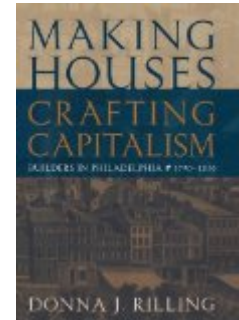


Donna J. Rilling. *Making Houses, Crafting Capitalism: Builders in Philadelphia, 1790-1850.* Early American Studies. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. xii + 261 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-3580-7.



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House as a Life

As the title of this useful study suggests, Donna J. Rilling details the process of construction in Philadelphia during the first half of the nineteenth century. This construction included both the creation of new houses within the city and the development of a capitalist infrastructure that spread throughout the Mid-Atlantic region and beyond. Using a vast collection of court and personal financial documents to detail the day-to-day activities of builders and the interplay between these micro-and macro-level constructions, Rilling demonstrates how the growing integration and complexity of the business world impacted a wide range of individuals and economic concerns.

Unlike in New York or Boston, Rilling argues, Philadelphia's artisan builders remained influential players in construction well into the nineteenth century. These men succeeded as small producers, forging a new economy even as merchants, agents, and large-scale capitalists emerged to compete with them. Utilizing a variety of legal and financial strategies and capitalizing on Philadelphia's unique ground-rent system, these men

acted as contractors, financiers, and craftsmen all at once. Master builders often did not possess much of their own capital, but they cobbled enough together from other sources to engage in speculative construction. Rilling then concludes that the activities of these journeymen and master mechanics "challenges the dominant narrative of industrializing America" because rather than resisting competitive capitalism, they embraced the developing economy and became critical spokes in the business cycle (p. 192).

Philadelphia's builders' (mostly master house carpenters, bricklayers, and plasterers) business strategies and endeavors are the primary focus of the work. Rilling sees these small producers as "aggressive and ingenious operators who plunged" into the perilous antebellum economy (p. vii). These masters and journeymen craftsmen are depicted in chapter 1, entitled "Men on the Make." Using the careers of John Munday, Moses Lancaster, and Warnet Myers as models, the chapter demonstrates how these men moved from journeymen to master artisans and rode the waves of multiple business fluctuations during

their careers. The success of these men varied. Lancaster, for example, spent time as a journeyman, master carpenter, and lumber merchant, but had little wealth to show at the very end of his long life. What is most important for Rilling is not individual success or failure, but the way that Lancaster and the others engaged their market activities to create a vibrant market infrastructure. Using family and church connections, extensive lines of credit, and speculators' nerves, all three men showed the desire to gamble for and on their living. While the three men Rilling details certainly fit these personality traits, how representative they were of the total artisan builder community remains questionable. The experiences of their fellow master and journeymen builders who accounted for upwards of one fifth of Philadelphia's craftsmen may have shown some more variety.

The characterization of early nineteenth-century men as aggressive speculators is not altogether new. Anthony Rotundo eloquently writes of the era's men as masculine overachievers in the workplace, but his *American Manhood* is positioned squarely within the middle-class. However, in this study, Rilling claims that craftsmen, notably journeymen and master builders, also fit this characterization. This argument diverges from recent studies of journeymen and masters in Philadelphia by William A. Sullivan, Bruce Laurie, and Ronald Schultz that focus more on the conflict between these groups of artisans than on their shared focus or camaraderie.[1] Rilling posits a relationship between these groups as containing more of a "paternalistic character," that "inhibited the workers from simply seeing themselves as employees" (p. 182). On a number of occasions the author points out how the favored among a master's men often used his guidance and support to move into a higher status. Certainly, some journeymen carpenters and related tradesmen did follow their masters into the ranks of small producers. However, this trend slowed by the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

Even though individuals constantly traversed the fuzzy line between ranks, there was a limit to the ease with which John Munday simply declared himself to no longer be a journeyman in the 1790s (p. 5). By the 1830s, scores of journeymen house carpenters even moved to New York City in search of better employment and opportunities. [2] However, this important issue is little discussed due to Rilling's decision (as noted in the introduction) not to revisit the topics of labor organizing and labor conflict. This choice prevents the author from integrating the whole story of labor relations into the process by which small producers created a capitalist economy. Labor questions were central to that course and Rilling misses the opportunity to analyze how they informed such issues as the financing of construction and the extraction of building materials.

Rilling presents an important discussion of the legal and financial framework of early nineteenth-century Philadelphia and especially how builders used the system. Central to this process was the city's unique ground-rent form of land tenure, whereby "title to a lot was granted in perpetuity, subject to payment of an annual rent" (p. 8). Under this system, builders only needed to secure enough capital to handle construction, without worrying about accumulating enough to purchase land outright. This meant that even carpenters of little means that secured mortgages or trade credit could build homes speculatively, gambling on their eventual sale. In New York City and Boston, merchants dominated capital-intensive real estate development, and the decision of banks to forward loans only to a few significant master craftsmen precluded most small masters and journeymen from taking these risks. Rilling argues, however, that the ground-rent system and an available line of mortgages and other financing allowed Philadelphia's craftsmen (small masters and journeymen) to vigorously engage market capitalism and remain a force in construction well into the nineteenth century (p. 49). This model of finance and speculative building certain-

ly worked for the men Rilling profiles, but the question arises, if any journeyman could secure enough capital to head a construction site, who decided to maintain their status as workers and why?

