

The Perfect Match

by Travis Nech

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THE PERFECT MATCH

A Texas Mason's Field Guide to Mortar Color Matching and Invisible Repointing

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Chapter 1: Why Your Repointing Doesn't Match

If there's one sentence I've heard more than any other in fifty years of hands-on field experience pointing a trowel at Texas brick, it's this one: "The brick looks great, but the new mortar sticks out like a sore thumb."

It comes in a phone call on a Tuesday morning. It comes at a backyard estimate while the homeowner stands there squinting at a repair somebody else did three years ago. It comes in emails with photographs attached — a nice clean repointing job, craftsmanship you can tell somebody sweated over, and one band of new joints running across the wall in a color that does not belong there. Not close. Not "a shade off." Wrong.

Here is the truth about repointing that most contractors won't tell you straight: the hard part was never the brick. Brick is forgiving. Brick hides in plain sight. The hard part is the mortar, and the hardest part of the mortar is the color. Color match is the number one complaint I hear about other people's repair work, and I don't say that to pat myself on the back. I say it because it tells you what homeowners actually see. They don't see joint profiles or bond patterns. They see color. The eye is ruthless about color. A joint that is half a shade lighter than its neighbor will catch your eye from the curb, and no amount of beautiful tooling will make you un-see it.

Now let me be honest with you the way I'd be honest sitting at your kitchen table. Perfect mortar color matching is one of the hardest skills in this trade. I'd rather lay a thousand brick in a complicated arch than match a forty-year-old joint on a house in Fort Worth. The arch has rules you can follow. Old mortar has forty years of weather, sun, rain, and time baked into it, and there's no bag on any shelf anywhere that says "Fort Worth, 1984, south-facing, under the eave." That doesn't exist. It has to be read, understood, and mixed by a human being with his eyes open and his trowel clean.

That's what this book is about. I wrote it to teach you — homeowner, handyman, or mason just starting out — how to make a repointing repair disappear. Not "look professional." Disappear. The kind of repair where your neighbor walks by and can't tell where the old work ends and the new work begins. That is the standard this whole book is aimed at, and I

won't lower it a single notch anywhere in these pages.

Before we go one step further, let me tell you about something that happened to me years ago. I'm going to tell you this story as a hypothetical composite — a mix of about a dozen jobs I've run into over the years, not one single house, because the particulars don't matter but the lesson does. Picture a brick ranch house, late seventies, the kind you see by the thousand all over the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The mortar joints are crumbling in places — the weather got to them, the way it does. The homeowner hired a company to repoint the worst of it. The company did clean work. Straight joints, tight tooling, no smears on the brick. Everything about the craftsmanship was solid.

And the homeowner hated it. Hated it enough to call me.

The new mortar was a cool, pale gray. The old mortar was warm — tan, almost buff, with a hint of brown in it from the sand they used back then. From the street, you could draw the exact outline of the repair with your eyes closed. The repair band ran along the front of the house like a stripe. The mason who did it had done everything right except the one thing the homeowner would actually look at every single day: the color.

I stood in that front yard, and I felt for both of them. The mason wasn't lazy. The homeowner wasn't picky. They were both victims of the same misunderstanding — that mortar is just gray paste and gray paste is gray paste. It isn't. Mortar is one of the most variable materials on the face of the planet, and I'll prove it to you in Chapter 2 when we take it apart ingredient by ingredient.

But here's the part that stuck with me, and the reason this story opens this book. The homeowner said something I'll never forget: "I thought it would look like it was never touched." That is the whole game. That's the promise every repointing job makes, whether it's spoken out loud or not. Not "we'll fix the bad joints." Not "we'll make it structurally sound." The promise is: when we're done, it'll look like we were never here. That's invisible repointing. That's the bar. And the color is what decides whether you clear it.

So why doesn't repointing match? In my experience it comes down to four things, and they stack on top of each other like bad habits:

First, most people mix what they have, not what they need. They grab the bag of mortar mix from the shelf — one brand, one color — and assume it will look like whatever was there before. That bag was mixed in a factory to one recipe, and your house was mixed by a man with a shovel forty years ago

from sand out of a local pit. The odds of them matching are about zero.

Second, new mortar and old mortar are not the same age, and age is a color. I'll get deep into this in the coming chapters, but mortar darkens, lightens, soots up, washes out, and mellows over the years. A fresh joint has never seen rain. A forty-year-old joint has seen forty Texas summers. You are not matching a recipe. You are matching a lifetime.

Third, nobody tests before they commit. They mix a wheelbarrow, they go to town on the wall, and they discover the mismatch when the wall is finished and the mortar has cured. By then it's done. The test panel — a small, hidden area where you try your mix first and let it cure for a week — is the cheapest insurance in this business, and most people skip it because it feels slow. Slow is cheap. Wrong is expensive.

Fourth — and this is the one that gets the craftsmen — color is decided by light. Mortar that matches in morning shade can miss in afternoon sun. Mortar that matches dry can miss after a rain. If you don't check your match in the same light, at the same hour, in the same wet-or-dry state, you're guessing. And guessing is how you end up with stripes.

Now, I want to set the expectation for this book before we go any further, because I'm not here to waste your time. By the time you finish the last chapter, you will know how to look at an old joint and see what it's made of. You'll know how sand, cement, lime, and pigment each push the color around. You'll know how to take a sample without hurting the wall, how to document what you found, how to mix test batches in small amounts, how to adjust a mix toward warmer or cooler or darker or lighter, and how to lay and finish the joint so the texture matches too — because color is only half the match, and I'll show you the other half. And you'll know the finishing secret I call MortarMagic — my own approach to mortar color matching and the Mortar Bucket setup I've refined in the field over the years — which turns the whole thing from guesswork into a repeatable method.

This is not a book of shortcuts. There are no magic powders that make any wall match. What there is, is a way of seeing. After fifty years of hands-on field work, I can walk up to a wall and read it the way you'd read a face. You can learn that. That's what I'm going to teach you, one chapter at a time, the way I'd teach an apprentice standing next to me at the scaffold.

One more thing before we start. I'm not an engineer, and I'm not going to pretend to be one. I've never held a license or a certification with letters after my name, and I don't need one

to tell you what I've learned with my own two hands. Everything in this book comes from field experience — real walls, real weather, real homeowners, real mistakes that I paid for out of my own pocket so you don't have to. That's the only authority I'm claiming. It's also, I think, the only one that matters when the wall in question is yours.

So grab a trowel — or just a cup of coffee — and let's learn how to make a repair disappear. And if you'd rather have the matching done by hands that have done it thousands of times, that's what we do every day at Champion Brick Repair — (817) 900-6324. Either way, next up: we take mortar apart, ingredient by ingredient, and find out where its color really comes from.

Chapter 2: How Mortar Gets Its Color

Let me tell you a secret that will save you more grief than any tool you own: mortar is mostly sand. By volume, roughly three parts sand to one part of the cement-and-lime blend that holds it together. Three to one. That means when you look at a mortar joint and ask, "Why is it that color?" — the answer, more often than not, is the sand.

This is the chapter where we take mortar apart like a clock. Every ingredient puts its fingerprint on the final color. Once you know what each one does, you can walk up to any wall and start reading it backward — from the color in front of you to the mix that made it. That's the skill the whole rest of this book is built on, so let's take it slow and get it right.

Sand: the boss of the color.

Sand decides more about your mortar's color than everything else in the wheelbarrow combined. And here's what makes it tricky: sand is not one thing. Sand is a local thing. Every sand pit in Texas pulls a slightly different blend of minerals out of the ground, and those minerals are the color.

In the field I think of sand in a few families. Light tan sand — the pale, almost cream stuff common in North Texas pits — makes mortar come out warm and light, the classic buff on so many seventies and eighties brick homes around Dallas and Fort Worth. A warmer, redder sand with more iron in it, common in parts of East Texas, gives the mortar a toast tone that leans toward the brick rather than the gray. Gray sand, cooler and flatter, drags the whole mix toward that concrete gray most people picture when they hear the word "mortar." And white or near-white sand is what you reach for when the

job calls for a bright, clean joint.

It isn't just hue, either — grain size matters. Fine sand packs tight and gives a smooth, dense joint that reads a little darker. Coarse sand, with visible grains, catches light on a thousand tiny faces and sparkles, so the same recipe in coarse sand looks lighter and livelier than in fine sand. I learned that the hard way years ago, standing there sure the mix was wrong when the mix was fine — the sand was just coarser than what was in the wall.

Then there's washed versus unwashed pit sand. Washed sand has had the fine clay and silt rinsed out; unwashed sand carries those fines, and the fines tint everything. Pre-1960s houses around here were often laid with pit sand straight out of the ground, fines and all — that gives old joints a softness and warmth modern washed sand can't reproduce on its own. If your test panel keeps coming out too clean and too bright, the missing ingredient might be nothing more than the dirt in the old sand.

Portland cement: the gray machine.

Now the binder. Standard gray Portland cement is the backbone of most modern mortar, and it brings a cool, flat gray to the party — the single most common reason a repointing job misses toward the gray. The original mason used a lighter binder or more lime; the repair mason used straight gray cement and sand from a different pit. White Portland cement changes everything: with white or light sand it gives you the bright, almost luminous joints you see on newer homes and on a lot of stone veneer work — I see it constantly in our WhiteStone Construction builds. If you're matching a joint that looks bright white or cream and your gray-cement tests keep coming out dingy, you are almost certainly looking at white cement in the original. That one observation has saved me more return trips than I can count.

Lime: the lightener and the softener.

Lime is the old soul of mortar. For most of the history of brickwork — right up through the middle of the twentieth century — lime was a major part of the mix, sometimes the main binder. Lime does two things to color. First, it lightens. A lime-rich mix is paler, softer-looking, almost chalky in the best sense. Second, it warms. There's a mellowness to a good lime joint that cement alone can't produce.

This is why old joints are so hard to match with modern bagged mixes. The bag on the shelf is a cement-dominant recipe. The joint in the 1920s bungalow was mixed when lime was king. Same sand, different binder, different color — and a different hardness too, which matters for the wall but that's a

story for another chapter. When I look at an old joint and see that soft, powdery pale look, my first thought is always: lime. Lots of it.

Pigments: the intentional color.

Sometimes the color in the joint was put there on purpose. Iron oxide pigments — the same family of colorants used in brick itself — come in reds, browns, yellows, and blacks. Carbon black makes mortar go dark gray to near black. These are mixed into the batch in small, careful amounts, and they are powerful. A handful of pigment in a wheelbarrow can move a whole wall's color.

Pigmented mortar is actually good news for the matcher, because it means the original color was a decision, not an accident of the sand pit. If you can identify the pigment family — and with test panels you can get close — you can reproduce it. The catch is dosage. Pigment color is brutally sensitive to amount. A scoop more or a scoop less, and you're visibly off. So when you're working with pigment, you measure. You don't eyeball. You write down what you put in the test batch, down to the spoonful, because when that test panel cures out and it's perfect, that notebook is the most valuable thing on the job site.

Water: the quiet variable.

