into a kind of permanent compression that resists cracking. Post-tension slabs handle soil movement better than conventional slabs, but they are not magic. They still move, and — critically — they should never be cut, drilled, or cored without knowing exactly where the cables run. A severed post-tension cable is dangerous and enormously expensive to repair. If your home has a post-tension slab (often noted on a metal tag near the garage or in your closing documents), tell any contractor who wants to drill into it.

Older Texas homes may sit on pier-and-beam foundations: the house rests on concrete or wood piers with a crawl space underneath. These foundations move differently — individual piers can settle independently — and the brick veneer on a pier-and-beam home is often supported by its own grade beam. Cracks in these homes can be more localized, and repairs sometimes involve shimming or re-leveling individual piers rather than work on a whole slab.

Whatever type you have, learn which one it is. It is usually in your home inspection report from when you bought the house. Knowing your foundation type helps you have an informed conversation with both masons and foundation specialists, and it keeps anyone from proposing the wrong fix for your structure.

The ground moves. That is Texas. Your job is not to stop it — it is to manage the water, watch the walls, and know the difference between the house breathing and the house asking for help.

Chapter 3: Water Finds a Way

Water is patient. It does not need a big opening. It does not need a storm. Given time, water will find its way through the smallest gap, the tiniest crack, the most minor failure in your home's defenses — and once it is inside the wall, it starts working on the materials from the inside out. Almost every brick problem I have repaired in fifty years of field work traces back to water in some form. Understand water, and you understand brick repair.

How water gets into a brick wall

Start with the brick itself. Brick is porous — it absorbs water directly through its face every time it rains. This is normal and expected. A sound brick wall absorbs water, and then the sun and the air gap dry it back out. The system works.

The trouble starts at the weak points. Mortar joints that have eroded or receded give water a deeper path in. Cracks give water a highway. But the most common entry points are not the brick at all — they are the places where other materials meet the brick.

Windows and doors are the biggest culprits. The joint where a window frame meets the brick is sealed with caulk, and caulk has a lifespan. When it dries, cracks, and pulls away, rain runs straight into the wall. I have seen window leaks rot the framing around the opening while the brick outside looked nearly perfect. The homeowner's first sign was often a stain on the interior wall or a musty smell near the window — the wall had been wet inside for years.

Flashing failures are next. Flashing is the metal (or sometimes flexible membrane) that directs water away from vulnerable spots: above windows and doors, where the roof meets a wall, at the base of the wall above the foundation. When flashing is missing, installed wrong, or corroded through, water pours into the wall at exactly the spot that

was supposed to be protected. In Texas, where we get intense driving rain in spring storms, a flashing failure can put a shocking amount of water inside a wall in a single afternoon.

Then there are the everyday sources that homeowners control without realizing it. Gutters that overflow because they are full of leaves dump roof water right at the foundation and splash it up onto the brick. Downspouts that end two feet from the house concentrate hundreds of gallons of water in one spot. Sprinkler heads aimed at the wall soak the brick every morning — and in the Texas summer, that daily soaking followed by brutal afternoon heat is a recipe for accelerated deterioration. Grading that slopes toward the house instead of away from it turns every rain into a foundation-soaking event.

What water does inside the wall

Once water is behind the brick, a few things happen, none of them good. First, it runs down the inside face of the brick and soaks into the sheathing and framing. Wood that stays wet rots. Wet wood also invites termites, which love nothing more than damp, hidden framing. I have opened walls where the brick looked fine from the street but the framing behind it was soft enough to push a screwdriver through.

Second, water in the wall feeds freeze damage. North Texas does not freeze often, but when it does — and the February freezes of recent years reminded everyone — water trapped in brick and mortar expands as it turns to ice. Ice takes up more space than water, and that expansion pushes the material apart from the inside. One hard freeze on a saturated wall can do more damage than five years of normal weather. This is the mechanism behind spalling, which gets its own chapter next.

Third, water carries salts. As water moves through brick and mortar, it dissolves soluble salts in the materials. When the water reaches the surface and evaporates, it leaves the salts behind as a white powdery

deposit — efflorescence. We will cover that in Chapter 6. For now, just know that white powder on your brick is a sign that water is moving through the wall.

Interior signs of water entry

By the time you see water damage inside the house, the wall has usually been wet for a while. Watch for these signs:

Discoloration or staining on interior walls, especially near windows, doors, or the tops of walls where they meet the ceiling. Paint that bubbles or peels in spots, particularly on exterior walls. A musty or damp smell in a room that you cannot explain. Baseboards that warp or pull away from the wall. In severe cases, visible mold growth.

Any of these signs means water is getting in, and the entry point needs to be found and fixed. Finding it is detective work. Water rarely comes straight through — it enters at one point and travels along framing, flashing, or the inside face of the brick before it shows up inside. A stain on an interior wall may originate from a failed flashing ten feet away and two feet higher. This is why diagnosing leaks takes experience, and why a contractor who just caulks the stain is wasting your money.

Managing water: the homeowner's real job

Here is the encouraging part: most water problems are preventable, and prevention is mostly maintenance, not construction. Keep gutters clean and downspouts extended away from the house. Keep the soil graded so water runs away from the foundation. Keep sprinklers off the walls. Re-caulk around windows and doors when the old caulk fails — this is a simple job most homeowners can do themselves or have done cheaply. Keep weep holes clear so the wall can drain.

For example, imagine a homeowner who notices the brick staying dark and damp near the bottom of one wall for days after every rain.

The gutters are clean, but a downspout empties right at that corner, and the mulch bed there is mounded up against the brick, covering the weep holes. Extending the downspout ten feet away and pulling the mulch back from the wall would likely solve the whole problem — no mason required. That is the power of understanding how water moves: sometimes the fix is a fifty-dollar downspout extension, not a five-thousand-dollar repair.

Walk your property after a heavy rain. Watch where the water goes. Look at where it pools, where it splashes, where the brick stays wet longest. Water tells you everything if you watch it. ### The roof-to-wall intersection

One of the most destructive — and most overlooked — water entry points is where a sloped roof dies into a vertical brick wall. Rain running down the roof hits that intersection with speed and volume, and without proper detailing, it pours straight into the wall. The detail that prevents this is called kickout flashing: a small angled piece of metal at the bottom of the roof-wall joint that kicks the water out into the gutter instead of letting it run down behind the brick.

Missing or poorly installed kickout flashing is behind a remarkable number of rotted walls I have opened over the years. The damage pattern is distinctive: a vertical band of deterioration on the brick wall starting exactly where the roof meets it, often with interior damage in the room below. The homeowner usually suspects a roof leak, and roofers get called, but the real problem is the missing kickout — a flashing detail, not a roofing failure.

If your home has any place where a roof slope meets a brick wall — over a garage, beside a dormer, along an addition — look at the bottom of that joint during your walk-around. You should see a small metal diverter kicking water outward into the gutter. If you see the roof's water running straight down the brick, or a stain on the brick

starting at that joint, have a professional evaluate it. Installing kickout flashing is a small job. Rebuilding a rotted wall section is not.

Step flashing along the rest of the roof-wall joint matters too. Where the sloped roof runs alongside the brick, individual step flashings should weave with the shingles and disappear into the wall. If you can see gaps, or if a previous repair smeared caulk along the joint instead of proper flashing, water is getting in. Caulk is not flashing. It is a temporary patch on a permanent problem.

In the next chapter, we will look at what happens when water, brick, and freezing temperatures collide — the faces of your brick popping off, one flake at a time.

Chapter 4: Spalling — When Brick Faces Pop Off

Spalling is one of the most common brick problems in Texas, and one of the most misunderstood. The face of the brick — the smooth outer surface you see from the street — starts to flake, chip, and peel away, exposing the rough, crumbly interior of the brick underneath. It can start as a few small flakes and progress until the brick face is gone entirely, leaving a pitted, recessed surface that absorbs even more water than before. Once it starts, it feeds on itself.

What spalling looks like

In its early stages, spalling looks like the brick is shedding thin layers, almost like peeling skin. You might see small flakes on the ground at the base of the wall. The surface of the brick looks rough where flakes have come off. As it progresses, larger pieces break away — sometimes chunks the size of a quarter or bigger. The exposed interior of the brick is softer, more porous, and often a different color than the original face.

Spalling tends to show up in patterns that tell you something about the cause. Brick near the ground, where splashback keeps it wet, spalls first. Brick under a leaking gutter or below a failed flashing spalls in a vertical streak. A whole wall of spalling brick often points to a manufacturing issue with that batch of brick, or to decades of a wall that never dries properly. When I walk a house and see spalling concentrated in one area, I start looking for the water source above or beside it.