In the most original part of the book, "Enterprising Nature," Rilling wonderfully shows the complex process of how builders obtained materials for their construction sites. Taking a cue from William Cronon's work on the natural resources around Chicago, Rilling sketches the varied Philadelphia industries that produced lumber, brick, lime, and marble.[3] While the methods of extraction, production, and distribution for these materials often had little in common, builders took active roles in coordinating all of them. Demonstrating how a master carpenter sometimes needed to be a lumber merchant, transport worker, or brick manufacturer, this discussion gets at the heart of the multitasking life of the builder. It is all the more interesting because these men were not general merchants or capitalists, but self-identified craftsmen. As Rilling points out repeatedly, the label of carpenter or painter that these artisans put next to their names in the directory or used in advertisements often described little of what they actually did when acting as master builders.

However, the majority of these men were artisans by training and Rilling uses the final two chapters to bring them back to their craft, concentrating on their work as carpenters and detailing the steps involved in a home's final assembly. In these years, craftsmen encountered new technological changes and a shift occurred to more mechanized woodworking, especially when it came to the manufacture of standardized items such as shutters and doors. These changes occurred as carpentry shops underwent a wave of specialization, shifting to embrace new steam and water power technologies that allowed for increased rates of production. Ironically, as master carpenters branched out into the fields of materi-

al extraction, architecture, and financing, journeymen lost the ability to move fluidly from skill to skill within the creation of a single house. Relationships among journeymen and masters may have been strained at times, but apparently, this division did not lead to friction. Rilling notably argues that these changes to time honored methods of craft production were not met with resistance because the large demand for new housing for a constantly growing Philadelphia supplied enough work to satisfy artisans. Certainly a lot of labor was demanded in these years, as the process for finishing a home was incredibly detailed and required a number of hands to complete (pp. 171-175).

The end of this story of home construction and market formation leaves two questions for the reader to ponder: who actually did all of this work and what did they think about the work they were doing? The profile that Rilling provides of a few dozen master builders seems to indicate that these men handled a vast number of roles single-handedly. While this was undoubtedly true, the entire process of housing construction--cutting down trees, digging clay, draining swamps, brick laying, woodworking, and painting--required an enormous supply of unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled laborers not profiled by Rilling.[4] These men, for one reason or another, had no way of engaging even the moderate lines of credit or financing that master builders could. More than the statement of "continued diligence and luck" is needed from Rilling to describe why some men managed to rise to the level of builder and others remained journeymen or schleppers all their lives (p. 139). Even if the reader accepts the argument that Philadelphia's carpenters could move into the upper ranks more easily than their compatriots in New York City or Boston because of the availability of financing and meager capital requirements, a question remains why so many men in the second quarter of the century remained wage-earning workers rather than going into business for themselves. The line between

journeymen and master craftsmen may have been fluid, but it was still a recognizable line and profiling journeymen who became masters is not the same as profiling the majority of journeymen who did not. A more descriptive and complete demographic profile of builders and craftsmen in the city might answer some of these issues and explain what types of men were doing what types of work within the process Rilling details so well.

The other important issue left out of Rilling's description is what builders thought about what they were doing. At a time when obtaining respectable housing for oneself and one's family weighed heavily on many artisans and workers, the field of home construction was not the same as other crafts. Rilling's argument about the connection between housing construction and the formation of capitalism would benefit from more attention to what Elizabeth Blackmar has called the "social meaning of housing."^[5] Rilling's builders vigorously engaged the housing market but functioned more as artisanal machines than thoughtful men when it came to personal motivation and self-reflection. Builders must have had some choice of putting up wooden homes for workers or fine brick and marble houses for middling and upper-class families. Other than simple profit motivation and speculative risk, why did particular builders construct one type of housing over another? In detailing the early career of Joshua Sharples, Rilling writes of a home that he constructed, that though "he had erected it, the dwelling was more expensive than one the carpenter would have inhabited, had he then been married with a family" (p. 131). What did Sharples think about that? Did he resent building a house he could not afford to live in? Did he ever tamper with the plaster before it was applied to express disgust? Were there builders who refused to work for certain clients based on political, religious, ethnic, or racial reasons? The reader is unsure because these types of questions are not addressed by the author. Men with very strong identities built houses in Philadelphia during

these years, and the context of who they were and what they thought about their work was just as important as any other factor to the formation of those homes and the larger capitalist structure they created.

Donna Rilling has crafted a useful study of the complex work lives of Philadelphia's builders and the version of capitalism that they actively helped shape. She asserts clearly that artisans should be viewed as vital, energetic cogs in the new market economy and not merely backward looking impediments to technological and commercial advancement. The master craftsmen she profiles certainly fit this depiction, alternatively engaging the tasks of natural material extraction, speculative financing, and craftwork. Through these varied roles, not only were houses built, but a modern economy was constructed. While Rilling's descriptions provide a nuanced picture of master builders' worklives, readers might want more information about all of the individuals who contributed to house construction. Also, the book piques interest in how these men contemplated their place in the formation of early capitalism without fully addressing it. These criticisms aside, Donna Rilling's *Making Houses, Crafting Capitalism: Builders in Philadelphia, 1790-1850* offers a well-written portrait of the interplay between micro- and macro-level economics in the early-nineteenth century.

Notes

[1]. See Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); Ronald Schultz, *The Republic of Labor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and William A. Sullivan, *The Industrial Worker in Pennsylvania, 1800-1840* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1955).

[2]. On individuals that moved from Philadelphia to New York, see "New York Union Society of House Carpenters-Constitution, By Laws, Roll of Members, 1833-1836," New York Public Library, Rare Book and Manuscript Division.

[3]. See William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1991).

[4]. For a discussion of these laborers in Philadelphia during the late eighteenth century, see Billy G. Smith, *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 81-84.

[5]. See Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 109-148.

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