Here's one most people never think about: water. A wetter mix cures out lighter, because the extra water leaves more tiny voids as it evaporates, and those voids scatter light. A stiffer, drier mix cures denser and darker. Same ingredients, same proportions, different water — different shade. That's why two masons can mix "the same recipe" and get two different colors, and why your test panel has to be mixed the way you'll actually lay it on the wall. Mix it the way you work. Consistency of water is consistency of color, and it's free.

Mix ratio and proportion.

More cement relative to sand pushes the color toward the cement's color — grayer with gray cement, brighter with white. More sand relative to cement pushes toward the sand's color. A rich mix (heavy on binder) and a lean mix (heavy on sand) made from the same materials will not match each other. When the old joint looks sandier, grainier, more textured than your test — you might not need different materials at all. You might just need more sand in the proportion.

Age and weathering: time as an ingredient.

And now the ingredient nobody puts in the wheelbarrow:

time. A new joint has never been rained on. An old joint has lived a life, and life leaves marks.

Sun bleaches. Years of Texas sun fade pigments and lighten the surface of the joint, especially on south and west exposures. Rain washes — it carries fine particles out of the surface and can leave the joint looking cleaner and lighter in some spots, dirtier in others. Airborne dust and soot settle in, especially under eaves and near roads, and they darken. Efflorescence — those white salt blooms you sometimes see on brick — can dust a joint pale. Biological growth, the green and dark staining you see on the shady north side of a house, tints everything it touches.

The result is that a forty-year-old joint is not one color. It's a landscape. The joint under the eave, sheltered from rain, will look different from the same joint three feet away getting full weather. The sunny side of the house won't match the shady side. I'll teach you in the next chapter how to read all of that before you touch a thing — because which part of the wall you match to is a decision, and it's one of the most important decisions in the whole job.

Here's the takeaway I want you to carry into every job: color is not an accident. Every shade in every joint was caused by something — a sand, a cement, a lime, a pigment, a proportion, a water content, a decade of weather. Your job as a matcher is not to guess. It's to detect. You're a detective, and the joint is the witness. Interview it properly, and it'll tell you exactly what it was made of.

That's Chapter 3: reading the existing joint — age, weathering, samples, documentation — before a single trowel touches it. Invisible repointing begins not in the mixing, but in the looking.

Chapter 3: Reading the Existing Joint

The biggest mistake in color matching happens before the first batch is ever mixed. It happens in the first five minutes on site, when somebody glances at the wall, says "looks like standard gray to me," and goes to work. Everything after that — the mixing, the laying, the tooling — is built on a guess. And a guess, like I told you in Chapter 1, is how you end up with stripes.

So this chapter is about the five minutes that actually matter. Slow down. Look. Read the wall. The existing joint is trying to tell you everything: what it's made of, how old it is, how the

weather has treated it, and exactly which part of it you should be matching. Your only job right now is to listen.

Start with light — the same light you'll finish in.

Before you look at color at all, look at the light. Mortar is a chameleon: a joint that reads warm tan at ten in the morning can read cool gray at four in the afternoon. This is the number one reason test panels get approved on site and rejected the next day — the mason checked the match at noon, and the homeowner looks at it at breakfast.

So here's the discipline: do your color reading in the light the homeowner lives in. If the repair is on the front of the house, read the joint in morning light — or better, at three times of day, noting how it shifts. Write it down. When you check your test panel later, check it in the same light, at the same hour. Light is the ruler. Don't change rulers in the middle of the job.

While you're at it, notice sun versus shade on the wall itself. The sunny south face of a house and the shaded north face have lived different lives — I talked about that in Chapter 2 — and they will not be the same color even if they were laid from the same batch on the same day. Decide early which exposure you're matching. My rule of thumb: match the most visible face, the one the homeowner and the street see most. On most houses, that's the front. Be deliberate about it, and tell the homeowner what you decided and why. That one conversation prevents more arguments than any mixing skill I own.

Wet it and watch.

Here's a field trick that costs nothing and tells you a fortune. Take a spray bottle of clean water and mist a section of the old joint. Watch what happens.

Dry mortar shows you the surface color — the bleached and sooted skin of the joint. Wet mortar shows you the depth color — what the material actually is underneath the weathering. Water darkens everything temporarily and kills the surface glare, and for a few minutes you can see the true tone of the sand and binder before decades of sun got to it.

Do the same to your test panel when the time comes. If the old joint wets out warm tan and your test wets out cold gray, your sand is wrong — and you learned it from a spray bottle, not a ruined wall. I do the wet test on every match job. Two minutes. It has never once wasted my time.

Map the weathering zones.

Walk the wall and map it like a surveyor — you'll find zones,

and every zone is a different color story.

Under the eaves, joints are sheltered from rain. They keep their dust and soot — often darker and dirtier than the exposed wall, yet sometimes the most honest record of the mortar's original color. It's a paradox: the dirtiest-looking joint may be the truest one.

Fully exposed areas get the full treatment: sun bleach, rain wash, the works. These joints run lighter and cleaner, and this is usually the color you match — it's what the homeowner is used to seeing. Just know you're matching a weathered color, not the original recipe.

Near the ground you get the splash zone — dirt bounced up by rain, sprinkler staining, sometimes green algae on the shady side. Near the top, under a leaking gutter, dark streaking. Each is local. Don't let a stained zone fool you into thinking the whole wall is that color. Read the wall in its clean, representative areas and note the stained zones separately.

Here's a scenario I run into all the time — a hypothetical composite drawn from many jobs, not one particular house. Picture a brick home with a shaded, damp north wall and a sun-baked south front. A mason matches the front beautifully, then repoints the back with the same mix — and the back looks wrong. Same house, same original batch, two different weathered colors. The fix isn't a better mix. It's reading each face on its own terms and mixing to the face you're standing on. Two faces, two matches, one happy homeowner. That's not extra work. That's the work.

Take a sample — the right way.

At some point, looking isn't enough, and you need a piece of the old joint in your hand. Do it right and do it gently.

Pick an inconspicuous spot — behind a downspout, low near the foundation behind a shrub. You're taking a small piece, not demolishing anything. Work a small chunk out with a margin trowel or stiff putty knife, going for depth: you want the full profile, surface to back. A shallow scraping only shows the weathered skin. A full-depth piece shows the skin and the body, and the difference tells you how much of the color is weathering and how much is material.

Crumble a bit between your fingers. Hard and sharp, resisting you? That's a cement-dominant mix, modern era. Soft, crumbly, almost chalky? That's lime talking — older work, and a clue your match needs lime for that softness of color. Look at the aggregate: can you see the sand grains? What color, what size? Hold it next to your candidate sands. This little

chunk is the most honest thing on the job site. It cannot lie to you.

Bag it and label it — a zip bag, a marker, the date, the address, which wall, which height, sun or shade. I've got bags in my shop going back years that I still pull out to compare. A labeled sample is a reference library. An unlabeled chunk of gray stuff in your truck is trash.

Document everything before you touch it.

Before any work begins, the wall gets documented. Photographs in daylight — straight-on and at an angle, because raking light shows texture that flat light hides. Photograph the weathering zones and the sample location. Write down your readings: the dry color in your own words ("warm light tan, slightly pink in morning sun"), the wet color ("deepens to warm brown-tan"), the hardness, the visible sand grain, the exposure, the time of day.

Why the paperwork? Two reasons. First, memory lies. A week from now, comparing your cured test panel, you won't remember exactly what the wall looked like. Your notes will. Second, the homeowner. When you can show your documented reading — "here's what I found, here's what I'm matching, here's my test panel next to the original" — you've turned a subjective argument about color into a professional process. Homeowners don't argue with a process they watched. They argue with surprises. Documentation kills surprises.

Know what the old joint is telling you about era.

With practice, the joint will tell you roughly when it was laid, and era narrows everything down. Soft, pale, lime-rich joints with fine aggregate: early to mid-twentieth century and older. Harder, grayer joints with coarser washed sand: the post-war boom decades. Very hard, uniform, almost concrete-like joints: modern bagged mixes — I see this end of the spectrum constantly in our WhiteStone Construction builds. Bright white or cream: white cement, worth confirming because it changes your whole material list.

Era isn't trivia. It's about predicting the recipe. A 1940s joint and a 1990s joint are different animals, and if you know which animal you're tracking, you stop wasting test batches on materials that were never in the original.

The reading is the job.

The match is won or lost before mixing begins. Everything in Chapter 4 and beyond — test panels, adjusting warm and cool, the MortarMagic method and the Mortar Bucket

workflow — all of it depends on the reading you do right now, with your eyes, a spray bottle, a putty knife, and a notebook.

So go read the wall. Take your time. The trowel can wait. The wall has been waiting forty years to tell somebody what it's made of — give it five honest minutes, and it'll tell you everything.

When you're ready, we'll mix. Small batches, careful notes, and a test panel that cures a full week before anybody makes a decision. That's next.

Chapter 4: The Mortar Bucket: Mixing on the Wall

There's a corner of every job I run where the magic actually happens, and it's not on the wall. It's on the tailgate of the truck, in a five-gallon bucket.

I call it the Mortar Bucket, and if you've ever watched me work, you've seen it: a little pile of sand, a scoop of cement, a splash of lime, and me standing there with a trowel like I'm seasoning a pot of chili. That's exactly what mortar matching is, by the way. Cooking. You taste, you adjust, you taste again. Except you can't taste mortar — well, you can once, and you'll never do it twice — so you learn to read it with your eyes instead.

When I started this trade back in the '90s, the standard way to pick a mortar color was to flip through a manufacturer's chart in a sales rep's truck and point at the closest square. "That one looks about right." Then the crew would order forty bags of it, mix it up on day one, and discover on day three that the joint they repointed looked nothing like the rest of the wall. Too pink. Too gray. Too fresh. The homeowner standing there with their arms crossed, and you're stuck with thirty-seven bags of wrong mortar and a patch that glows like a neon sign.

Bag guessing is a gamble, and the house always wins that gamble. That's why I quit guessing.

The MortarMagic method — the way we do it on-site at every job — is built around one simple idea: you don't choose the mortar color in an office or at a supply counter. You choose it on the wall, standing in front of the actual brick, in the actual light, next to the actual old mortar that's been aging there for

decades. Everything else is theory. The wall is the truth.

Here's how it works.

First, I grind out a section of the old joint and take a clean look at what's really in there. Not the surface — the surface is weathered, sun-bleached, dust-caked. I get down to the heart of the joint, where the original mix still shows its true colors. Then I look at the sand. Always the sand. I'll get into why sand runs the whole show in the next chapter, but for now, just know: the sand tells you more about the color than anything else in the bucket.

Then I mix small. I'm talking a coffee-can batch, not a wheelbarrow. One batch, one test patch. I blend my sand, add my cement and lime by feel and by measure — I've got ratios I trust, built up over fifty years of hands-on field experience — and I spread that test patch right onto the wall, right in the middle of the repair area. Not on a board on the ground. On the wall. The wall is where it has to match, so the wall is where it gets tested.

And then I walk away.

That's the part most guys can't stand. You mix this perfect little batch, you tuck it in nice, and then you have to leave it alone for a full cure before you judge it. Wet mortar lies — that's the whole subject of chapter six — but even I have to discipline myself not to declare victory too early. I've been doing this half a century and I still catch myself squinting at a damp patch thinking "that's close enough." It's never close enough when it's wet.