Freeze-thaw damage: the main culprit

The most common cause of spalling is the freeze-thaw cycle, and it works like this. Brick absorbs water. When the temperature drops

below freezing, the water inside the brick turns to ice and expands. That expansion exerts tremendous pressure inside the tiny pores of the brick — more than enough to fracture the material. When the ice thaws, the water settles deeper into the new micro-cracks. The next freeze expands them further. Each cycle breaks the brick down a little more, and the face eventually lets go.

Texas does not freeze as often as northern states, but that almost makes it worse in one respect: Texas brick is often manufactured for a milder climate, and Texas homeowners rarely think about freeze protection. Then a hard freeze arrives — and in recent years, North Texas has seen some severe ones — and walls that have been quietly saturated for years suddenly start shedding faces. The damage was building up in the pores for a long time. The freeze just finished the job.

The bricks most vulnerable to freeze-thaw damage are soft, underfired bricks and bricks that stay wet. A brick that dries out between rains can survive many freezes. A brick that is saturated — because of a gutter problem, a sprinkler hitting the wall, or weep holes that cannot drain — is a brick waiting for the next freeze to break it.

De-icing salts

Salt makes freeze damage worse. De-icing salts used on driveways and sidewalks can splash or wick into nearby brick, and salt water freezes and expands with even more destructive force than plain water. Salt also crystallizes inside the brick's pores as the water evaporates, and those growing crystals pry the material apart from the inside — a process similar to freeze damage but driven by chemistry instead of temperature.

If you use de-icing products near brick steps, planters, or low walls, keep the salt away from the masonry. Sweep it off rather than hosing it

toward the brick. The convenience of a clear walkway is not worth the slow destruction of the brick around it.

Sandblasting and pressure washing

Some spalling is man-made, and it is entirely preventable. Sandblasting brick — blasting it with abrasive material to clean it or remove paint — strips the hard outer face right off the brick. That fired outer face is the brick's armor. It is denser and more weather-resistant than the interior. Once it is gone, the soft interior is exposed to every rain and every freeze, and spalling follows as surely as night follows day. I have seen beautiful old brick ruined in a single afternoon by an overzealous cleaning job.

Pressure washing is the gentler cousin of sandblasting, but it can cause the same kind of damage when done wrong. A high-pressure nozzle held close to the brick drives water deep into the pores and can blast mortar right out of the joints. If your brick needs cleaning, it should be done with low pressure, a wide fan tip, kept at a distance — or better yet, with a mild detergent and a soft brush. The goal is to clean the surface, not to excavate it.

Why painting over spalling fails

When homeowners see spalling brick, a common impulse is to paint over it. The paint covers the ugly spots, and for a few months, the wall looks better. Then the paint starts to bubble and peel, the spalling continues underneath, and the wall looks worse than before.

Here is why. Remember the core principle from Chapter 1: brick manages water by absorbing it and releasing it. Paint forms a film on the surface that traps moisture inside the brick. The water still gets in — through the back of the brick, through cracks, through unpainted areas — but now it cannot get out through the face. It sits in the brick, and the next freeze expands it, pushing the paint off and taking more

brick face with it. Painting spalled brick does not fix the problem. It accelerates it and hides it at the same time, which is the worst combination.

The only real fix for spalled brick is replacement. The damaged bricks need to come out and new bricks need to go in, with proper mortar and proper drainage behind them. It is painstaking work — each brick is cut out individually, the cavity is cleaned, and the new brick is set and pointed to match. There is no shortcut, no coating, no miracle sealer that restores a spalled face. A contractor who tells you otherwise is selling you something, not fixing something.

That said, not every spalled brick needs immediate replacement. A few spalled bricks on a wall are a maintenance note, not an emergency — but they are a signal to find and fix the water source that caused them. Replace the damaged units, fix the drainage, and the wall will outlast all of us. #### What to do when you find spalling

Finding spalled brick on your house calls for a calm, methodical response — not panic, and not paint. Start by assessing the extent. A handful of spalled bricks scattered across a wall is a maintenance item: note their locations, photograph them, and get a mason to replace them. Widespread spalling across whole sections of wall is a bigger project, and it almost always means there is a water problem feeding it that must be fixed first.

Next, hunt the water source before you schedule the brick work. Walk the area above and around the spalling. Check the gutters — overflowing gutters are the single most common cause of localized spalling. Check sprinklers hitting the wall. Check the grading and weep holes at the base. Check flashing above windows. Fix the water first, then replace the brick. Replacing spalled brick while the water problem continues is like bailing a boat without plugging the leak.

When it comes to replacement, ask your mason about brick matching. No one can promise that new brick will be invisible against decades-old brick — sun, weather, and manufacturing variations all change appearance over time. But a good mason will source the closest available match in size, color, and texture, and will blend the repair by replacing full sections rather than peppering single bricks across the wall when the damage is extensive. Ask to see a sample of the replacement brick against your wall before the work starts. A small test area, or even a few loose bricks held up to the wall, tells you more than any verbal promise.

One more caution: beware of anyone who proposes to seal spalled brick with a waterproof coating as the fix. Sealers trap moisture in the brick — the same problem as paint, discussed earlier in this chapter — and they do nothing to restore the lost face. The damaged units must come out. There is no coating that rebuilds brick.

Ignore the water, and you will be replacing bricks again in a few years.

Chapter 5: Mortar Joints — The First Thing to Go

If brick is the skin of your house, mortar is the stitching that holds it together. And like stitching, it wears out first. Mortar is softer than brick by design — it is supposed to be the sacrificial element in the wall, the part that gives a little so the brick does not have to. But that means mortar joints are almost always the first thing on a brick wall to show age, and keeping them sound is the single most cost-effective maintenance a homeowner can do.

What mortar does

Mortar does more than hold bricks in place. It seals the joints against water entry. It bonds the brick units into a unified wall that distributes loads and resists wind. It accommodates small movements in the wall without cracking the brick. And it is a visible design element — the color and profile of the joint are part of what makes a brick wall look the way it does.

A sound mortar joint is slightly recessed or flush with the brick face, firm to the touch, and uniform in color. When you run your finger along it, it should feel solid, not sandy or crumbly. When you tap it, it should sound solid, not hollow.

How mortar fails

Mortar fails in a few recognizable ways. The most common is simple erosion: decades of rain, wind, and sun wear the joint back. The mortar recedes deeper and deeper into the joint, leaving the edges of the brick exposed. You can see the shadow lines deepen year by year. This is normal aging, and on a well-built wall it takes decades to become a problem.

More aggressive failure looks like crumbling. The mortar turns sandy and falls out in grains or chunks. You might find piles of sand-like material at the base of the wall. If you can scrape mortar out of a joint with your fingernail or a key, that joint has failed. Crumbling mortar no longer seals against water, no longer bonds the brick, and no longer does its job.

Cracking in mortar joints is also common, and it means different things depending on the pattern. Hairline cracks in a few joints are usually shrinkage or minor movement — often cosmetic. Cracks that run through many consecutive joints, especially in a stair-step pattern, are telling you about foundation movement, and we will read those in Chapter 7.

One cause of premature mortar failure deserves special attention: the wrong mortar for the job. Mortar comes in different strengths, designated by letter — Type N is the standard for most residential veneer work, softer and more flexible. Type S is stronger and used where more strength is needed. The critical rule is that mortar should be softer than the brick it surrounds. If a repair is done with mortar that is too hard — too strong, too rigid — the mortar will not give when the wall moves, and the brick will crack instead. I have seen well-meaning repairs where hard modern mortar was smeared over old soft brick, and within a few years the brick faces were cracking while the new mortar sat there untouched. The repair damaged the wall. Matching mortar strength to the brick is not a detail. It is the whole job.

What crumbling mortar means for your wall

When mortar joints fail, the wall loses its water seal. Rain that used to run off the face of the wall now runs into the open joints and behind the brick. The wall ties, the sheathing, the framing — everything behind the brick gets wetter than it was designed to get. Open joints

also let wind-driven rain push deeper into the wall, and they give insects and even small pests entry points.

Failed mortar also changes how the wall handles movement. The joints are the wall's expansion system. When they are intact and flexible, the wall moves as a unit. When they are crumbled and open, individual bricks can shift, and the wall loses its integrity. A wall with widespread mortar failure is a wall that is deteriorating faster every year, because each failed joint lets in the water that fails the next joint.

The good news is that mortar failure is one of the most straightforward problems to fix, if it is caught in time. That fix is called repointing.

Repointing basics

Repointing — sometimes called tuckpointing, though true tuckpointing is a specific decorative technique — means removing the failed mortar from the joints and packing in new mortar. Done properly, it is meticulous work. The old mortar is ground or chiseled out to a proper depth, usually about three-quarters of an inch, without damaging the edges of the brick. The joints are cleaned and dampened. New mortar, matched in strength and color to the original, is pressed into the joints in layers and tooled to match the original joint profile.

