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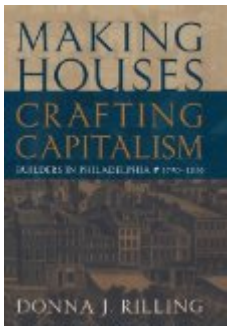
Donna J. Rilling. *Making Houses, Crafting Capitalism: Builders in Philadelphia, 1790-1850.* Early American Studies. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. xii + 261 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-3580-7.



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City of Builders

Donna J. Rilling's *Making Houses, Crafting Capitalism* skillfully examines the house building business in Philadelphia during the early nineteenth century. The book focuses on the efforts of artisans to become master builders, entrepreneurs who could independently organize the financial, human, and material resources required for house construction and oversee the entire building process. Among craftsmen, carpenters were typically best suited for this role. Their trade involved them in many important tasks in house construction ranging from framing to the fabrication of stairs and sashes. This concise and fascinating study covers the stuff of house building-its financial challenges, the indispensable construction materials that went into Philadelphia's row houses, and the human skill involved in both raising structures as well as becoming a master builder. In essence, Rilling stridently argues that Philadelphia was not just a "City of Homes" as it was popularly known in the nineteenth century, but it was also a "City of Builders."

To a certain degree, the history of the builders Rilling discusses has fallen into the gap separating business from labor scholarship. Students of labor have concentrated on the tensions between blue-collar workers and management while their business counterparts have primarily dealt with large firms. The author has artfully rescued independent, small-scale house builders from this chasm. Rilling regards "labor" as the skilled work involved in fabricating houses and "business" as the struggle of Philadelphia artisans to be their own bosses, to thrive in a capitalist system.

The book opens by detailing the attempts of three craftsmen (two carpenters and a painter) to become master builders. From their personal tales emerge some of the important themes that echo throughout the rest of the study like the pounding of hammers at a construction site. Most importantly, it took a good deal of business acumen, some luck, and innumerable hours of hard work to move from journeyman to house builder.

Rilling's second chapter persuasively lays out why Philadelphia was simultaneously a "City of Homes" and a "City of Builders." Many of Philadel-

phia's builders used speculative construction techniques to gain independence. Intrepid mechanics devised projects in which they financed and erected multiple structures in advance of specific orders or contracts from customers. A builder might secure a dozen lots on a street and erect a series of row houses that he would then sell. Ideally, speculation anticipated market demands and reaped significant profits. It also forced craftsmen to establish connections with wealthy merchants or investors willing to extend the credit necessary for construction. In places like New York or Boston, such speculative development lay beyond the reach of most mechanics because land values were so steep. But in Philadelphia, vast swaths of undeveloped real estate kept land costs reasonable.

In addition, the concept of ground rent rendered construction even easier. Craftsmen did not have to purchase land outright. Rather, in many cases, ground lords who owned land "sold" plots to building tradesmen in exchange for ground "rent." Under such arrangements, the builder had the right to raise a structure as long as he paid the rent, a small fraction of the land's total value. When he sold the house, the rent payments passed on to the new owner. This erased the capital outlay required to purchase land outright.

The last four chapters of the book cover the human and material resources that went into the construction of houses. Being an independent builder called for negotiation skills and an experienced eye able to calculate fair and accurate cost estimates for customers and the contractors working on a job site. The ability to draw plans helped clients visualize the product. Rilling also discusses the nuances of carpentry work itself. Significantly, the author demonstrates that the mechanization creeping into the realm of woodworking by the mid-nineteenth century had little negative effect on carpenters in Philadelphia.

A particularly interesting chapter addresses the ways that house builders tapped the natural resources of the Delaware Valley for materials like clay, lime, lumber, and marble. This is a stimulating attempt to link the built environment of the city with the natural environs of its periphery in the vein of William Cronon's ***Nature's Metropolis***[1]. The study culminates in a chapter that combines all of the major themes Rilling highlights in the rest of the book. The chapter puts together the entire construction process by attempting to tell the story of how master builder Joseph Montgomery coordinated the development of a block of thirty-two row houses in the Spring Garden neighborhood of Philadelphia starting in 1849.

Rilling has bricked together a strong foundation of source material for her study. It includes a variety of primary documents like mortgages, court proceedings, and account books. Secondary scholarship tightly binds the diverse primary records she has painstakingly assembled. Atop the foundation, the author has crafted a framework of persuasive arguments that supports a variety of interesting discussions.

However, I do have some quibbles when it comes to the finishing work on this structure. First, Rilling overstates the uniqueness of ground rent in Philadelphia. Versions of it existed in other cities like Baltimore and New York. She notes that people certainly profited from it and used it differently in the City of Brotherly Love than in Gotham. Trying to make the argument that ground rent "was peculiar to Philadelphia among American cities" (pp. 43-44) seems unnecessary and needlessly complicates an otherwise compelling discussion. Second, one does not get a sense of how many journeymen succeeded in becoming master builders during the early-nineteenth century. Even though it is surely impossible to ascertain an exact figure, it would be nice to know the number Rilling encountered in her research. Perhaps this type of information could have been placed in an appendix. Finally, the last chapter's focus on Montgomery's toils in Spring Garden is forced. This section of the book is based

more on William Eyre, a carpenter. Rilling cites his diary in over half of the chapter's footnotes. In fact, Eyre's writings do not directly relate to Montgomery's building project. While ambitious, the chapter feels a bit contrived by relying on Eyre's experiences to flesh out the daily rigors of Montgomery's construction.

These minor critiques aside, Rilling deserves praise as a master builder, herself. *Making Houses, Crafting Capitalism* fits nicely on a shelf alongside Bruce Laurie's *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* [2]. More generally, Rilling greatly contributes to our understanding of how residential structures were constructed in the nineteenth-century city. By blurring the lines between business and labor history, Donna J. Rilling has clarified the history of house builders.

[1]. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992).

[2]. Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).