The beauty of bucket-mixing on site is that when the patch isn't right — and the first one usually isn't — I've wasted a coffee can of material, not a pallet of bags. I adjust. A little more sand. A little less cement. A darker sand this time, or a lighter one. Another batch, another patch, right there on the wall. By the third or fourth try, the patch disappears into the original work. You can't tell where the old ends and the new begins. That's the MortarMagic standard: invisible. If you can find my repointing with your eyes, I didn't do my job.

Let me tell you why this beats bag guessing so completely that I can't believe anybody still does it the other way. A bag is made in a plant, in bulk, months ago, from sand the plant had on hand that day. That sand came from a pit or a quarry, and the next truckload from the same pit will be a shade different, because sand is a natural material and natural materials vary. So even a bag that matched perfectly on the last job might not match on this one — same brand, same product name, same color chart, different dirt.

Worse, the color chart is a photograph printed on paper. Paper lies worse than wet mortar. A little square of printed color can't tell you what that mix will look like at 4 p.m. on a north-facing wall in Waco after a rain. The wall tells you. Only the wall tells you.

On-site bucket mixing also solves the biggest practical problem in repair work: every old wall is its own recipe. The house I'm repointing was built in 1974 by a mason who mixed by shovel-scoops and bought his sand from a pit that closed twenty years ago. There is no bag on any shelf that will match it. But I can get there with a bucket, some sands, cement, lime, and patience — because I'm not trying to match a product. I'm matching this wall, this mortar, this house. The bucket doesn't care what the chart says.

There's a rhythm to it that I love. Mix, patch, wait, read, adjust, mix again. Each batch teaches you something. "Too much cement — the patch went gray." "Sand's too fine — it looks dusty." "That's it — that one's got the warmth." By the time you've got it, you haven't just mixed a batch of mortar; you've learned that particular wall's language. And then the real work begins, and the repointing goes up invisible because you earned the color, you didn't buy it.

Let me give you a composite example — not a specific customer, just the kind of day that happens regularly — because I want you to picture the scene. Imagine a homeowner with a 1980s brick ranch, and somebody's patched the front wall twice before, each time with off-the-shelf mortar. From the curb it looks like the wall has bruises — three different gray rectangles where the repairs went in. I show up, and the first thing I do is walk the wall with the homeowner and point at those patches. "See how you can spot every one of those? That's bag mortar. Now watch this."

I set up my bucket. I pull three sands out of the truck — I'll tell you about my sand collection in the next chapter; I've got bins like a painter's palette. I mix a small batch, tuck a patch in next to the old work, and we go have a glass of sweet tea while it starts to set. An hour later we're both looking at the wall and that homeowner is shaking their head because the patch has vanished into the original mortar. "How'd you do that?" the same way every time: "I mixed it for your wall, not for a chart."

That's the Mortar Bucket. Small batches, on-site, on the wall, judged by the wall, adjusted until invisible. MortarMagic isn't a product you buy off a shelf — it's the discipline of matching at the job site, every time, no shortcuts. You can learn more about how we work at mortarmagic.netlify.app, and if your wall has bruises on it like that ranch, Champion Brick Repair

will come make them disappear — call us at (817) 900-6324.

The bucket is where the color is born. But the sand is the father of that color, and sand deserves a chapter all its own.

One more thing before we leave the bucket, because it matters and I don't want you to miss it: keep notes. Every batch I mix gets written down — which sand, how much, what ratio, what the patch looked like at one day and at seven days. I've got buckets of old job notes, literally. That record-keeping is the difference between a mason who got lucky once and a mason who can walk up to a new wall and match it the first week. The wall teaches you; the notebook keeps the lesson. When a homeowner calls me back five years later because the neighbor wants the same work, I don't have to guess again. I open the notebook, and the recipe is right there. That's professionalism: the bucket gives you the color, the pencil makes it repeatable.

Chapter 5: Sand Is the Color

If there's one sentence in this whole book I wish every mason would tattoo on the inside of their eyelids, it's this: sand is the color. Not the cement. Not the lime. The sand.

Cement is gray. Lime is white. They matter — cement can darken a mix and lime can lighten it — but they're the seasoning. The sand is the meat of the dish. Sand makes up the bulk of every mortar joint, and the color of that bulk is the color your eye reads from the curb. A mason who understands sand can match almost any wall. A mason who doesn't will spend his career buying bags and wondering why they don't work.

Texas gives us a wonderful problem when it comes to sand: we've got every kind of it, and it's all different. Drive from one side of DFW to the other and the sand changes. Go down to Waco and it changes again. Head out toward Hamilton and Evant, my home turf, and the sand changes one more time. Every pit, every riverbed, every quarry produces its own shade — tan, buff, gold, red-brown, near-white, charcoal gray — and each one carries the fingerprints of the ground it came out of.

That's the secret behind matching old Texas mortar. That 1960s brick ranch wasn't mortared with a bag product; it was mortared with sand from a pit that was open in the '60s, and that pit's sand had its own color. When I stand in front of that

wall and look at the old joints, I'm not just seeing "gray" or "tan." I'm seeing the sand's personality — warm or cool, light or dark, fine or coarse — and my job is to find a sand on my truck that speaks the same language.

So let me talk about what actually makes one sand look different from another, in plain English.

First is color — the raw color of the grains themselves. Pick up a handful of sand and look at it dry. Some sands are pale, almost cream. Some are golden, like beach sand. Some are reddish, some are brown, and some are a deep gray that looks almost like ground-up slate. That base color is the foundation of your mortar color, and there's no additive in the world that can fully change it. You pick your sand first, then you season around it.

Second is grain size and gradation. Fine sand packs tight and gives mortar a smooth, almost dusty look when it cures. Coarse sand shows its individual grains and gives the joint texture — you can see the sparkle of it in the sunlight. Gradation just means the mix of big grains and little grains together; a well-graded sand fills its own gaps and makes a strong, workable mortar, while a sand that's all one size can be tricky to work. For color matching, the practical point is this: two sands can be the same base color but look completely different in a joint if one is fine and the other is coarse. The fine one reads lighter. The coarse one reads darker and more textured. I've matched walls where the sand color was identical to the original but the grain was wrong, and the patch still stuck out. Get both right.

Third is how much the sand varies within itself. Natural sand isn't one color — it's thousands of grains in a range of shades. Some sands are tight and consistent, every grain near the same color. Others are wild, with dark specks and light flecks mixed in. That variation is what gives old mortar its living, natural look. A bag product made from one washed, graded, consistent sand will always look a little flat next to a 1970s joint made from pit sand that had every shade of tan in it. When I'm matching, I sometimes blend two or three sands to rebuild that natural variation — a little of the wild one for character, a little of the consistent one to hold it steady.

Now, sourcing. I keep bins of sand the way a painter keeps tubes of paint. Over the years I've collected sands from all over Texas — light ones, dark ones, red ones, buff ones, fine ones, coarse ones. When a new job comes in, the first thing I do after reading the wall is walk my bins and pick candidates. That's the advantage of doing this for fifty years: my truck is a library of sand.

You don't need fifty years to start, though. You need curiosity

and a few labeled buckets. Buy small quantities from local suppliers. Label everything — where it came from, what it looked like dry, what color it made when you mixed it. Mix a test batch from each one and keep a cured sample. Within a year you'll have a working palette, and every job you do adds to it.

Blending is where the craft really lives. Rarely does one sand alone give you the match. More often it's a blend — two parts of this, one part of that — and the blending happens in the Mortar Bucket, by hand, with your eyes on the wall. I blend dry first, so I can see the sand color without cement confusing the picture. I lay the dry sands out side by side on a board and compare them to the old joint. When the dry blend disappears against the old mortar, I know I'm in the neighborhood. Then the cement and lime go in, and the real tuning starts.

Let me give you a composite story — hypothetical, but the kind of thing I see every season — to show you how sand drives the whole job. Picture a homeowner with a chimney that's been repointed before, and the old repair used a light tan bag mortar. The original chimney mortar is a warm, reddish tan. The repair looks like someone pasted a beige bandage on a brick column. I grind out a section, look at the old sand under the weathered surface, and I see coarse, reddish-brown grains with dark specks. I go to my bins and pull a coarse reddish sand and a fine buff sand. Dry blend: two parts reddish, one part buff. Against the old joint, the dry blend vanishes. Mix a small batch, patch it on the chimney, walk away. Next day it's cured and the patch is gone — invisible. The homeowner says, "That's exactly it." And all I did was listen to the sand.

One caution I give every young mason: watch out for manufactured sand sold as "masonry sand" that comes out of a crusher. Crushed sand has sharp, angular grains and a uniform color, and it makes mortar that looks flat and lifeless next to natural pit or river sand. It has its uses, but for color matching old Texas brickwork, natural sand with real variation will win every time. And always — always — look at your sand dry AND damp. Damp sand is darker, just like damp mortar, and if you only ever look at dry sand you'll pick too dark every time. That's a small habit that saves big mistakes.

Here's my sand checklist, the one I run through on every job:

1. Read the old joint's sand — color, size, variation — before anything else.
2. Pull candidates from your bins and compare them dry against the old mortar.
3. Blend sands dry until the dry blend matches.
4. Mix a small batch, patch it on the wall, and cure it fully

- before judging.
5. Keep notes on every blend — source, ratio, cured result.

Sand is the color. Cement and lime are seasoning. The bucket is the kitchen. And the wall is the only judge that matters. If you build your whole matching method around the sand, you'll be ahead of ninety percent of the masons out there still guessing at bag charts.

When MortarMagic comes out to your home — you can see how we work at mortarmagic.netlify.app — the sand library rides in the truck, and the matching starts at your wall, not at a supply counter. And when the repointing's done and the color has vanished into the original brickwork, that's Champion Brick Repair quality. Call (817) 900-6324 and we'll read your sand for you. WhiteStone Construction handles the bigger structural masonry and new builds the same way — right material, right match, no shortcuts.

But don't trust any of it until you've made your trial patches and let time do its honest work. Which brings us to the chapter where wet mortar tells its lies — and where patience separates the craftsmen from the guessers.

Chapter 6: Trial Patches and Cure Time

Wet mortar lies. Say it with me: wet mortar lies.

Every mason learns this the hard way, usually on somebody's house, usually in front of somebody who's paying by the hour. You mix a batch, it looks perfect going on — the color is right there, dead on — and you stand back feeling like a genius. Next morning you come out with your coffee and the patch has changed color overnight. It's lighter. Or darker. Or somehow both at once, in a way that makes no sense until you understand what happened. The mortar didn't fail. It cured. And curing changes everything.

This chapter is about the most boring-sounding, most important part of the MortarMagic method: trial patches and cure time. Nobody gets excited about waiting. Everybody wants to see the result now. But the mason who judges a match on wet mortar is guessing, and we've already established what I think of guessing.