A proper repointing job restores the wall's water seal, its structural unity, and its appearance. It is one of the best investments a homeowner can make in an aging brick wall. But the word “properly” is doing a lot of work in that sentence, because repointing is also one of the most commonly botched repairs in the trade.

The most common botch is smearing new mortar over the old without removing the failed material. This is sometimes called a “smear job” or “bagging,” and it is worthless. The new mortar has nothing solid to bond to, so it cracks and falls off, often within a year or two — and

while it is up there, it traps moisture against the wall. If a contractor proposes to repoint your wall without grinding out the old joints, find another contractor.

The second most common botch is the wrong mortar — too hard, wrong color, or both. A wall repointed in bright gray modern mortar when the original was a soft buff color will look patchy and wrong for the life of the wall. Worse, as described above, mortar that is harder than the brick will crack the brick over time. A competent mason will discuss mortar type and color matching with you before the work starts, and will often do a small test panel so you can approve the match.

The third botch is poor joint preparation — repointing over dust, or repointing dry joints on a hot Texas afternoon so the new mortar dries before it cures. Mortar needs moisture to cure properly. On a summer day in Dallas, a good mason works in sections, keeps the joints damp, and sometimes shades the wall. These are the small professional habits that separate a twenty-year repair from a two-year repair.

How to check your own mortar

You do not need any special tools. Walk the walls of your house once a year and look at the joints. Look for deep recession, crumbling, missing chunks, and cracks. Press your thumb firmly into a few joints in different areas — sound mortar will not give. Scrape gently with a key — sound mortar will resist. Pay special attention to the walls that get the most weather: the south and west walls that take the afternoon sun and the driving rain, the areas under gutters and below windows, and the bottom courses near the ground where splashback hits.

If you find failed joints, do not panic, but do not ignore them either. Mortar deterioration is progressive. A wall that needs repointing in a few areas this year will need more next year, and the water entering

through the failed joints is working on the wall behind the brick the whole time. ### Mortar types in plain terms

Mortar is not one thing. It comes in types designated by letter, and the letters describe strength — which, counterintuitively, is not a case of stronger is better. The right mortar is the one matched to your brick and your wall, not the strongest one on the shelf.

Type N is the standard for most residential brick veneer in Texas. It is a medium-strength, relatively flexible mortar that bonds well and accommodates normal movement. If your home was built in the last fifty years, its original mortar is very likely Type N, and repairs should generally use Type N as well.

Type S is stronger and used where more structural strength is needed — below grade, in retaining walls, in high-wind applications. It has its place, but that place is usually not your veneer wall. Using Type S to repoint a veneer built with Type N creates exactly the hard-mortar problem described earlier in this chapter: the joints become stronger than the brick, and the brick pays the price.

Type O is a softer, lower-strength mortar sometimes found in older homes and appropriate for very soft brick. And if your home predates the 1930s, it may have been built with true lime mortar — a soft, breathable, self-healing material that is very different from modern cement mortars. Lime mortar walls must be repaired with lime-compatible mortar. Smearing modern Portland cement mortar over historic lime-mortar brick is one of the fastest ways to destroy an old wall: the hard modern mortar traps moisture and the soft old brick spalls and crumbles.

The takeaway for a homeowner is simple: ask your mason what type of mortar he plans to use and why. “Type N, to match your existing mortar” is the answer you want to hear on a typical Texas veneer home. “Whatever I’ve got on the truck” is not. Mortar selection is a

professional decision, and a professional should be able to explain it in one sentence.

Get an estimate, understand the scope, and put it on the schedule. Your wall will thank you for decades.

Chapter 6: The White Powder — Efflorescence Explained

Every so often a homeowner calls about white powder on their brick. It looks like dust or a faint white stain, sometimes in patches, sometimes covering whole sections of wall. It brushes off easily, but it comes back. It is almost always efflorescence, and while it is usually harmless in itself, it is telling you something worth hearing.

What efflorescence is

Efflorescence is a deposit of soluble salts left on the surface of the brick when water evaporates. Here is the process. Brick and mortar contain small amounts of soluble salts — this is normal, a natural part of the materials. When water moves through the brick or mortar, it dissolves some of those salts and carries them along. When that water reaches the surface of the wall and evaporates, the salts are left behind as a white, powdery residue.

Think of it like the white ring left in a glass after salt water dries. Same principle, playing out across the face of your house. The powder itself is just salt. It is not mold, it is not structural damage, and in most cases it brushes right off with a dry brush.

New construction often shows efflorescence in the first year or two. New brick, new mortar, and the water used during construction all contribute moisture and salts, and as the wall goes through its first wet-dry cycles, the salts work their way out. This kind of efflorescence usually fades on its own as the wall dries out and the readily soluble salts are exhausted. If your home is new and you see white powder, it is usually just the wall settling in.

What it signals about water entry

Here is the important part: efflorescence requires water moving through the wall. No water movement, no salt deposits. So while the powder itself is cosmetic, its presence proves that water is traveling through your brick or mortar and reaching the surface. On a new home, that is expected. On a twenty-year-old home that suddenly develops efflorescence in one area, it is a clue.

When I see efflorescence concentrated in a specific area — below a window, under a gutter, near the ground on one wall — I treat it as a marker for a water source. Something is feeding more water into that section of wall than the rest. It might be a failed caulk joint above, a gutter overflowing, a sprinkler hitting the wall, or grading that pools water at the base. The efflorescence is the wall's way of pointing at the problem. Follow the white powder uphill and you will usually find the water.

Efflorescence that appears on interior brick or on basement walls deserves more attention, because it means water is moving all the way through the wall from the outside — or rising up from the ground through the masonry. Either way, there is a water management issue to address.

Cosmetic versus warning sign

Most efflorescence is cosmetic. It looks bad, it comes back after you brush it off, and it bothers homeowners far more than it bothers the wall. If the wall is otherwise sound — good mortar, no spalling, no cracks, no interior moisture — efflorescence is a housekeeping issue, not a repair issue.

But there is a more serious cousin called subflorescence, where the salts crystallize just below the surface of the brick instead of on it. You cannot see subflorescence directly, but you can see its effects: the surface of the brick flakes and peels, which looks exactly like spalling — because it is a form of spalling. The growing salt crystals exert

pressure inside the brick's pores, breaking the face apart from within. If your brick is spalling and there is efflorescence nearby, salts may be part of the damage mechanism, and the water source feeding the salts needs to be found and stopped.

There is also a simple test to distinguish efflorescence from other white substances. True efflorescence dissolves in water — wipe it with a damp cloth and it disappears (though it may return as more water moves through). If the white substance does not dissolve, it might be something else: a calcium carbonate deposit, which is harder and more crusty, or in rare cases the beginnings of a different problem. When in doubt, have a mason look at it. A visual inspection is usually all it takes.

How to deal with it

For cosmetic efflorescence, the standard treatment is simple: let the wall dry thoroughly, then brush the deposits off with a stiff dry brush. Do not use water to wash it off — water just dissolves the salts and carries them back into the brick, and they will reappear when it dries. Do not use acid cleaners unless you know what you are doing; muriatic acid can burn the brick face and damage the mortar if misapplied, and it is a job for a professional with the right dilution and neutralization process.

More important than removing the powder is addressing the water. If the efflorescence keeps coming back in the same spot, something is feeding water into that wall. Check the gutters above, check the caulk around nearby windows, check the grading at the base, check the sprinklers. Fix the water, and the efflorescence will fade on its own as the wall dries out.

One thing not to do: do not seal the wall to trap the salts inside. Sealers and paints applied over efflorescence will bubble and peel as the salts continue to migrate, and as we discussed in the spalling

chapter, trapping moisture in the brick accelerates every other form of damage. The wall needs to breathe and drain. Help it do that, and the white powder takes care of itself.

Efflorescence is your wall talking to you. Most of the time it is saying something mild — “I got wet, I’m drying out.” Sometimes it is saying something more urgent — “water is getting in here, find it.” ### Efflorescence or something else?

Not every white substance on brick is efflorescence, and misidentifying it leads to the wrong response. Here is how to tell the common look-alikes apart.

True efflorescence is powdery and dry. It brushes off easily with a dry brush or cloth, and it dissolves when wiped with a damp cloth. It often appears in patches that follow water patterns — below windows, near the ground, under gutters. If the white stuff behaves this way, it is almost certainly efflorescence, and everything earlier in this chapter applies.

Mold and mildew are different. They look fuzzy or slimy rather than powdery, they come in colors — black, green, gray, sometimes pink or orange — and they grow in persistently damp, shaded areas. White mold exists, but it looks organic and textured, not like fine salt dust. Mold on brick signals chronic dampness and poor drying, and while the mold itself can usually be cleaned off, the moisture problem behind it needs attention.