Here's what's actually going on inside that joint. When you first mix mortar, every grain of sand is coated in water, and the cement paste is dark and saturated. Water makes

everything look darker and richer — the same reason a wet T-shirt looks darker than a dry one, and the same reason a wet stone on the creek bank looks almost black. As the mortar cures, the water leaves — some of it hydrates the cement, some of it evaporates — and the color rises and lightens. How much it changes depends on the mix: high-cement mixes tend to lighten more dramatically; high-lime mixes stay a little more stable; fine sands lighten more than coarse ones because their packed surface reflects more light once dry.

There's no formula for how much a given batch will shift. None. The shift depends on your sand, your cement, your lime, your water, the humidity that day, whether the wall faces the sun or the shade, and about six other things I could bore you with. That's exactly why you can't judge wet. The only way to know what a mix will look like cured is to cure it and look.

So we make trial patches. Small ones, right on the wall, in the repair area, exactly like I described in chapter four. And then — this is the discipline — we leave them alone for a full cure before we make any decisions. For a color judgment, I want to see the patch at twenty-four hours at minimum, and for the final approval before the big mix, I like to see it at several days. Mortar keeps shifting subtly for weeks; the first day's cure gets you ninety percent of the truth, and a week gets you the rest.

I know what you're thinking: that slows the job down. You're right. It does. And it's worth every hour, because the alternative is repointing an entire wall with the wrong color and then living with a homeowner who can see your mistake from the street. The trial patch is cheap insurance. A coffee-can batch and a little patience versus tearing out a day's work. That's not a hard choice.

Let me walk you through how I read a cured patch, because there's a method to it and it's worth learning.

First, I read it in the same light the wall will be judged in. That means daylight — not the harsh glare of a work light at dusk, not the flat gray of an overcast morning if the wall faces south and gets full sun. I stand where the homeowner will stand: the sidewalk, the driveway, the patio. The match has to work from the curb, not just from six inches away. I've had patches that looked perfect up close and failed from twenty feet because the overall tone was off. Step back. The curb is the judge.

Second, I compare the patch to the old mortar, not to the brick. This sounds obvious, but your eye will cheat on you. The brick is bright and colorful; the mortar is subtle. If you let your eye drift to the brick, everything looks fine. Force your

eye to the joint. Old joint, new patch, old joint, new patch. Back and forth. If the patch disappears, you've got it.

Third, I check it wet and dry — after the cure, I mean. I'll splash a little water on the cured patch and watch what happens. A matched patch and the old mortar should darken together, in the same way, and lighten together as they dry. If the patch darkens differently than the old work, the sand is wrong even if the dry color is close. Old mortar and new mortar should age and weather as twins. That water test has saved me more than once from a match that was almost — but not quite — right.

Fourth, I write it all down. Date, batch number, mix ratio, sand blend, weather, what the patch looked like at one day and at seven days. The notebook again. The patch is a one-time lesson; the notebook makes it a permanent recipe.

Now, a composite, hypothetical story — because this is where most do-it-yourselfers and plenty of pros go wrong. Imagine a fellow who decides to repoint his own garden wall. He mixes up a batch on Saturday morning, spreads it in, and by noon he's admiring his work. Looks great. Matches perfectly. He mixes the whole wall's worth of mortar and spends the weekend tucking joints. Monday morning he walks out and the whole wall has gone two shades lighter than the original brickwork. Every joint glows pale against the old wall. He matched wet, and wet lied to him.

The fix — what he should have done — is what we do on every MortarMagic job: one small trial patch on Saturday, judged on Sunday, and the full mix only after the cured patch proves the match. That one day of patience would have saved him a whole weekend of redo work. Slow is smooth, and smooth is invisible.

There's one more thing about cure time that matters for the homeowner reading this book: don't judge our work on day one either. When Champion Brick Repair finishes your repointing, the new joints will look a shade different for the first few days while they finish curing. That's normal. That's chemistry. Give it a week, let the water finish leaving, and then stand at the curb and look. That's when the match shows its true face. If you ever have questions during that first week, call us at (817) 900-6324 and we'll talk you through it — but what you'll see after a full cure is the wall the way it was meant to look, with our work vanished into it.

Let me leave you with the rule I drill into every mason who works with me: never commit to a full mix until a cured trial patch has earned your trust. Wet mortar lies. The cured patch tells the truth. The wall is the judge, the notebook is the memory, and patience is the whole game.

One practical note for folks who want to run trial patches like we do: set up a proper test area. Don't tuck your patches into the most visible part of the front wall — pick a section that's representative of the old mortar but not the first thing a visitor sees. The side of the garage, a stretch behind the shrubs, the back of the chimney. And label your patches. A little piece of tape with the batch number next to each one saves you from the embarrassing moment of staring at three patches and not remembering which was which. I've been doing this for fifty years and I still label everything. Memory is a fine thing; tape is better.

Also, keep your trial patches small but not tiny. A patch the size of a postage stamp won't tell you the truth — there's not enough of it for your eye to read the overall tone. I like a patch at least six inches long and a couple of joints tall. Big enough to read from the curb, small enough to grind out in five minutes if it's wrong. And when a patch IS wrong, don't just grind it out and forget it. Look at it one more time before it goes. Ask yourself: too light or too dark? Too warm or too cool? Too fine or too coarse? Every wrong patch is a free lesson, and the lesson is only free if you pay attention to it.

That completes the heart of the MortarMagic method — the bucket, the sand, and the honest cure. From here, the book turns to putting it all into practice: reading different eras of Texas brickwork, handling the tricky ones, and keeping your matched mortar looking right for decades. The principles don't change. Mix on the wall, let the sand lead, and never trust wet.

If your wall is ready for invisible repointing, MortarMagic is how we do it — matched on-site, cured and proven, every time. See the method at mortarmagic.netlify.app, and call Champion Brick Repair at (817) 900-6324. For full masonry and structural work, WhiteStone Construction brings the same care to every joint we touch.

Chapter 7: Tooling and Joint Profile

There's a morning I remember, must've been twenty-some years ago, when I stood back from a patch job and felt that sinking feeling in my gut. The color match was about as close as a man could hope for — same sand, same mix, same batch. And yet the new mortar sat there shouting. It wasn't the color. It was the shape.

The old joints were struck concave — that smooth, curved line

you make with a bent jointer. I'd finished mine flush, scraped flat with the face of the brick. Same mortar. Completely different wall. That was the day I learned a lesson no bag of cement will ever teach you: the profile of a joint changes the color you see, just as sure as the mix does. If you're going to match mortar so well nobody can tell you were there, you have to match the mason's hand, not just his mud.

The Five Profiles Worth Knowing

Across North Texas you'll run into five joint profiles on almost every house you touch. Each one plays its own tricks with light and shadow.

Concave is the most common in modern brick veneer, and it's what I struck on nine out of ten houses for most of my career. A curved jointer presses a gentle valley into the mortar. That curve catches a thin line of shadow along each edge and a bright highlight down the middle as the sun moves, so a concave joint almost always reads a shade darker and richer than the same mortar struck flat. It's also the most weather-resistant profile — the tooling compresses the surface, tightening it against rain. If you're matching concave work, you need that same compression — one steady pass, full pressure.

V-joint is the showpiece profile. A V-shaped tool cuts a crisp valley with sharp edges, throwing a strong shadow line down the center of every joint. On a sunny Texas afternoon those shadow lines do most of the visual talking. The trick with V-joints: the same mortar struck in a V reads noticeably darker than in a concave or flush profile — sometimes a full shade darker on the fan. When I match a V-joint, I carry a finished sample and hold it against the wall from six feet back, because up close the mortar itself matches while the profile is doing all the work. Keep your V tool clean and your lines crisp — a wobbly V reads like a wobbly hand.

Weathered shows up on a lot of older Dallas-area brick, and it's got a job to do. The top edge is cut flush with the brick above, and the mortar slopes outward and down toward the brick below — a tiny drip edge built into every joint. That angled face catches light completely differently than a flat one — full sun on the south elevation, almost none on the north. So the same mortar can look like two different mortars depending on which side of the house you're standing on. When I match a weathered joint, my sample boards carry the profile struck right into them — never flat samples. A flat sample of the right mortar looks wrong against a weathered joint every single time.

Grapevine is the old-timer's signature, still found on early

twentieth-century work around Fort Worth and the small towns. The jointer runs a center line down the joint and trims the mortar back on both sides, leaving a raised little ridge. It's ornamental and beautiful, and that raised center ridge throws shadow on both sides of itself — a real color-matching challenge. A grapevine joint in a light mortar reads medium; in a medium mortar it reads dark. If the original mason ran grapevine, you run grapevine — no substitutes, no "close enough." The shadow pattern is the appearance.

Flush is exactly what it sounds like: mortar struck even with the face of the brick. You see it on commercial work and older homes where the mason cut the joint with his trowel and left it. Flush joints read lighter than any other profile in the same mortar, because there's no shadow line at all — just a flat band of color in flat light. They're also the most honest profile. There's nowhere to hide a bad match. Field wisdom: a flush joint troweled fifty years ago has weathered to a texture no new trowel will match. I match the shape and let the color do the talking, and I tell the homeowner the new work will look crisp for a few weeks until the weather softens it like it softened the old.

Why the Profile Changes the Color

Most folks get this backwards. A mortar's pigment — what it is in the bucket — is only half of what your eye reads. The other half is light.

Every joint profile bends light differently. Concave puts a bright highlight down the center with soft shadow at the edges; your eye averages them, and the average reads a touch darker than the pigment alone. A V-joint concentrates the shadow into one hard line, and hard shadow always wins the eye — so V reads darkest. Flush gives the eye nothing but flat pigment in flat light, so it reads lightest. Weathered and grapevine sit in between, each with its own shadow signature.

I've proven this on sample boards more times than I can count: one batch of mortar, five profiles, looks like five different colors from ten feet away. So when somebody tells me "the mortar matches but it doesn't look right," the first thing I check isn't the mix. It's the profile.

Matching the Original Mason's Hand

Now the part no manual can teach. Every mason leaves a signature in how he tools a joint — pressure, speed, the curve of the tool he favored. After fifty years I can read a wall like handwriting. Matching that hand comes down to four things:

the tool, the timing, the pressure, and the pass.

The tool. Concave jointers come in a dozen radii. A tight 3/8-inch jointer cuts a deep valley; a wide 3/4-inch one makes a shallow, soft curve. The original mason picked one, and his whole wall wears that choice. I carry a full set of jointers in the truck and hold each against the existing joints until I find the radius that sits into the old work like it belongs there. Same with the V tool — different angles, different shadows. Measure with a plastic radius gauge if you want precision. No shame in measuring. The shame is in guessing.

The timing. You strike the joint when the mortar is thumbprint hard — firm enough to hold its shape, soft enough to take the tool. Too early and the tool drags and tears; the surface takes stain unevenly and the color goes patchy. Too late and the mortar won't take the profile cleanly; you get a half-struck joint and a pale surface that never got compacted. In a Texas July, thumbprint-hard might arrive in twenty minutes. In a November morning, it might take two hours. You don't watch the clock. You touch the mortar. That thumb is fifty years old and it hasn't lied to me yet.

The pressure. A heavy-handed mason compresses the surface hard, and compressed mortar cures denser and darker. A light-handed mason leaves the surface open, and open mortar cures lighter and chalkier. When I match a wall, I'm copying the pressure, not just the profile. I strike test joints with a heavy, light, and medium hand, then compare all three against the old work in the same light. Usually one of them steps forward and says, "that's me."

The pass. Some masons ran one clean pass and were done. Some went back over it — and a second pass burnishes the surface, closes it up, and darkens it noticeably. If the original wall has that burnished, almost polished look in the joints, that's a two-pass wall, and a one-pass repair will read light against it no matter how perfect your mix is. Watch for it on older high-end work — the old boys left joints you could almost see your face in.

A Field Method That Works

Here's my method, and I give it freely because it's saved me a thousand callbacks. Before I touch a wall, I make a profile board: a scrap of brick where I lay six or eight short joints of my matched mortar, each struck with a different tool, pressure, and pass count, each labeled in pencil. Then I hold that board against the wall and look at it from the distance the homeowner will — six feet, ten feet, from the curb. Walls get looked at from standing distance, not nose-against-the-wall.

One of those samples will step forward. It'll just belong. That's the profile match, and I carry that knowledge into the whole job. The color fan got me the pigment; the profile board gets me the appearance. Together, they make the repair disappear.

And when it's done right — when the profile matches the hand that laid it fifty years ago — the homeowner walks the wall, squints, and asks, "Which ones did you fix?" That's the whole ballgame, friend. That's MortarMagic. That's what fifty years of hands-on field experience teaches you: the match isn't in the bucket. It's in the hand that strikes the joint.

MortarMagic is the craft of matching mortar so the repair disappears — and at Champion Brick Repair, (817) 900-6324, it's what we've been doing for Texas homeowners for decades. WhiteStone Construction carries the same care into every project we touch.

Chapter 8: Weather, Season, and Cure

There's an old mason's saying that mortar is born twice: once in the mixer, and once on the wall. The first birth gives you the ingredients. The second one — the cure — decides the color you'll live with for the next fifty years. And the second birth is ruled entirely by the weather.

Texas weather is a loud, pushy partner in every job, and it changes mortar color in ways that surprise even experienced hands. Heat, cold, rain, wind — each leaves its fingerprints on a joint. Let me walk you through all four, the way I've learned them over fifty years, so you can schedule every job to give the repair its best chance of disappearing.

Texas Heat: The Fast Dry That Lightens

From May through September, the sun is not a backdrop — it's a foreman with opinions. When mortar cures in high heat, the water in the mix evaporates fast, sometimes far too fast for a proper cure. And fast-dried mortar almost always cures lighter than the same mix cured in mild weather.

When mortar dries quickly, the fine cement particles and pigment get pulled to the surface with the water — like the tide going out and leaving shells on the beach. That surface buildup creates a lighter, sometimes chalky film on the joint. The extreme version is efflorescence, those white powdery

patches blooming on new brickwork. But even a mild case shifts the color noticeably lighter than the match at the fan.

I learned this the hard way one August. Mixed perfect, struck perfect, matched the sample like a dream at ten in the morning. By four o'clock, with the wall baking at a hundred and five, the new joints had cured a full shade lighter than the old work. The color was right. The cure was wrong. Never let a hot wall bake since.

Three field rules I live by in the heat. First, **schedule the work early**. Start at first light, while the wall is cool and the air holds the night's humidity. My best color matches were struck before noon on summer days. Afternoon in July is for washing brick and setting up tomorrow — not for striking joints you're trying to match.

Second, **keep the brick damp**. A dry, hot brick sucks the water out of your mortar before the joint can cure — that's suction, and it lightens the joint just like fast air-drying. Wet the repair area before you start and mist between stages. Damp, not dripping — damp brick lets the mortar cure at its own pace instead of getting robbed.

Third, **shade the work if you can**. A tarp hung off scaffolding to shade a south or west elevation is worth more than any fancy additive. A slow dry is a dark, even, true-color dry. On a big matching job I'll drape damp burlap over finished sections through the first critical hours. Old-fashioned. Works like nothing else.

Cold Snaps: The Slow Cure That Darkens

Texas winters are mostly kind, but every year brings blue-norther days when the temperature drops thirty degrees overnight and stays there. Mortar cured in cold weather behaves the opposite of mortar cured in heat: it cures slowly, holds its moisture longer, and comes out darker than the same mix cured mild.

A slow cure lets the fine particles settle evenly and gives the cement its full strength-gain cycle — a denser, darker, richer joint. Structurally fine, but for color matching it's a trap. A match that looks perfect in the bucket in December can dry down darker than the old work, and now your repair reads like a dark band instead of disappearing.

The other danger is frost on fresh mortar. If a joint hasn't set before a hard freeze, the water in it expands and damages the surface — pitting and spalling that never match the old work. The rule I was taught as a young man, and still follow to the

letter: **no fresh mortar within reach of a freeze.** If the overnight low drops below forty and the mortar isn't set, you stop. A delayed job is a story; a frozen joint is a scar.

My cold-weather rules are simple. **Work midday, not morning.** Let the wall warm up — at least forty degrees and rising when you start, with enough daylight left for the joints to take their set before dark. In January that's roughly ten to two. You don't get a full day in winter. You get the good middle of one.

Don't cheat with hot water. I've seen fellows mix with scalding water to beat a cold morning — it flashes the surface, throws the color off, and weakens the set. Mix at room temperature, keep materials out of the wind, work inside the weather's honest window.

Plan for the darker cure. When I'm matching in cold weather, I pull my color match about a half-shade light of what the fan tells me, knowing the slow cure will darken it to the target. That's not a guess — it's a calibration I earned over years of winter work, checking February jobs against December samples. Which brings me to the most important practice of all.

Rain and Wind: The Movers of Moisture

Rain and wind move moisture through your mortar, and moving moisture moves color.

Rain on fresh mortar is the simplest disaster: it washes the surface. A joint struck an hour before a shower gets its surface fines rinsed away unevenly, leaving a streaked, mottled look no touch-up will fix. Worse, heavy rain can wash the joint out entirely. I watch the sky the way a farmer does, and if there's a real chance of rain before the mortar sets, I don't lay. Tarps help against a passing shower, but a Gulf-season gully-washer defeats any tarp you own. When the clouds build, I stop, cover, and come back tomorrow. Mortar is patient. Rain is not.

Rain on cured mortar is a different story, and one of the biggest causes of mismatch callbacks in this business. Old mortar is weathered and porous. After a rain, the old joints darken with moisture and stay dark a while. Fresh repair mortar is denser and less porous, so the new joints dry faster and stay lighter while the old ones are still dark. The morning after a rain, the homeowner sees a patch of light joints in a sea of dark and panics. Two days later everything's dry and even, and it matches beautifully. I tell every customer upfront: judge the match when it's dry. Wet mortar lies. It

always has.

Wind is the quiet one. A dry Texas west wind accelerates evaporation off the joint surface just like heat does — even on a mild day. You strike a perfect joint at seventy degrees, a steady twenty-mile-an-hour wind dries the surface film in minutes, and you get the same lightening effect as heat curing, sneakier because the air feels fine. On windy days I mist more often, shade the work, and slow down. The mortar sets the pace, not me.

Scheduling the Work: A Texas Calendar

If I could hand every homeowner and young mason one page from this book, it would be this.

Best months: March, April, October, November. Mild temperatures, moderate humidity, gentle cures. The mortar dries at a natural pace and the color comes out true to the mix. If you have a choice on a planned repair, these are the months. I've done my finest invisible work in October.

Good months: February, May, December. Workable with care. February and December want midday-only scheduling and a hard eye on the freeze forecast. May is usually lovely but can turn hot early — watch the thermometer, not the calendar.

Hard months: June, July, August, September, January. Summer is the heat battle: early starts, damp brick, shade, slow down. January is the freeze battle: midday window, no work ahead of a norther, plan for the darker cure. These months don't mean you can't do good work — I've done plenty of it in August — but you respect the weather, because it will not respect you.

The one-week rule: never judge the final color the day the mortar is struck. Mortar keeps curing through the first week, and the color shifts — usually darkening and evening out. I tell every customer: we'll look at it together seven days after the work is done, in dry weather, in the same light where you first noticed the problem. That one sentence has prevented more anxiety and callbacks than any other habit in my business.

The Cure Log: My Simplest Quality Tool

Here's a practice that costs nothing and saves everything: the

cure log. Every matching job gets a line — date, mix, temperature, wind, cloud cover, how long the wall took to cure — and a note on the final color against the old work: match, slightly light, slightly dark.

Fifty years of that, and I don't need a textbook to tell me what a hundred-degree day does to a batch. My log tells me. And when a job comes back with a question, I can say honestly what the conditions were and what the mortar did. That honesty, backed by a record, is worth more than any claim I could make.

Weather is the partner you don't get to choose, friend. But you get to plan around it, work with it, and respect what it does to your craft. The mason who schedules with the sky instead of against it gets joints that disappear — and joints that disappear are the whole reason for this book.

When the weather turns hard and the calendar won't wait, Champion Brick Repair — (817) 900-6324 — has been working Texas skies for decades. MortarMagic means matching the mortar and the day it cured. WhiteStone Construction brings that same field-tested care to every wall we touch.

Chapter 9: Historic and Oddball Mortars

Most mortar you'll ever match is ordinary, honest gray — cement, sand, water, laid by a working mason on a working house. But then there's the rest of it. The soft, crumbly white joints in a 1920s bungalow. The jet-black mortar on a 1970s commercial building. The salmon-pink joints on a ranch house out past Weatherford that nobody can explain. The old lime-rich mud that powders under your thumb like stale cake.

These are the historic and oddball mortars. They're where a matching job goes from straightforward to genuinely tricky — and where doing it wrong can do real damage to a building that deserves better.

One thing up front, plain as I can say it. I am not a preservation specialist, and I'm not a licensed professional in anything except the school of hard knocks. What I offer here is fifty years of hands-on field experience on old buildings in Texas, plus an honest map of where my knowledge ends and the preservation standards take over. When a building is truly historic — registered, landmarked, or just plain precious — the right move is to follow the preservation guidelines and, when in doubt, defer to the folks who do that work for a

living. I'll show you exactly where that line is.

Soft Historic Joints: Why Old Mortar Is Supposed to Be Soft

Here's something that surprises most homeowners: on a pre-1940s building, the mortar is supposed to be softer than the brick. That's not damage. That's design.

Old lime mortars cure to a relatively soft, flexible joint. The building moves with the seasons, the foundation shifts a hair, and the soft mortar absorbs that movement instead of cracking the brick. The mortar is the sacrificial layer. It's meant to give, so the masonry units don't have to.

The trouble starts when a well-meaning crew repoints those soft joints with hard modern mortar — straight Portland cement, strong as iron. Now the building still moves, but the joints don't give. So the movement goes into the brick faces, and you get spalling: the faces of hundred-year-old bricks popping off like scabs. I've walked up to old buildings in Fort Worth and seen beautiful antique brick ruined by a repointing job that was technically "stronger" than the original. Stronger was the problem.

So the first rule of historic matching: **match the hardness, not just the color.** On old lime mortar I use a proper lime-rich mix — soft and breathable, the way the original was. The color of old lime mortar is its own character too: warm, chalky, with a matte finish modern cement mortars don't naturally have. You don't get that look by tinting a hard mix. You get it by using the right soft materials and letting the joint cure the slow, gentle way lime wants to cure.