Hard-water mineral deposits form where water consistently runs over concrete or mortar — below a limestone windowsill, for example. These deposits are crusty and hard, not powdery, and they do not brush off. They are calcium carbonate, essentially the same mineral as the mortar itself, redeposited by water. They are stubborn but usually cosmetic, and they indicate a water path worth investigating.

Finally, there is a white haze sometimes left by improper acid cleaning — a chemical burn on the brick face from acid applied too strong or left too long. This looks like a bleached, uneven whitening rather than a powder, and it does not brush off because it is damage to the brick surface, not a deposit on it. It is another reason acid cleaning belongs in professional hands.

When in doubt, try the simple tests: brush it dry, wipe it damp. Powdery and water-soluble points to efflorescence. Anything else deserves a closer look — and if you are unsure, a mason's visual inspection will settle it in minutes.

Learning to tell the difference is part of learning to read your house, which brings us to the next chapter: reading cracks like a map.

Chapter 7: Reading Cracks Like a Map

Of all the things a homeowner can learn about their brick house, reading cracks is the most valuable. Cracks are the wall's diary. They record what the ground did, when it did it, and how serious it was. A homeowner who can read the basic patterns will know which cracks are cosmetic, which ones deserve watching, and which ones mean it is time to call a professional. This chapter will teach you the map.

Hairline versus wide

Start with the simplest distinction: how wide is the crack? Hairline cracks — thinner than a credit card, barely wide enough to catch a fingernail — are extremely common and usually not a structural concern. They come from normal shrinkage, minor seasonal movement, and the everyday flexing of a house. Most brick homes develop some hairline cracks in the mortar joints over the years. They are worth noting and watching, but they rarely require anything more than monitoring or minor repointing.

Wider cracks deserve more attention. As a rough guide I have used for years: cracks up to about a sixteenth of an inch are generally minor. Cracks around an eighth of an inch warrant a closer look and a plan. Cracks a quarter inch or wider — wide enough to fit a pencil into — need a professional evaluation, because something significant moved. These are guidelines, not engineering thresholds, but they will serve a homeowner well.

Width is not the only thing that matters. A hairline crack that is growing is more concerning than a wider crack that has been stable for ten years. This is why I always recommend that homeowners document cracks when they first notice them: photograph them with a coin or ruler for scale, note the date, and check back in a few months. A crack with a history is a crack you can understand. A crack you just

noticed could be ten days old or ten years old, and that difference matters.

Stair-step cracks

The most common crack pattern in Texas brick homes is the stair-step crack. It follows the mortar joints in a zigzag, stepping up or down across the wall like a staircase. This pattern is the signature of differential foundation movement — one part of the foundation settling or heaving relative to another.

Stair-step cracks that follow the mortar joints, rather than breaking through the bricks themselves, are actually the wall working as designed. The mortar is the weak link on purpose, and it is cracking so the brick does not have to. A stair-step crack through mortar joints, especially a narrow and stable one, is often a cosmetic issue that can be repointed once the movement has stabilized.

But pay attention to the details. A stair-step crack that is wider at the top than the bottom suggests one side of the wall is dropping. Wider at the bottom than the top suggests heaving — the ground pushing up. A crack that runs through the bricks themselves, breaking the units rather than following the joints, indicates more force was involved. And a stair-step crack that keeps growing, or that reopens after being repaired, is telling you the movement is still active and the foundation question has not been answered.

Vertical cracks

Vertical cracks in brick walls often appear near the corners of the house or in the middle of long walls. Near corners, they frequently relate to the foundation: the corner settles or the two walls move slightly independently, and the brick cracks at the stress point. In the middle of a long wall, vertical cracks can come from thermal

expansion — a long run of brick expanding in the Texas summer heat with no expansion joint to absorb the movement.

Many brick homes, especially older ones, were built without proper expansion joints, and long walls develop vertical cracks as the brick grows and shrinks with temperature. These cracks are often uniform in width and stable over time. They are a maintenance item — they need to be sealed or repointed to keep water out — but they are not usually a structural alarm.

Horizontal cracks

Horizontal cracks deserve respect. A horizontal crack running along a mortar joint, especially one that is long and relatively straight, can indicate that the wall is being pushed or pulled laterally. In a veneer wall, a horizontal crack at the level of a floor line can suggest the framing and the veneer are moving differently. Horizontal cracking accompanied by bulging — where the wall visibly bows outward — is a serious condition that needs prompt professional attention, because it can indicate failed wall ties or pressure building up behind the veneer.

Short horizontal cracks in a few joints are less alarming and often relate to minor settlement or shrinkage. But any horizontal crack that is growing, or any horizontal crack you can see daylight through, should be evaluated promptly.

Diagonal cracks

Diagonal cracks running from the corners of windows and doors are among the most common patterns in residential brick. Openings are the weak points in any wall — the brick above a window is carried by a steel lintel, and the corners concentrate stress. When the foundation moves even slightly, the stress concentrates at these corners and the brick cracks diagonally outward from them.

Small diagonal cracks at window and door corners are so common in Texas that they are almost a normal feature of an aging brick home. They become concerning when they are wide, when they are growing, or when they appear suddenly after years of stability. A new diagonal crack at a door corner, combined with a door that has started sticking, is the classic sign of foundation movement, and it is worth a professional look.

Settlement versus structural concern

Homeowners often ask me: is this crack just settlement, or is it structural? Here is how I think about it after fifty years of looking at cracked walls.

Normal settlement and seasonal movement produce narrow cracks, mostly in mortar joints, that appear gradually and then stabilize. They do not come with other symptoms. The doors work, the windows work, the floors feel level. These cracks are the house breathing. They need monitoring and eventually cosmetic repair, but they are not emergencies.

Structural concern shows up as a pattern, not a single crack. Wide cracks. Growing cracks. Cracks through brick units, not just mortar. Cracks combined with sticking doors, cracked window glass, sloping floors, or gaps opening between the wall and the ceiling. Multiple symptoms pointing the same direction. When the crack is part of a bigger story the house is telling, take it seriously.

When it is a foundation issue needing a foundation specialist

This is the most important section in this chapter, so let me be plain about it. A mason repairs brick. A foundation specialist repairs foundations. When the problem is in the ground, brick repair alone will not hold, and any mason who tells you otherwise is either inexperienced or dishonest.

Call a foundation specialist first — before any brick work — if you see any of the following: cracks that are actively growing; the same cracks returning after a previous repair; doors or windows binding or failing to latch; floors that feel unlevel or bouncy; gaps between walls and ceilings or between the brick and the window frames; or any crack you can fit your finger into. These are foundation symptoms, and they need a foundation evaluation with elevation readings, not a tube of caulk.

A reputable masonry contractor will tell you this himself. When I walk up to a house and see active foundation movement, I do not sell brick work. I tell the homeowner to get the foundation evaluated and stabilized, and to call me back when the ground is done moving. Then the brick repair will last. Any contractor who wants to fix your cracks without asking about the foundation, without asking whether the cracks are growing, without asking about doors and floors — that contractor is not doing you a favor, no matter how good the price sounds.

For example, imagine a homeowner who notices a stair-step crack above the garage that has doubled in width over one summer, and the side door near it now scrapes the frame. That homeowner does not need a mason yet. That homeowner needs a foundation evaluation. Once the foundation is stable, the mason can repoint the crack and it will stay repaired. Order matters. Foundation first, brick second, always.

The homeowner's crack log

The single most useful thing you can do about cracks — beyond reading them — is documenting them. A crack log turns vague worry into concrete information, and it transforms the conversation when you eventually call a professional. Here is how to keep one.

For each crack you notice, record four things: where it is, what it looks like, how wide it is, and when you found it. “East wall, stair-step crack above the kitchen window, hairline, first noticed March.” Take a photograph with something for scale — a coin, a ruler, or even your fingertip held beside the crack. Phone photos are perfect for this. Store them in an album labeled with the house and the year.

Then recheck on a schedule: every season during your walk-around, and once more after any extreme event — a severe drought summer, a hard freeze, a foundation watering change. Compare the new photo to the old one. Has the crack grown? Has it branched? Has it appeared on the inside wall too? A crack that looks identical year after year is a crack at rest. A crack that changes between checks is a crack with something to say.

Note the conditions, too. Texas cracks often open widest in late summer, when the clay is driest and the foundation has settled most, and close partially in spring when the soil swells. A crack that breathes with the seasons — opening in August, tightening in March — is usually following the normal soil cycle. A crack that opens and never closes, or that grows wider every summer without recovering, is trending in one direction, and that direction deserves professional attention.

Bring the log when you call a contractor. A mason or foundation specialist who can see dated photos of a crack’s history can give you a far better diagnosis than one who sees it for the first time with no history at all. You will also protect yourself: if a contractor tells you a crack is new and urgent and your log shows it unchanged for three years, you know to get a second opinion. Documentation is quiet power. Keep the log.