How do you know you're in lime territory? The thumb test works: press the old joint firmly. If it powders, crumbles, or leaves a chalky mark on your skin, it's lime-rich. If it's hard as rock and rings when you tap it, it's modern Portland. And if you're not sure — on anything old enough that the answer matters — slow down and treat it as historic until proven otherwise.

White and Colored Mortars: The Oddballs

Every now and then you walk up to a wall and the mortar isn't gray at all. White. Buff. Pink. Even black. These were somebody's deliberate choice — an architect's vision, a builder's signature, a fashion of the decade.

White mortar is the most common oddball: usually a white-Portland mix or a very lime-rich mix that cured pale. Matching it is mostly about the base — white cement and the right pale sand — then aging it honestly. White mortar shows every shadow the joint profile casts (remember Chapter 7), and every stain. Your match has to account for how the old white has weathered, not how white looks fresh from the mixer. Old white mortar in Texas usually picks up a warm, slightly cream tone from dust and weather. Match the cream, not the snow.

Colored mortars — buffs, pinks, tans, reds — were usually made with mineral pigments mixed in back in the day. My honest advice: don't eyeball it. Use a pigment supplier's color chart, make test batches, cure them properly, and compare in real daylight. And write down the recipe. A colored match without a written recipe is a one-time miracle you can't repeat when the next section needs work — and on a colored-mortar building, there is always a next section.

Black and dark mortars deserve a special warning. Popular on certain commercial buildings and mid-century homes, and brutally unforgiving. Dark mortar shows every variation in the mix, every difference in tooling pressure, every change in cure conditions. A dark joint struck heavy-handed sits visibly darker than the same batch struck light. On a dark-mortar match I build my profile board (Chapter 7's method) with extra care, because the profile shadows on dark mortar do even more of the visual work than usual. And I schedule dark-mortar work in mild weather if I possibly can — heat-lightening on a dark joint is a disaster you can see from the street.

Brick and Stone Special Cases

Not every unit behaves like a standard modern brick, and the units change how the mortar match reads.

Soft historic brick — handmade, low-fired — is porous and irregular. The joints are usually wide and lime-rich, and the whole wall has a handcrafted character. The match here isn't about precision; it's about sympathy. Slightly irregular joints, a soft mix, a warm color. Make it too perfect and it looks wrong — like a new suit on an old cowboy. Let the wall keep its character.

Stone brings deep, irregular, shadowed joints. Stone mortar is usually a natural gray or buff, and the color match matters less than the texture — the eye reads the joint as a dark, rough line between big shapes. I match stone joints by feel: same roughness, same depth of strike, same honest gray. The color fan is almost secondary.

Painted or previously coated masonry is a trap I've fallen into once and never again. If the old mortar was painted over — common on old Texas commercial buildings — then the "color" you're matching is paint, not mortar. Strip a test area, find out what's underneath, and settle it with the owner in writing before you mix a batch: are we matching the paint, or the mortar with a repaint planned?

A Hypothetical Story About Knowing When to Stop

Let me tell you a hypothetical story — a composite of things I've seen over the years, not any one real customer, and I'm labeling it as such so there's no confusion.

Imagine a young mason, full of confidence, called to a beautiful old 1910 building downtown. The mortar is soft and white and crumbling, and the owner wants it "fixed good and strong." The young mason thinks: I'll give him strong. He repoints the whole facade with hard Portland mortar, tools it beautifully, matches the color close enough to fool most eyes. The owner is thrilled.

Five years later the brick faces start spalling. Ten years later the facade is a patchwork of damaged antique brick. The "strong" repair destroyed what it was supposed to save — because the mortar was supposed to be the soft part, and nobody told the young mason, or he didn't listen.

That story is hypothetical. But the lesson is as real as anything in this book: **on a historic building, the wrong repair is worse than no repair.** When in doubt, stop. Ask. Defer.

When to Defer to Preservation Standards

Here's my plain-English map of where I draw the line, after fifty years in the field.

I handle it myself when: it's a regular residential repoint on a non-historic home; the existing mortar is modern Portland and I'm matching like-for-like; the homeowner just wants the wall sound and the color to disappear. That's my bread and butter, and MortarMagic was built for exactly that.

I slow down and research first when: the building is pre-1940; the mortar is soft, white, or lime-rich; the brick is handmade or unusual; the mortar is a deliberate color. I test, I document, I use appropriate soft mixes, and I tell the owner

what I'm doing and why. No surprises.

I defer to preservation standards when: the building is registered historic, landmarked, or in a historic district with rules; the work is structural or involves significant rebuilding; a preservation architect or the local historic commission is involved. In those cases the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties — the national plain-language guidelines for this work — are the authority, not me. I follow them, or I step aside for a specialist who lives in that world every day. That's not weakness. That's professionalism.

And one more line I never cross: I never claim credentials I don't have. I'm a mason with fifty years of hands-on field experience. That experience is deep and I'm proud of it, but it doesn't make me a licensed engineer, a preservation architect, or a certified anything. When a job needs those credentials, I say so, and I help the owner find them. Honesty about what you are is part of the craft — maybe the most important part.

The Oddball's Reward

I'll close with this. The oddball jobs — the pink mortar, the soft lime, the handmade brick — are the ones that taught me the most, and the ones I'm proudest of. Anybody can match gray to gray. Matching a hundred-year-old lime joint so it disappears, with the right softness and the right warmth, and knowing the wall will breathe easy for another fifty years — that's the craft at its highest.

And that's what this whole book has been about. Not tricks. Not shortcuts. The patient, honest, field-tested work of making a repair disappear — in color, in profile, in hardness, in character. Do that, and the wall doesn't remember you were there. Do that, and the homeowner gets their home back. Do that for fifty years, and you've got something worth writing down.

For the oddballs, the antiques, and everything in between — Champion Brick Repair, (817) 900-6324, brings fifty years of hands-on field experience to every Texas wall. MortarMagic is our craft of the invisible repair. And WhiteStone Construction carries that same honest workmanship into every project, historic or brand-new.

Chapter 10: The Ten

Matching Mistakes

I've spent my whole working life in masonry, and I can tell you this straight: when a mortar color match fails, it's almost never the mortar's fault. It's something a man did or didn't do along the way. I've made a few of these mistakes myself, early on, and I've fixed other men's mistakes for close to five decades now. Every one of them is avoidable. Every one of them has a fix.

Here are the ten ways matching fails, the ones I see over and over, and what to do instead.

Mistake 1: Grabbing a Bag Off the Shelf and Calling It Done

This is the big one. A contractor shows up with a bag of premixed mortar — the same gray he used on the last three jobs — and trowels it into your 1960s ranch's warm-tan joints like the color doesn't matter. He'll tell you it'll "dry close enough." It won't. It never will.

Premixed bag mortar is made to one factory color, and your house's mortar was made by a man with a shovel and a wheelbarrow on a specific Tuesday fifty years ago. Those two things were never going to agree.

The fix: Match the mortar to the house, not the house to the bag. A custom blend starts from the original joint's color and works outward. That's the whole philosophy behind MortarMagic — the color you get is the color of YOUR house, not the color of a factory in another state. Any contractor who reaches for the same bag on every job isn't matching anything.

Mistake 2: Skipping the Trial Patch

I've watched men mix a full batch, spread it across an entire wall, stand back, and then realize the color is wrong. Now they've got a wall of wrong-colored joints, a homeowner standing next to them, and a bad afternoon ahead.

A trial patch is a small, unglamorous thing. You mix a little, work it into a few joints in an out-of-the-way spot, let it cure, and look at it. It's the cheapest insurance in masonry. It costs you twenty minutes and saves you a callback.

The fix: Always lay a trial patch and let it cure fully before committing to the wall. I'll say it again because men skip it:

LET IT CURE. Wet mortar tells you nothing. Judge it dry, in daylight, at the same angle your neighbor's going to see it from.

Mistake 3: Ignoring the Weathering

Old mortar isn't one color — it's a gradient. The mortar under the eave is darker, cleaner, closer to the day it was laid. The mortar above the garden bed has fifty years of sun, rain, and sprinkler water in it. The chimney mortar up at the crown is half-bleached and the rest of it's got creosote shadows.

A contractor who matches the cleanest, most protected joint on the house is going to look great under the porch and wrong everywhere else.

The fix: Sample the mortar where the repair is actually going in, and study the weathering of that whole elevation. On a weathered wall, you're matching the weathered color, not the protected color. On a MortarMagic match, this is part of the intake: we want to know which part of the house we're matching so the blend lands where the eye actually goes.

Mistake 4: Over-Tooling the Joint

Tooling — shaping the joint with a jointer or slicker — is where the finish gets its texture. Too little and the joint looks sloppy. Too much and you polish the surface into a hard, smooth ribbon that looks nothing like the older, softer-tooled joints around it. Over-tooling also darkens the joint because it draws the fines to the surface and packs everything tight.

I see this a lot on repairs. The new joints are slick and tight and the old joints are softly tooled and open-textured, and from the street it looks like a stripe running through the wall.

The fix: Tool to match the existing profile and texture. If the old joints were struck with a convex jointer, strike the new ones the same way, with the same pressure. If they were raked or left rough, leave the new ones rough. The profile is part of the match — color is only half the job.

Mistake 5: Mixing Too Much Water (or Too Little)

Mortar mixed wet finishes darker than mortar mixed stiff. Same bag, same sand, same everything — add too much water and your joints come out a shade or two darker. Mix it too dry and it goes lighter, crumbly, and weak.

This one bites men who eyeball their water. On a big repoint, the first batch gets mixed careful and the fifth batch gets mixed tired, and the wall shows every bit of it.

The fix: Measure the water. Write the mix down. Batch by batch, keep the water consistent. This is one of the reasons we built the Mortar Bucket around precise measurement — when the recipe is fixed, the color is fixed. In the field, the fix is discipline: same water, same sand, same sequence, every batch.

Mistake 6: Pointing in the Wrong Weather

Mortar pointed in the blazing afternoon sun sets fast and cures uneven. Mortar pointed when it's forty degrees barely sets at all. Mortar pointed the hour before a thunderstorm gets washed and weeps. Every one of these changes the color, the strength, or both.

The worst is hot sun with wind. The surface flashes off, the joint crusts over, and you get a pale, dusty finish that looks like a different mix entirely — even when it isn't.

The fix: Point in mild conditions when you can — morning, overcast, temperature above forty and below ninety. Shade the work if you have to. Mist the joints, don't soak them. If the weather turns on you mid-wall, stop. A wall pointed tomorrow right beats a wall pointed today wrong, every single time.

Mistake 7: Forgetting That Sand Is Half the Color

Men obsess over the cement and the pigment and forget that sand is often the loudest voice in the mix. Coarse sand gives a rough, light-scattering joint. Fine sand gives a smooth, dense-looking joint. A sand with warm tan grains gives you a warm joint no matter what cement you used.

Switch sand sources mid-job — even from one side of the same pit to another — and the color shifts. I've seen walls where batch one and batch four are visibly different and the only thing that changed was the sand pile.