Learn to read the map. Your walls are telling you the truth. Listen to them, document what you see, and bring in the right professional for what the map shows.

Chapter 8: The Homeowner Walk-Around

You do not need to be a mason to keep an eye on your brick house. You just need a routine. This chapter gives you one: a seasonal self-inspection you can do in under an hour, twice a year, with no tools beyond your eyes, a camera, and maybe a pair of binoculars. The goal is not to diagnose problems like a professional. The goal is to notice changes early, when they are small and cheap to fix.

Do this walk-around in the spring and the fall. Spring catches whatever winter did. Fall prepares the house for the wet months ahead. Pick a dry day with good light, and walk the same route every time so you learn what is normal for your house.

The walls

Walk slowly around the entire house, looking at every wall from a few feet away and then from across the yard. You are looking for changes since last time. New cracks, growing cracks, spalling brick, crumbling mortar, stains, and discoloration. Look at the wall as a whole first — bulging, leaning, or wavy sections will show up when you sight along the wall from one end. Then look closer at the details.

Pay attention to the bottom two feet of every wall. This is where splashback hits, where sprinklers soak, where mulch piles up, and where most moisture damage starts. Check that the weep holes just above the foundation are open and clear — not painted shut, not clogged with dirt, not buried under mulch or soil. If the ground has built up against the brick over the years, pull it back. Soil against brick wicks moisture straight into the wall, and it gives termites a hidden highway.

Look up, too. The areas under the eaves, below windows, and around hose bibs and exterior faucets are all common trouble spots. Staining below a window often means the caulk has failed. Staining below the eaves can mean the gutters are overflowing. A dark damp patch that never seems to dry is always worth investigating.

Windows and doors

Every window and door is a hole in your brick wall, and every hole is sealed with caulk. Walk to each one and look at the joint where the frame meets the brick. Sound caulk is flexible and continuous. Failed caulk is cracked, shrunken, pulling away from one side, or missing in chunks. If you can see a gap, water can get in.

Check that windows and doors open, close, and latch properly. A window that used to glide and now sticks, or a door that suddenly will not latch, can be an early sign of foundation movement — especially if it changed over a single season. Note which ones are affected and whether they are on the same side of the house. That information is gold to a contractor later.

Look at the steel lintels above windows and doors — the metal bars or angles that carry the brick over the opening. Surface rust is common and usually cosmetic, but heavy flaking rust, rust staining running down the brick, or a lintel that looks swollen means the steel is corroding and expanding, which can crack the brick around it. Lintels can be cleaned, treated, and painted by a professional before the corrosion becomes a structural issue.

The chimney

If you have a brick chimney, look at it from the ground with binoculars. Check the mortar joints for erosion and the brick for spalling — chimneys take brutal weather exposure, with no eaves to protect them, and they deteriorate faster than walls. Look at the

flashing where the chimney meets the roof; this is one of the most leak-prone spots on any house. Check the chimney cap and crown for cracks. A cracked crown lets water straight down into the chimney structure.

Also sight along the chimney from the side. A chimney that is leaning away from the house, even slightly, is a serious condition — it means the chimney's foundation is moving independently of the house, and it needs professional evaluation promptly. Do not ignore a leaning chimney.

The foundation line

Walk the foundation line all the way around the house, looking at where the brick meets the concrete. You are looking for new or growing cracks in the brick just above the foundation, gaps opening between the soil and the foundation wall (normal in late summer, but note how wide), and any signs of water pooling or poor drainage.

This is also the time to check your drainage. After a rain is ideal, but even on a dry day you can read the signs: mulch washed away from the foundation, soil eroded into gullies, splash marks on the brick, downspouts that end too close to the house. Every downspout should carry water at least several feet away from the foundation — extensions are cheap and they prevent expensive problems.

If you run soaker hoses in the summer to manage the clay soil, check that they are working evenly all the way around and that they are not ponding water against the foundation. The goal is even moisture, not puddles.

Drainage and gutters

Look up at the gutters from the ground. Are they pulling away from the fascia? Are there visible sags where water would pond? Are the downspouts connected and intact? Then look at the ground below:

staining on the brick under a gutter joint, mulch displaced in a fan pattern, or a trench eroded in the soil all point to a gutter that is overflowing or leaking.

If you are comfortable on a ladder and can do it safely, a visual check of the gutter interiors for leaves and debris is worthwhile in the fall. If you are not comfortable on a ladder, hire it done — gutter cleaning is inexpensive, and clogged gutters are one of the most common causes of water damage to brick walls. Never risk a fall to check a gutter. Your safety is worth more than any inspection.

What to do with what you find

Write it down. Photograph it. Date it. A simple note on your phone — “east wall, stair-step crack above kitchen window, hairline, photo taken” — repeated twice a year builds a history of your house that is enormously valuable. When you eventually call a contractor, you will be able to say exactly when a crack appeared and how fast it has grown, instead of guessing. Contractors love informed homeowners, and informed homeowners get better diagnoses.

Sort what you find into three buckets. Bucket one: maintenance you can handle — re-caulking a window, extending a downspout, pulling mulch off the weep holes, aiming a sprinkler away from the wall. Bucket two: watch and recheck — hairline cracks, minor efflorescence, small areas of mortar erosion. Photograph them, note them, look again next season. Bucket three: call a professional — growing cracks, spalling brick, bulging walls, leaning chimneys, signs of water inside the house, anything involving the foundation.

The walk-around is not about finding problems to worry about. Most of the time, you will find nothing new, and that is the point. You will know your house is sound because you looked, not because you hoped. ### After a storm: the extra walk-around

North Texas weather earns its reputation — hail, straight-line winds, driving rain, the occasional tornado. After any significant storm, do a focused walk-around beyond your normal seasonal routine. Storms find weaknesses that calm weather hides.

Start with impact damage. Hail can chip brick faces and knock mortar out of joints, especially on the windward walls. Look for fresh chips with sharp edges and lighter-colored interiors — new damage looks different from old weathering. Check windows for cracked glass and damaged screens, and check the window caulk, which hail can beat loose.

Next, check everything water-related. High winds drive rain into places it normally never reaches — under eaves, into attic vents, behind shutters. Look for new stains on the brick, water marks under the eaves, and debris packed against weep holes. Check that gutters are still attached and downspouts still connected; wind and heavy water loads pull gutters loose, and a detached downspout pouring roof water against the foundation will do more damage in one season than the storm did in one night.

Look up at the roof-wall intersections and the chimney. Dislodged flashing is common after wind events, and a piece of flashing bent back from a chimney or a roof joint is an open door for the next rain. Binoculars are your friend here — do not climb on the roof yourself to inspect storm damage. Falls are the leading cause of serious homeowner injury, and no inspection is worth that risk.

Document everything with photos before you clean up or make temporary repairs. If the damage is significant enough to involve your homeowner's insurance, dated photos taken immediately after the storm are the foundation of your claim. And if a door-knocker appears offering a free storm inspection, remember what Chapter 11 taught you before you say yes.

And when something does change, you will catch it early — when the fix is a caulk gun and a Saturday morning instead of a scaffold and a work crew.

Chapter 9: What Repair Estimates Should Tell You

So the walk-around found something, or a crack has been growing, or the mortar is crumbling — and it is time to get a professional involved. You call a masonry contractor, he walks the property, and a few days later an estimate arrives. This chapter is about reading that estimate like a professional, so you know what you are buying before anyone picks up a trowel.

What a complete estimate includes

A proper masonry estimate is a written document, not a number on a napkin and not a verbal promise. It should contain, at a minimum, the following elements.

First, a clear description of the problem as the contractor understands it. “Repoint deteriorated mortar joints on the east wall” is a scope. “Fix the brick” is not. The estimate should tell you what the contractor believes is wrong and what he proposes to do about it, in words you can understand. If you cannot tell from the estimate what work will actually be performed, the estimate is incomplete.

Second, the scope of work in detail. Which walls, which areas, how many square feet or linear feet. How deep the old mortar will be removed. What will be done about any damaged brick — replaced, and if so, how many units. What happens to the surrounding areas: will landscaping be protected, will windows be masked. The scope is the heart of the estimate. Everything else hangs on it.

Third, materials. The estimate should specify the type of mortar to be used and how the color will be matched. As we discussed in Chapter 5, mortar must be matched in strength to the existing brick and wall — softer than the brick, appropriate for the application. For brick

replacement, the estimate should address how replacement units will be selected to blend with the existing wall. “Match existing as closely as possible” is honest language; any contractor who promises a perfect invisible match on thirty-year-old brick is overselling.

Fourth, the process. How will the old mortar be removed — grinding, chiseling, or both? How will dust be controlled? How will the new mortar be cured — and in Texas summer heat, curing method matters, because mortar that dries too fast does not gain its proper strength. A contractor who has a plan for hot-weather curing is a contractor who has done this before.

Fifth, cleanup. Masonry work is dusty and messy. The estimate should state that the work area will be cleaned daily and thoroughly at completion — mortar droppings removed, dust washed from windows and siding, landscaping restored. Cleanup disputes are among the most common homeowner complaints, and they are entirely preventable with a written commitment.

Sixth, warranty terms. What does the contractor warrant, and for how long? A workmanship warranty on repointing and brick replacement is standard — the contractor stands behind the quality of the installation. Understand what the warranty covers and what it does not. No honest contractor warrants against future foundation movement, because no mason controls the soil. A warranty that covers workmanship for a stated period, in writing, is what you are looking for. Get the terms in the contract, not just in conversation.

Seventh, price, payment terms, and schedule. The total price, what is due when, and when the work will start and finish. Deposits, progress payments, and final payment on completion are normal. Full payment upfront is not.

How to compare two bids

Get at least two or three estimates for any significant job. Then compare them carefully — and compare scope first, price second. This is where most homeowners go wrong. They line up the bottom-line numbers and pick the lowest, without checking whether the bids describe the same work.

Bid A says “repoint east wall, grind joints to 3/4 inch, Type N mortar, color-matched, includes cleanup and 5-year workmanship warranty” for one price. Bid B says “tuckpoint east wall” for thirty percent less. These are not the same job. Bid B does not say how the old mortar will be removed, what mortar will be used, or whether there is a warranty. The lower price may reflect less work, cheaper materials, or simply less honesty about what is included. You cannot compare prices until you have compared scopes.

When bids differ significantly, ask why. Sometimes there is a good reason — one contractor has a more efficient method, or interprets the problem differently. Sometimes the reason is that one bid leaves out work the other includes. A contractor who can explain his bid clearly, in plain language, is usually a contractor who understands his work. A contractor who gets vague or defensive when you ask questions is telling you something.

Be especially careful with bids that are dramatically lower than the others. In masonry, as in most trades, you generally get what you pay for. A bid that is half the price of the others is not a bargain — it is a different job, done with different materials, by someone with different overhead, or it is a contractor who plans to find “extra work” once the job starts. Ask what is excluded. Ask about change orders — how additional work, if needed, will be priced and approved. Get the answers in writing.

Questions to ask before you sign

Before you accept any estimate, make sure you can answer these questions. What exactly is wrong, in the contractor's professional opinion? What is the proposed fix, step by step? What materials will be used, and how will they be matched to the existing wall? How will the work area be protected and cleaned? What is the warranty, in writing? What is the payment schedule? When will the work start and finish? What happens if additional damage is found once work begins?

A good contractor welcomes these questions. He has answered them a hundred times, and he would rather spend twenty minutes explaining the job than two days fixing a misunderstanding. If a contractor resists questions, rushes you, or tells you that you do not need to worry about the details — worry about the contractor.

The estimate is the beginning of the relationship

The way a contractor writes an estimate tells you how he will do the work. Detailed, clear, and honest on paper usually means detailed, clear, and honest on the wall. Vague, rushed, or evasive on paper rarely improves once the tools come out. Take the estimate seriously, read every line, ask every question, and never sign anything you do not fully understand. ### Change orders and progress payments, done right

Even the most thorough estimate cannot see inside your wall. Once work begins — old mortar ground out, damaged brick removed — a mason sometimes finds additional deterioration hidden behind the surface: rotted sheathing, failed flashing, more damaged brick than the exterior suggested. This is normal, and it is why your contract needs a clear change-order process before work starts.

A change order is simply a written amendment to the contract: a description of the additional work found, the additional cost, and your signature approving it before the work is done. The key words are written and before. A professional contractor stops, shows you what he

found — photographs help — explains why it needs attention, prices it, and gets your written approval. What a professional does not do is perform extra work silently and present the bill at the end, or pressure you with claims that the work had to be done immediately.

Agree in advance on how change orders will be priced. Some contractors use unit prices in the original estimate — a per-square-foot repointing rate, a per-brick replacement rate — so extras are simple arithmetic. That is the cleanest arrangement and worth asking for.

Structure payments around visible progress. A typical arrangement: a deposit to schedule the job and order materials, a payment when demolition and preparation are complete, a payment at the halfway point of installation, and a final payment — a meaningful amount, not a token — held back until the work is finished, the cleanup is complete, and you have walked the job with the contractor and are satisfied. Never make the final payment before the final walkthrough. That last payment is your leverage, and once it is paid, your leverage is gone.

Keep every document: the signed estimate, the contract, every change order, every receipt. If a dispute ever arises, the homeowner with a complete paper trail is the homeowner who prevails. It is that simple.

The next chapter covers how to check out the contractor behind the estimate — because the person matters as much as the paper.

Chapter 10: Hiring the Right Masonry Contractor

The contractor you hire matters as much as the repair itself. A skilled mason with the right materials will give you a repair that lasts decades. An unqualified contractor with the wrong materials can damage your wall worse than if you had done nothing. This chapter is about telling the difference before anyone starts work.

Start with time in business

Masonry is a trade learned over years, not weeks. A contractor who has been doing brick work in your area for a decade or more has seen your soil, your weather, and your housing stock. He knows which brick was used in which subdivisions, how the local clay moves, and what repairs hold up over time. Longevity is not a guarantee of quality, but it is a strong indicator. Fly-by-night operators do not last ten years. Good ones do.

Ask how long the company has been in business under its current name, and how long the owner has been doing masonry work. Then verify it — business registrations, a physical local presence, and a track record you can check. A contractor who has been serving the same community for years has a reputation to protect, and that reputation is your best insurance.

Insurance: non-negotiable

Any contractor who works on your home must carry general liability insurance, and if he has employees, workers' compensation coverage. This is not paperwork for its own sake. If a worker is injured on your property, or if the work damages your home, insurance is what stands between you and a very expensive problem.

Ask for proof of insurance — a current certificate, not a verbal assurance. A legitimate contractor provides this without hesitation; it is a routine request. Here is an important fact for Texas homeowners: Texas has no state-level license for masonry contractors. There is no state board to check, no state license number to verify. That makes insurance even more important, because it is one of the few objective credentials available. Also check your city or county requirements — some local jurisdictions have their own registration or permit requirements for contractors, and a professional will know what applies in your area and comply with it.

Written scope and contract

Never hire a masonry contractor without a written contract. The contract should include the full scope of work from the estimate, the materials to be used, the total price and payment schedule, the start and completion dates, the warranty terms, and the cleanup commitment. Everything discussed should be on paper. Verbal promises are not enforceable and are frequently misremembered — honestly, on both sides.

Read the contract before you sign it. If something in the estimate is not in the contract, ask for it to be added. If the contractor will not put it in writing, consider that a warning. Professionals document their work. Amateurs and opportunists avoid documentation.

References and reputation

Ask for references — recent customers with similar work — and actually contact them. Ask whether the work was completed on time, whether the crew was professional, whether the cleanup was thorough, and whether any problems came up after the job. One or two references are a start; a contractor with deep local roots will have many.

Check the company's standing with the Better Business Bureau. The BBB tracks complaints and how businesses respond to them, and a long-standing accredited business with a clean record is a meaningful signal. Look at online reviews with a critical eye — patterns matter more than individual reviews. A contractor with dozens of reviews mentioning punctuality, cleanliness, and good communication is telling you something consistent. A contractor with no reviews, no references, and no verifiable history is asking you to take a leap of faith with your home. Do not take it.

Drive by past jobs if the contractor offers addresses. Brick work is visible from the street. You can see the quality of mortar matching, the neatness of the joints, and how the repair has aged — all without knocking on anyone's door.

How the contractor communicates

Pay attention to how a contractor behaves before the job starts, because it predicts how he will behave during it. Does he show up when he says he will? Does he explain the problem in terms you understand, or hide behind jargon? Does he answer your questions directly? Does he put everything in writing without being asked twice?

A good masonry contractor is also honest about the limits of his trade. As discussed in Chapter 7, a mason who sees active foundation movement should tell you to get a foundation evaluation before he touches the brick. A contractor who tries to sell you brick work over a moving foundation is either inexperienced or prioritizing the sale over your home. Honesty about what he cannot fix is one of the strongest signs of a contractor you can trust with what he can.

Trust your judgment

After you have checked insurance, read the contract, called the references, and compared the estimates, trust your instincts. If something feels wrong — the price is too good, the pressure is too high, the answers are too vague — walk away. There are plenty of qualified masonry contractors in the Dallas–Fort Worth area. You do not need to hire the first one who knocks, and you do not need to hire anyone who makes you uncomfortable. ### The interview: questions that reveal character

Beyond the paperwork — insurance, contract, references — have a real conversation with any contractor you are considering. The way he answers a few direct questions tells you more than any brochure.