The fix: Source all your sand for a job from one place, one delivery, one pile. Screen it the same way every time. And when you're matching, the sand's color and grain are the first things to study — get the sand right and you're halfway home before the cement ever shows up.

Mistake 8: Judging the Match Too Early

Fresh mortar is dark. Curing mortar lightens. Fully cured mortar, after a rain or two, settles into its final color. A joint that's perfect at day three might look like it was always perfect; a joint that's perfect at hour three will be too light by day ten.

Homeowners panic at day two. Contractors panic at day two. Everybody wants to judge a match before it's done curing, and the judgment is always wrong.

The fix: Give the repair a full cure — a week at minimum, two weeks if you want to be fair — before anyone declares victory or defeat. Judge it after a rain if you can. Tell the homeowner this up front so nobody's staring at day-two joints with a worried look. Patience is part of the trade.

Mistake 9: Cleaning the Wall Wrong After Pointing

New joints need a careful cleanup — a soft brush, the right timing, light water. What I see instead: a man hits the wall with a pressure washer, or floods it with a hose, or scrubs the joints with a stiff brush while they're still green. He washes the color right out of the joint face, exposes the aggregate unevenly, and leaves a streaked, blotchy mess.

Acid washing is its own special disaster. The wrong acid, too strong, left on too long, and you've bleached the new joints a full shade lighter while the old joints — already aged and hardened — shrug it off.

The fix: Brush the joints gently at the right time, use plain water sparingly, and keep the pressure washer in the truck. If a chemical cleaning is truly needed, test it on a hidden area first and neutralize it properly. Cleaning should reveal the match, not remake it.

Mistake 10: Treating the Match as a One-Man Guess

Color matching is not a solo sport. The mason mixing the batch, the man pointing the joints, and the homeowner paying for it all need to agree on what "done" looks like. The most common failure I see isn't technical at all — it's a mason who matched what HE thought was right, pointed a whole wall, and then heard the homeowner say, "That's not what I expected."

No trial patch was shown. No sample was approved. Nobody was on the same page. Now it's a dispute instead of a job.

The fix: Show the match before you build the match. Lay the trial patch, walk the homeowner to it, look at it together in daylight, and get the nod. Put it in writing if it's a big job — "trial patch approved, located at rear elevation, east corner." A five-minute conversation prevents a five-thousand-dollar argument.

None of these mistakes are mysterious. They're all the same story: someone rushed, someone skipped a step, someone assumed. Matching is a discipline. It's measure, patch, cure, check, then build. Do the small steps right and the wall takes care of itself.

And if you're doing this work yourself — a small repair, a garden wall, a section of chimney — the same ten mistakes apply at any scale. The fix is always the same too: slow down, match the house, and let the cure tell the truth.

The Mortar Bucket was built for exactly this kind of work. Measured blends, matched to your house, so the bag isn't the guess anymore — the recipe is. You can see how it works at mortarmagic.netlify.app, and if you're in Texas and want the work done by hands that have done it for fifty years, Champion Brick Repair is at (817) 900-6324 and WhiteStone Construction is at (254) 723-5040. Either way — patch first, cure fully, and never trust wet mortar.

Chapter 11: Hiring and Bidding — What a Match Costs

Sooner or later, most homeowners decide they'd rather hire this work than do it themselves. That's a fine decision — matching and repointing is skilled labor, and a good mason earns his money. But the hiring part is where people get burned, so let me walk you through it the way I'd explain it across a kitchen table.

This chapter is about three things: what honest pricing looks like, what questions separate the real masons from the pretenders, and what your warranty should actually say. If you're a contractor reading this, it's also about how to price this work so you can stand behind it without losing your shirt.

What Matching Work Actually Costs

Let me start with the truth: real color-matched repointing costs more than slapping in gray bag mortar. There's no way around it. The sampling, the trial patches, the custom blending, the careful tooling — all of that is labor, and labor is the price.

That said, here's how honest contractors think about it.

Small repairs — a few square feet, a patch around a window, a section of garden wall — are usually priced as a half-day or full-day service call plus materials. The matching is a fixed part of the job, not an hourly mystery. If a contractor can't tell you what the matching costs separate from the pointing, he's guessing at both.

Whole-wall or whole-house repointing is priced by the square foot of wall, and the honest price carries the matching work built in — sampling, trial patch, blending, cure checks. Be suspicious of a bid that's dramatically lower than the others. On matched work, a low bid doesn't mean efficiency; it means the matching got skipped. Ask yourself: is the cheap bid the one with the bag mortar? It almost always is.

Historic or high-visibility work — front elevations, chimneys people see from the street, landmark homes — runs higher because the standard is higher. The match has to be right in daylight from the sidewalk, and that takes more sampling, more trial patches, more cure time. If your house is your showcase, pay for the standard.

One more thing about cost: the most expensive repoint is the one you pay for twice. A cheap job with the wrong color gets torn out and redone, and the redo costs more than the right job would have in the first place — plus the aggravation. Price the match into the job the first time.

The Questions That Separate Real Masons from Pretenders

When a contractor comes to look at your job, you're interviewing him whether you realize it or not. Here are the questions I wish every homeowner would ask — and the answers you want to hear.

"How will you match my existing mortar color?"

Good answer: "I'll sample your existing joints, do a trial patch, and have you approve it before we start." Bad answer: "We

use a standard mix" or "It'll blend in as it ages" or anything that suggests the bag decides the color.

"Can I see a trial patch before you do the whole wall?"

Good answer: "Absolutely — I'll put one in a discreet spot and we'll look at it together once it's cured." Bad answer: hesitation, or "We don't usually do that," or "It'll be fine." A mason who won't show you a trial patch is a mason who doesn't want you to see the color before it's too late.

"What sand and materials will you use?"

Good answer: specifics — where the sand comes from, what type it is, and how he'll keep the mix consistent batch to batch. Bad answer: a shrug, or "Whatever the yard has." Remember Chapter 10: sand is half the color. A mason who can't tell you about his sand can't tell you about your match.

"How long will you let the trial patch cure before we judge it?"

Good answer: at least several days, ideally a week or two, and he'll tell you wet mortar lies. Bad answer: "We'll know when it dries" — meaning an hour from now.

"What happens if the match isn't right?"

This is the big one. Good answer: "We'll adjust the blend and re-patch until you're satisfied — the trial patch exists so we get it right before the wall." Bad answer: "It'll weather in" — the four words that have covered more bad matches than any other phrase in masonry. Weathering softens a match; it doesn't create one.

"Can you give me the mix recipe in writing?"

Good answer: yes, with proportions, and he'll note it in his records too. Bad answer: "It's my own formula" or "I just eyeball it." Here's the thing — eyeballing is how batch four stops matching batch one. A mason with a written recipe is a mason who can repeat his own work. That's the whole idea behind the Mortar Bucket: a fixed, written recipe matched to the house, so the color doesn't depend on who's holding the shovel that day.

"How long have you been doing this, and can I see your work?"

Good answer: years in the field, and photos of actual matched work — not stock photos, not someone else's chimney. Ask to see a repair up close in a photo. The joints should disappear into the wall, not announce themselves.

Red Flags — Walk Away When You See These

Some signs are loud enough to hear from the driveway.

The mason never looks at your mortar. He glances at the wall, nods, and talks price. If he doesn't study the joints, sample the color, and ask about the house's age, he's not planning to match anything.

The bid is dramatically lower than everyone else's. On matched work, there's no shortcut that makes a real match cheap. The low bid skipped something — the sampling, the trial patch, the blending, or all three.

He wants full payment up front. Deposits are normal — materials cost money. Full payment before a trowel touches the wall is not. A reasonable structure is a deposit for materials, progress payments as work completes, and final payment when you've walked the finished job in daylight and you're satisfied.

He badmouths every other contractor in town. A mason confident in his work doesn't need to tear down his competition. He'll explain what HE does and let the work speak.

No written proposal. A handshake bid is fine for a small favor between neighbors. For paid work on your house, get it in writing: scope, materials, the matching process, price, timeline, and warranty. If he won't write it down, he won't stand behind it either.

He pressures you to decide today. "This price is only good if you sign now" is a sales tactic, not a mason talking. Good work is still good work tomorrow.

Warranty Language You Can Stand Behind

A warranty on matched repointing should cover two things: the workmanship and the match. Here's what honest warranty language looks like — whether you're the homeowner asking for it or the contractor writing it.

Workmanship: The joints will be properly prepared, the mortar properly mixed and tooled, and the work will hold under normal weather for the warranty period. If a joint fails because of how it was built, the mason comes back and fixes it. That's standard and fair.

The match: This one's trickier, because mortar weathers and colors settle. Honest language says the match was made to the existing mortar as it appeared at the time of the work, verified by an approved trial patch, and the contractor will correct the blend if the finished work doesn't match the approved patch. What it does NOT promise is that new mortar will age at exactly the same rate as fifty-year-old mortar forever — nobody can promise that, and a contractor who does is selling something.

What's NOT covered: Damage from things outside the mason's control — foundation movement, water intrusion from a failed roof, a homeowner hitting the wall with a pressure washer, structural issues. A warranty covers the mason's work, not the house's other problems.

The length: For repointing workmanship, a year or two is typical and honest. Some contractors offer longer. What's more important than the number is that it's in writing, with the contractor's real name and number on it.

For contractors: write the warranty the way you'd want it written for you. Specific, honest, and limited to what you actually control. A warranty you can't stand behind is worse than no warranty at all — it's a promise you made knowing you couldn't keep it. The trial patch is your best friend here: "match verified against approved trial patch dated ____" turns a subjective argument into an objective record.

A Note on Bidding It Yourself (For the Tradesmen Reading)

If you're a contractor getting into matched work, price the matching as its own line item. Don't hide it in the square-foot rate and hope nobody notices the extra hours — that trains customers to think matching is free, and it trains you to skip it when you're busy.

Price it honestly: sampling and analysis, trial patch materials and labor, blending, cure-time check visits. It's real work and it deserves a real line on the bid. Customers respect a mason who says, "The matching is \$X because here's what it involves." They do not respect the mason who skips it and hopes nobody notices — because from the street, everybody notices.

And keep your recipes. Every match you do is a recipe you can reference, a color you can reproduce, a customer you can serve again. The mason with a book of proven matches is worth more than the mason with a good eye and a bad memory. The Mortar Bucket is built on exactly this principle — matched, measured, repeatable. You can see the system at

mortarmagic.netlify.app.

The Bottom Line on Hiring

Hire the mason who studies your wall, shows you a trial patch, writes down his recipe, puts it all in writing, and stands behind it. That man will cost more than the bag-mortar man, and he'll be worth every penny, because the wall will look like it was never touched — and that's the whole point.

If you're in Texas and you want it done by hands with fifty years of field experience behind them, Champion Brick Repair is at (817) 900-6324 and WhiteStone Construction is at (254) 723-5040. And if you want to understand the matching system we use, MortarMagic is at mortarmagic.netlify.app. Ask the questions in this chapter of anybody you hire — including us. A good mason welcomes them.