Ask: who will actually be doing the work? Some contractors sell the job and send a crew you have never met. Others work alongside their crew every day. Neither arrangement is automatically bad, but you should know which one you are getting. Ask who supervises the site, whether the workers are employees or subcontractors, and whether the person giving you the estimate will be present during the work. Consistency between the salesperson and the work crew is where quality lives or dies.

Ask: what will you do if you find something unexpected? You want to hear about stopping, documenting, and written change orders — the process described in Chapter 9. If the answer is vague, the change-order process will be vague too.

Ask: how do you handle mortar matching? A thoughtful answer mentions mortar type, test panels, and honest expectations about blending with aged brick. A dismissive answer is a red flag in disguise.

Ask: can you explain why this repair is the right one? You are not testing his knowledge; you are testing his willingness to teach. The best contractors are educators. They want you to understand what you

are buying, because an informed customer is a satisfied customer. A contractor who cannot or will not explain his own recommendation in plain language either does not understand it himself or does not respect you enough to try.

Finally, notice what he asks you. A good contractor asks about the history of the problem: when did you first notice it, has it changed, have you had foundation work done, where does water go when it rains. A contractor who asks good questions is diagnosing. A contractor who asks no questions is selling.

Your home deserves a contractor you trust, and trust is earned through transparency, not salesmanship.

Chapter 11: Red Flags

Most masonry contractors are honest tradespeople who take pride in their work. But every year, especially after major storms, a wave of opportunists moves through Texas neighborhoods looking for quick money. This chapter is about recognizing them before they touch your house — or your wallet.

Door-knockers after storms

Hail season in North Texas brings out the storm chasers — contractors who sweep through neighborhoods after every big storm, knocking on doors and offering free inspections. Some of these are legitimate local companies drumming up business. Many are not. They come from out of town, work a storm for a few weeks, and disappear, leaving no one to honor the warranty they promised.

Be especially cautious of anyone who shows up uninvited right after a storm and tells you your brick or roof has damage you cannot see. High-pressure tactics thrive on urgency and fear. A legitimate contractor does not need to manufacture an emergency at your front door. If you are concerned about storm damage, call a local contractor you have vetted yourself — do not hire the one who found you.

Cash-only demands

A contractor who insists on cash only — no checks, no cards, no paper trail — is a contractor who does not want a record of the transaction. There are legitimate reasons a small tradesman might prefer cash for a small job, but for any significant masonry work, cash-only is a red flag. It usually means the business is not properly established, not paying taxes, not carrying insurance, or planning to disappear.

Normal payment practice is a deposit to schedule the work, progress payments as milestones are completed, and final payment when the

job is done to your satisfaction. Get receipts for everything. A paper trail protects both sides.

No written contract

This one is simple: no contract, no job. A contractor who wants to work without a written agreement is avoiding accountability. It does not matter how friendly he is, how good the price sounds, or how quickly he can start. Without a written scope, price, schedule, and warranty, you have no recourse if the work is poor, incomplete, or never finished. Chapter 9 covered what the contract should contain. If a contractor will not provide one, that is the entire evaluation.

High-pressure “today only” pricing

“This price is only good if you sign today.” “I can fit you in this week, but I need an answer now.” “My supplier is raising prices tomorrow.” These are sales tactics, not facts. Legitimate masonry work does not expire at midnight. A contractor who pressures you to decide on the spot is trying to prevent you from getting other estimates, checking references, or thinking clearly.

Take your time. Get multiple bids. Check insurance and references. Sleep on it. Any contractor worth hiring will still be there next week with the same price — and if he is not, you have learned something valuable about him before he touched your house.

No local physical presence

Ask where the contractor’s business is located. A legitimate local contractor has a physical presence — an office, a shop, a yard, at minimum a verifiable local address and a local phone number that has been in service for years. Be wary of contractors who operate only from a cell phone and a truck with out-of-state plates, who cannot tell you where their office is, or whose business address turns out to be a post office box.

This matters most when something goes wrong. If the mortar starts cracking six months after the job, you need a contractor you can find. A local business with deep roots will come back and make it right, because its reputation depends on it. A storm chaser who has moved on to the next state will not.

Demands for large upfront payments

A reasonable deposit to schedule work and order materials is normal — typically a fraction of the total, not the majority. A contractor who demands half or more upfront, or full payment before work begins, is a serious red flag. Once he has your money, his incentive to finish the job — or to do it well — drops sharply.

Structure payments around progress: a deposit to get on the schedule, payments tied to completed milestones, and a meaningful final payment held back until the work is complete, the cleanup is done, and you are satisfied. This arrangement is fair to both sides, and any professional contractor will accept it.

What to do if you have already hired the wrong contractor

If you recognize these red flags after work has started — or after you have paid — do not panic, but act quickly. Document everything: photographs of the work, copies of all communications, receipts for all payments. Stop further payments if the contract allows it. If the contractor disappears or the work is defective, you have options: file a complaint with the Better Business Bureau, report fraud to your local authorities or the Texas Attorney General’s consumer protection division, and consult an attorney about your contract rights.

Prevention is far cheaper than recovery, which is why this chapter exists. The few hours you spend vetting a contractor are the best investment in the entire project. ### The insurance-claim game

One more red flag deserves its own section, because it has become increasingly common in Texas: the contractor who wants to handle your insurance claim for you. It usually starts after a hailstorm. A door-knocker or a flyer offers a free inspection, finds storm damage to your brick or roof, and proposes to deal with the insurance company on your behalf — sometimes asking you to sign an assignment of benefits or a contingency contract that gives him control of the claim.

Be very careful. Signing over your insurance claim to a contractor means he negotiates the settlement, and his incentive is to maximize the claim, not to serve your interests. Some of these operators inflate damage, manufacture claims for pre-existing wear, or perform unnecessary work to consume the payout. In the worst cases, homeowners discover too late that they signed away rights they did not understand, owe money beyond what insurance paid, or have a claim attached to their policy history that raises their premiums for years.

Your insurance claim is between you and your insurer. If you have legitimate storm damage, document it yourself with photos, file the claim yourself, and meet the adjuster yourself. Then hire a vetted local contractor — using everything in Chapters 9 and 10 — to perform the work for the agreed scope and price. Keep the roles separate: the insurer decides coverage, you decide the contractor, the contractor does the work.

A related scheme is the contractor who offers to cover your deductible or waive it. In Texas, waiving an insurance deductible on a claim is illegal — and a contractor who casually proposes breaking the law to win your business will cut other corners you cannot see. Walk away from anyone who suggests it, no matter how tempting the offer sounds.

Legitimate contractors do excellent insurance restoration work every day. The difference is process: you control the claim, the scope is in

writing, the price is agreed, and the contractor's job starts after the paperwork — not with your signature on his claim form.

Hire slowly, hire carefully, and the red flags will never get past your front door.

Chapter 12: Protecting Your Brick for the Long Haul

Everything in this book has been building toward a simple truth: brick houses last a very long time when they are maintained, and they deteriorate quickly when they are neglected. The difference is rarely one big event. It is the accumulation of small maintenance decisions made — or not made — over years. This final chapter is your long-term maintenance playbook: the handful of habits that will keep your brick walls sound for decades.

Gutters and downspouts

If this book had to name one maintenance item above all others, it would be gutters. Your roof collects an enormous amount of water — hundreds of gallons in a single Texas thunderstorm — and the gutters and downspouts are the system that carries it safely away. When that system fails, all of that water goes exactly where it should not: down the walls, into the brick, and against the foundation.

Clean your gutters at least twice a year, in the spring and fall, and after any major storm that fills them with debris. Make sure downspouts are connected, intact, and extended well away from the house — extensions and splash blocks are inexpensive and they work. Watch for the signs of gutter failure described in Chapter 8: staining on the brick below, eroded soil, mulch washed out of beds. A gutter problem caught early is a Saturday chore. A gutter problem ignored for years is a masonry repair bill.

Grading: the ground should slope away

Walk around your house and look at the ground. It should slope away from the foundation in every direction, so rain runs off instead of pooling against the wall. Over the years, soil settles, mulch builds up,

and flower beds change the grade — often creating low spots right against the house where water collects.

Maintain a gentle slope away from the foundation, and keep soil and mulch below the brick line. Soil piled against brick wicks moisture into the wall and hides the weep holes. As a rule, you should be able to see the foundation and the bottom course of brick all the way around the house. If landscaping has buried them, pull it back. Your wall needs to breathe at the bottom as much as at the top.

Caulk: the cheap fix that prevents expensive problems

The caulk joints around your windows, doors, and other openings are wear items. They last years, not decades, and Texas sun is hard on them. Inspect them during your seasonal walk-around and re-caulk when the old material cracks, shrinks, or pulls away. This is one of the simplest and cheapest maintenance tasks a homeowner can do, and it prevents one of the most common sources of water entry.