Chapter 12: Maintaining the Match

The mason's truck pulls away, the joints are pointed, the color is right, and the wall looks like it was never touched. Job done? Not quite. A matched repair is a living thing for its first year or two — it cures, it weathers, it settles into the wall. How you treat it in that time decides whether the match you paid for is the match you keep.

This chapter is the owner's manual for your new joints. Clean them right, think carefully about sealers, give the repair time to age in, and know when to pick up the phone.

The First Few Weeks: Leave It Alone

The hardest maintenance instruction in this book is also the simplest: for the first few weeks, do nothing.

Fresh mortar is still curing. It's gaining strength, shedding moisture, and settling into its final color. Everything you do to it now — scrubbing, spraying, leaning ladders against it — can mark it. The most common damage I see to new joints doesn't come from weather; it comes from a well-meaning homeowner with a garden hose.

The rules for the first month:

- No pressure washer. Not on the new joints, not near them, not "just to rinse the dust off." A pressure washer can cut

into green mortar and strip the color right off the joint face. Keep it in the garage for now.

- No scrubbing, no chemicals, no acid anything. The joints don't need cleaning yet and they can't take it yet.
- Keep sprinklers from pounding directly on fresh joints. A gentle rain is fine — mortar's been meeting rain for thousands of years. A sprinkler head blasting the same six joints every morning is not rain; it's a tiny water hammer.
- Tell the lawn crew. If you've got a mowing service, let them know there's fresh masonry work and to keep the trimmers and blowers off it. String trimmers chip green mortar like nothing else.

After about a month of normal weather, the mortar is cured enough for normal life. You'll know it's settling in because the color stops shifting — that slow lightening of the first weeks levels off and the joints just look like they've always been there.

Cleaning New and Old Joints

Once the repair is cured, normal cleaning is fine — but "normal" in masonry means gentler than most people think.

Routine cleaning: A soft brush and a garden hose with a gentle spray is all a brick wall ever needs. Work top to bottom so dirty water doesn't streak over clean joints. This handles dust, pollen, cobwebs, and light grime. Do it once or twice a year and your wall will outlive us all.

Algae and mildew: North-facing walls and shaded areas grow green and black film. The fix is a soft brush and a mild, masonry-safe cleaner — never bleach straight from the jug, which can discolor mortar and kill every plant it touches. There are cleaners made for masonry; use one, follow the label, rinse thoroughly. Test in a hidden spot first. This applies to old joints and new ones alike — but be extra gentle on the new work for its first year.

Efflorescence: That's the white, powdery crust that sometimes blooms on new masonry. It's mineral salts working their way out as the mortar cures — common, harmless, and temporary. Dry-brush it off. Don't hose it — water just feeds the cycle. Don't acid-wash it — you'll do more harm than the salts ever would. It usually fades on its own within a season or two as the wall dries out and settles.

What never to do: Sandblasting, grinding, wire wheels, muriatic acid from the hardware store used at full strength, and pressure washers held close. Every one of these removes the joint face — and the joint face is where your color match lives. Damage the face and you've damaged the match. A wall

that's been blasted or acid-burned doesn't just look bad; the joints are physically weaker.

If your wall needs serious cleaning beyond a brush and a hose — heavy staining, years of neglect, paint — call a mason before you call a pressure-washing company. Cleaning masonry is a masonry decision.

Sealers: The Honest Pros and Cons

"Should I seal my brick?" is one of the most common questions I get, and the honest answer is: it depends, and usually no.

Let me lay out both sides the way I'd lay them out at your kitchen table.

The pros: A good breathable masonry sealer slows water absorption. On a wall that takes driving rain, that can mean less interior moisture, fewer freeze-thaw cycles chewing at the joints, and slower weathering of the mortar color. If your wall has a genuine water problem — not a leak from the roof, but the wall itself soaking up storm after storm — a sealer is worth discussing.

The cons: Sealers change the appearance. Most of them darken the masonry slightly — the "wet look" that never quite goes away. On a matched repair, that darkening hits the new and old joints differently, because they absorb differently, and your invisible match can become visible again. Some sealers trap moisture instead of breathing, which is worse than no sealer at all — trapped water freezes, expands, and pops the joint faces off. And once a wall is sealed, it's sealed; removing sealer is its own miserable project.

The middle ground: If you do seal, use a breathable, penetrating sealer — not a film-forming coating, not paint, not anything that makes the wall shiny. Apply it to the whole elevation, not just the repaired section, so the appearance change is uniform. And wait until the new mortar is fully cured — months, not weeks — because sealing green mortar traps the moisture that's still trying to get out.

My general advice: Most Texas brick walls don't need sealer. Good mortar, good drainage, gutters that work, and grading that moves water away from the house do more for a wall than any coating. Fix the water's path before you coat the wall. If a contractor's first answer to every wall is "seal it," get a second opinion.

One more note: never seal a wall to hide a bad match. I've

seen it tried. The sealer darkens everything unevenly, the mismatch shows through anyway, and now you've got a mismatched wall that's also sealed — harder to fix, not easier.

Letting the Repair Age In

Here's something nobody tells homeowners: a good match gets BETTER with time.

In the first months, the new joints are the cleanest thing on the wall. They haven't collected dust, grown a whisper of algae, or been softened by sun the way the fifty-year-old joints have. From six inches away, a sharp-eyed person might spot the repair — not by color, but by cleanliness.

Then the seasons do their work. A little dust settles in. A rain washes the wall. The sun does what the sun does. Within a year or two, the new joints have picked up the same patina as their neighbors, and the repair disappears completely. This is the match aging in, and it's the most satisfying part of the job — the wall finishes what the mason started.

What you can do to help it along: nothing, mostly. Normal weather is the best aging agent there is. Don't try to "weather" new joints artificially — no dirt rubbed in, no tea-staining tricks, no shortcuts. I've seen homeowners try to age new mortar with all kinds of home remedies, and every one of them looks like exactly what it is. Let time do it. Time is honest.

What to watch for while it ages: hairline shrinkage cracks in the first weeks are normal and usually harmless — mortar shrinks a little as it cures. If a crack opens wide, if a joint crumbles when you touch it, or if whole sections sound hollow when you tap them, that's not aging — that's a problem, and it's a phone call (see below).

Seasonal Care Through the Year

Spring: Walk the wall after the storm season. Look for new cracks, loose joints, places where water is getting in. Clean off the pollen with a soft brush and a gentle hose. Check that your gutters made it through winter — overflowing gutters dump water down the wall, and no mortar enjoys that.

Summer: Texas heat is brutal on everything, but cured masonry handles it fine. This is the season to keep sprinklers aimed at the grass, not the wall. If you're doing any work near the wall — painting trim, running a ladder — pad the ladder feet and keep tools off the fresh joints if the work is less than a year old.

Fall: Clean the gutters. I say it twice because it matters twice. Water management is joint management. Trim back any bushes or vines touching the wall — plants hold moisture against the mortar and roots work into joints. A foot of clearance is a good rule.

Winter: Texas freezes are the real test. Water gets into any tiny opening, freezes, expands, and wedges the opening bigger. This is freeze-thaw, and it's the number-one killer of mortar in climates that freeze. There's no maintenance trick against it beyond what we've already covered — good joints, water directed away, no trapped moisture. If a joint fails in winter, note where and call in spring; don't try to patch it in freezing weather.

When to Call Back

A good mason wants to hear from you if something isn't right. Here's how to tell the difference between normal settling and a real problem.

Call back soon if: joints are crumbling or falling out within the first year; large sections sound hollow when tapped; the color is clearly, obviously wrong in daylight after full cure (not "I think I see a difference from six inches" — clearly wrong from the sidewalk); water is coming through the repaired area.

Don't panic about: slight color variation as the mortar cures (give it time); hairline shrinkage cracks in the first weeks; efflorescence blooming and fading; the new joints looking "too clean" for the first months (they'll age in).

When you call: be specific. "The joints on the east chimney, about halfway up, are crumbling when I touch them" gets you a fast, useful response. "Something's wrong with the wall" gets you a guessing game. Take a photo in daylight — a mason can tell a lot from a photo.

And here's the thing I want every homeowner to hear: calling back is not complaining. It's part of the deal. Any mason worth hiring would rather come look at a concern in month three than hear about a failure in year three. The warranty in Chapter 11 exists for exactly this. Use it.

The Long View

A properly matched, properly pointed wall is a fifty-year wall. Your grandchildren could be looking at those joints. The maintenance it asks of you is almost nothing: keep water moving away, clean it gently, leave it alone the rest of the time.

That's the quiet payoff of doing the match right in the first place. A wall that disappears — old joints and new joints, one color, one texture, one wall — doesn't need fussing over. It just stands there, doing its job, looking like it always has. Which is exactly what we were after from the first trial patch.

If you're starting a matching project — or maintaining one — the MortarMagic system is at mortarmagic.netlify.app, and it's built around everything in this book: sample the house, blend to the house, write the recipe down. For the work itself, done by hands with fifty years of field experience, Champion Brick Repair is at (817) 900-6324 and WhiteStone Construction is at (254) 723-5040. Take care of the wall, and the wall takes care of the house.

You've reached the end of the field guide — but the wall keeps the last word. Go look at yours in daylight. Really look. The joints are telling you everything you need to know.

Conclusion

If you've read this far, you now know more about mortar color matching than most of the men holding trowels out there. That's not a dig at them — most masons were never taught this craft. They were taught to build, not to blend. Building is honest work and I respect it. But matching is a different trade inside the trade, and now you hold its whole playbook.

Let me leave you with the five things I want every homeowner and every mason to carry off this page.

First: the match is made before the trowel ever comes out. Reading the joint, choosing the sand, making the trial patch, watching it cure — that's where the match happens. The day of repointing is just execution. Every failed match I ever saw was a failed preparation wearing a work shirt.

Second: wet mortar lies, and cure time tells the truth. Nothing in this book matters if you judge the color on day one. Give it its weeks. Give it its rain. The patient matcher wins every time.

Third: sand is the color. You can adjust cement, you can adjust lime, you can nudge with pigment — but the sand sets the foundation of everything. Find your sand first, and half the battle is already won.

Fourth: tooling is a signature. Match the profile, match the pressure, match the hand of the man who struck it forty years ago. A color match with the wrong tooling is a match that fails

in the light of day.

Fifth — and this is the one for the homeowners: hire the man who brings you a trial patch. If he shows up, mixes on your wall, waits for it to cure, and comes back to show you the result before he touches your house, you've found a matcher. If he pulls a bag out of the truck and says "trust me," keep looking.

I started doing this work fifty years ago, when a bag of mortar was a bag of mortar and nobody talked about matching anything. I learned this craft the slow way — by failing, by studying the joints that were done right, by mixing a thousand batches in the Mortar Bucket until the wall stopped arguing with me. Everything in this book is what those years taught me, and I wrote it so you don't have to spend the decades I spent.

Mortar is the humblest material on a building. Nobody buys a house for the mortar. But the mortar decides whether the brick work looks like it was always one wall or like somebody pasted new patches on an old face. Get it right, and your repair disappears. That disappearing act — that's the whole game. That's MortarMagic.

Thank you for reading. Now go match something.

— Travis

Resources & Next Steps

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

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