Use a quality exterior caulk rated for masonry and the Texas climate, and apply it to clean, dry joints. If you are not comfortable doing it yourself, a handyman can re-caulk a whole house in a day for a modest cost. Either way, do not let failed caulk sit for years. Every rain that passes through an open joint is water inside your wall.

Keep weep holes clear

We covered weep holes in Chapter 1, and they deserve a repeat appearance here because they are so often blocked. Check them during every walk-around. Clear out dirt, mulch, and debris. Never fill them, never paint them shut, and never let landscaping bury them. These small openings are your wall's drainage system. A wall that cannot drain is a wall that stays wet, and a wall that stays wet is a wall that deteriorates.

Vegetation off the walls

Plants against brick walls cause more damage than most homeowners realize. Ivy and climbing vines hold moisture against the wall, work their roots into mortar joints, and hide developing problems from view. Shrubs planted too close trap humidity and prevent the wall from drying. Tree branches rubbing against the brick abrade the surface and drop debris into gutters.

Keep vegetation at least a foot or two away from brick walls, and trim anything that touches. This is not about aesthetics — though a clear wall looks better — it is about giving the wall air circulation and sunlight so it can dry after every rain. A wall that dries is a wall that lasts.

Sprinklers: water the lawn, not the house

Lawn irrigation systems are a leading cause of premature brick deterioration in Texas suburbs. A sprinkler head aimed at the wall soaks the brick every cycle, day after day, all summer long. The brick never fully dries, the mortar erodes faster, efflorescence appears, and freeze damage finds a saturated wall when winter comes.

Walk your sprinkler zones and watch where the water actually lands. Adjust or relocate any head that sprays the house. This single change — aiming water at the lawn instead of the wall — can add years to the life of your brick and mortar. It costs nothing and it matters enormously.

Periodic professional inspections

Your twice-yearly walk-around catches most problems early. But every few years, it is worth having a masonry professional look at the house — especially as it ages past twenty or thirty years. A professional sees things a homeowner misses: early mortar failure in shaded areas, lintel corrosion just starting, flashing details that were never right, subtle bulging that has developed gradually.

Think of it like a dental checkup. You brush your teeth every day, but you still see the dentist. Your walk-around is the brushing. The professional inspection is the checkup. Together, they catch problems when they are small.

The long view

A brick veneer house in Texas, properly maintained, can stand for a century or more. The brick itself is extraordinarily durable — there are brick structures still standing after hundreds of years. What fails is never really the brick. It is the mortar that was not repointed, the gutter that was not cleaned, the caulk that was not replaced, the drainage that was not maintained, the water that was not managed.

None of these tasks is difficult. None is expensive compared to the repairs they prevent. The homeowners who spend the least on brick repair over the life of their house are not the ones who got the cheapest initial price — they are the ones who paid attention. ### The ten-year plan: budgeting for masonry maintenance

Maintenance is cheaper than repair, but it still costs money — and homeowners who budget for it never have to choose between a repair and a surprise. Here is a realistic way to think about masonry maintenance costs over a decade.

Years one through three on a sound house are mostly about the walk-around and the small stuff: caulk, gutter cleaning, downspout extensions, sprinkler adjustments, keeping weep holes clear. Budget a few hundred dollars a year for materials and minor hired help. This is the cheapest phase, and it is also the phase that determines how expensive the later phases are. Every dollar spent here saves many dollars later.

Years three through seven are when you start seeing the first real maintenance projects: re-caulking the whole house as the original

caulk ages out, possibly repointing the most weather-exposed wall sections, addressing any spalled brick that has appeared, treating lintel rust before it becomes lintel replacement. Plan for one moderate project in this window — the kind of work described in Chapter 9's estimates — and get it done on your schedule rather than waiting for it to become urgent. Scheduled work is always cheaper than emergency work, because you can get multiple bids and choose your timing.

Years seven through ten are the professional inspection window. If your home is approaching thirty years old, or if you have never had a mason look at it, this is the decade to establish that relationship. A professional inspection every few years from here on will map out the next decade's needs: which walls will need repointing, which chimney needs attention, which flashing details are aging out.

The exact numbers vary by house size, age, and exposure — a small one-story home costs less to maintain than a large two-story with complex rooflines — but the principle is universal: steady, planned maintenance spending beats sporadic emergency spending by a wide margin. Set aside a modest annual amount for the house's exterior, spend it on the small things without hesitation, and save the big decisions for the inspection years. Your brick will outlast your mortgage. Plan like it.

Be the homeowner who pays attention. Your walls will repay you for decades.

Conclusion

If you take one idea from this book, let it be this: small problems become big ones, and early action is always cheaper than late repair. A hairline crack repointed today is a weekend-scale job. The same crack ignored for five years, with water working through it every rain, becomes damaged sheathing, rotted framing, and a repair bill many times larger. A gutter cleaned this fall is a chore. A gutter ignored for three years is a spalled wall and a foundation soaked beyond its design.

You now know how your brick veneer works — the cladding, the air gap, the ties, the weep holes, and the fundamental truth that brick manages water rather than blocking it. You know why Texas clay moves and how that movement writes itself on your walls. You know how water gets in, what spalling looks like, why mortar fails first, what the white powder means, and how to read cracks like a map. You know how to walk your property twice a year and what to look for. You know what a proper estimate contains, how to hire the right contractor, which red flags to avoid, and how to protect your brick for the long haul.

That is a lot of knowledge, and you earned it for the price of a book. Use it. Walk your walls this weekend. Look at your gutters, your caulk, your weep holes, your grading. Photograph anything that looks different from last season. Handle the small maintenance yourself, watch the things that need watching, and call a qualified professional — the right one, vetted the way Chapter 10 describes — when something is beyond a caulk gun and a Saturday morning.

Your brick house is one of the largest investments you will ever make, and it is built from one of the most durable materials humans have ever used. Treat it with the attention it deserves. Catch problems early. Fix them properly. And enjoy the peace of mind that comes from

knowing your walls are sound — because you looked, you understood what you saw, and you acted.

Quick-Reference Glossary

Air gap — The roughly one-inch space between the back of the brick veneer and the sheathing, which lets water drain down and air circulate.

Caulk joint — The flexible sealant joint where window and door frames meet the brick; a wear item that needs periodic replacement.

Efflorescence — White powdery salt deposits left on brick when water evaporates; usually cosmetic, but a marker of water movement.

Expansion joint — A flexible vertical joint in long brick walls that absorbs the brick's growth and thermal movement.

Flashing — Metal or membrane material that directs water away from vulnerable spots such as window heads, roof-wall joints, and the base of walls.

Grade beam — The thickened concrete edge of a slab foundation that carries the brick veneer.

Kickout flashing — A small angled flashing at the bottom of a roof-to-wall joint that diverts roof water into the gutter.

Lintel — The steel bar or angle that carries brick over a window or door opening.

Mortar — The bonding material between bricks; softer than brick by design. Common residential type: Type N.

Plasticity index — An engineering measure of how much a clay soil can swell and shrink; higher means more movement.

Post-tension slab — A concrete slab strengthened with tightened steel cables; should never be cut or drilled without locating the cables.

Repointing — Removing failed mortar from joints and packing in new, matched mortar.

Shelf angle — A steel angle bolted to the structure on multi-story homes that carries the brick above a floor line.

Spalling — The flaking or peeling of brick faces, usually from freeze-thaw damage or salt crystallization.

Stair-step crack — A zigzag crack following mortar joints; the classic signature of differential foundation movement.

Subflorescence — Salts crystallizing just below the brick surface, breaking the face apart from within.

Veneer — A non-structural outer layer of brick (cladding) tied to the framed wall behind it.

Wall tie — A metal connector anchoring the brick veneer to the framing while allowing independent movement.

Weep hole — A small opening at the base of a brick wall that lets trapped water drain out; must stay clear.

Resources & Next Steps

You've learned what your brick walls are telling you. When you're ready to act — whether that means getting a repair estimate, learning about foundation work, or diving deeper into a specialty — here's where to go:

Travis Nech has spent 50 years in brick, masonry, and foundation work across Texas. He owns and operates Champion Brick Repair, Metro Foundation Repair, LintelLOCK, MortarMagic, and WhiteStone Construction.

- **Champion Brick Repair** — brick & masonry repair, Dallas–Fort Worth — championbrickrepair.com — (817) 900-6324
 - **Metro Foundation Repair** — pressed concrete pile foundation repair — metrofoundationrepair.com — (817) 523-1540
 - **LintelLOCK** — the field-developed lintel replacement system — lintlerepair.com — (469) 730-0650
 - **MortarMagic** — mortar color matching & the Mortar Bucket — mortarmagic.netlify.app
 - **WhiteStone Construction** — stone, ranch & property work, Hamilton TX country — (254) 723-5040
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About the Author

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