

THE FRANCESTOWN HERITAGE MUSEUM

Newsletter



May 2021

BRICKS

BRICKS –

Now what could be more common and more taken for granted than a brick? Synonymous with sturdy construction (just ask the three little pigs). Oh, I can already hear a lot of derisive snorts from the readers who are thinking – oh surely he’s not going to devote an entire newsletter to a brick. Well rest assured it will not be the entire newsletter – just look at the column to the right for example. Pay attention – there is a quiz on bricks at the end.

From the time the first settlers/colonists came ashore, much attention was given to staying warm in the coming winter. When they first arrived they had no iron stoves, no bricks, no mortar or any other such materials. But a fireplace and chimney would have to suffice for both cooking needs and warmth from the freezing low temperatures.

Not having bricks or other such material, about all they had were sticks and clay to build a chimney. Large stones could be used for the 4’-5’ walls of the firebox and were held in place by building a wooden crib out of logs around the outside of the fireplace and laying the stones up against this wooden crib. Above the firebox rose the chimney but not having any bricks or mortar this could only be built using sticks and clay. This assembly was known as a “mudcat”.

So before you can ask, we’ll digress and explain the name “mudcat”. The mud part is obvious, that being the clay. Well, the clay needed a binder to hold it together and to bind to the sticks. To reinforce the clay they would use pretty much whatever was available near the work site. Among the favorites were hay, straw, horse and human hair, old rope and animal dung. All these and the clay would be mixed together and rolled out in long pieces. These rolls of pliable clay were called “cats”. Hence the term “mudcat” to describe the chimney.

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WHAT’Z IT TOOL . . .



This tool was recently acquired and is in excellent condition. It is solid hardwood with a U shaped metal insert in the center belly of the tool. A cutter is attached by two bolts that center the blade in line with the U-shaped belly in the main tool. The knife can also be adjusted to set the distance between the blade and the bottom of the belly insert. The tool is specific to its job and was used by the proprietor of one of the factories discussed in a past issue of this newsletter.

As with previous WHAT’Z IT articles, the first person to correctly identify both the name of this tool and it’s use will receive one of our coveted Life Time free passes to the museum (the value of which is not diminished by the fact that we do not charge admission to anyone).

COMMUNITY MARKET

The Frankestown Community Market opened early this year with the first market held April 2nd. The Horse Sheds remained the venue for the market which was open from 4:00 – 7:00 PM. As the Heritage Museum is virtually next door we have partnered with the Market and will be open with our hours coinciding with those of the market. Please plan to come down to the Common on Fridays and take advantage of the many fine products in the market all made and/or grown locally. You will be supporting the local economy but will also have the opportunity to visit the museum and immerse yourself in the past. A time when life itself depended on the local community.

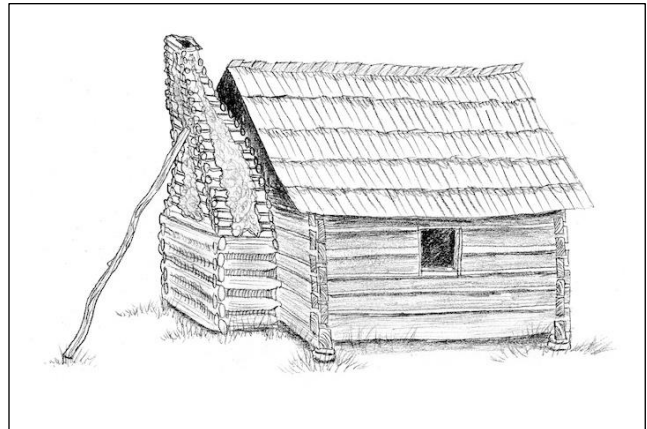
To build the chimney they would set one of these cats on top of the sticks and then mash it down by placing more sticks on top of it and repeating the process for the height of the chimney. The figure to the right is the remains of a mudcat chimney. The photo below is a closer view of the deteriorated chimney on the right and the cat is clearly visible and appears to be some type of grass or hay mixed with the clay.



Needless to say this type of construction was not an ideal arrangement. When building something designed to contain fire, doing so with wood poses some degree of peril. In fact fires were not uncommon, especially in the mudcat chimneys of the day.

One solution was to build the chimney tilting away from the house and then prop it up with a large wooden pole. If the chimney caught fire they need only to knock down the prop and the burning chimney would fall away from the house. This gave rise to a little ditty by a Mr. Clay Dobbins:

To cook my beans and keep me warm
I'll mud and cat all day long
But if at night I hear a roar
I'll kick the pole, then run away



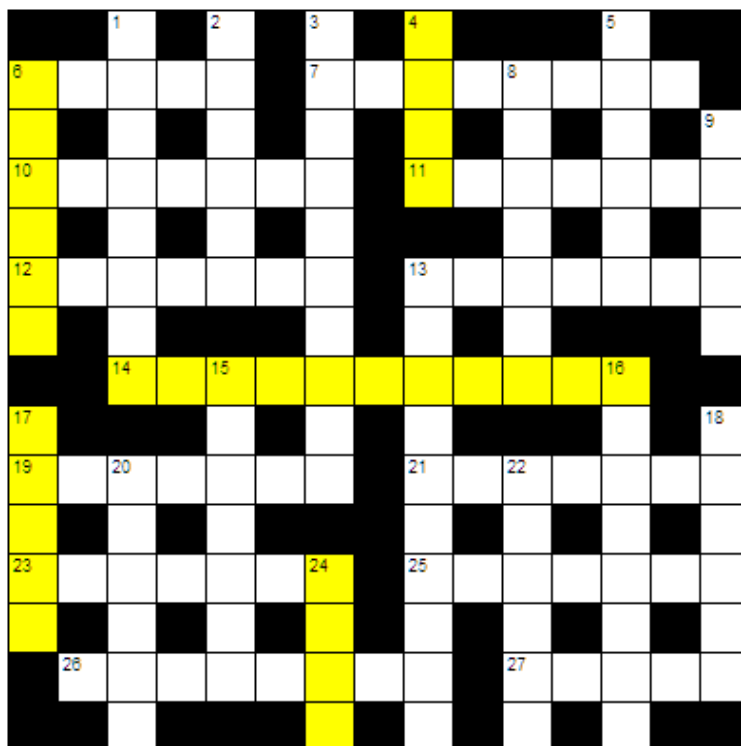
The photo at left shows a mudcat chimney being constructed at Colonial Williamsburg.

It is important to remember that our ancestors were from Europe, Great Britain, and other old world areas. They did know how to make bricks and were familiar with iron stoves. These first crude chimneys were born out of necessity as brick making facilities were not yet at hand and the need for a fireplace and chimney was. Local brick makers started to appear shortly after their arrival and more permanent and safe structures followed.

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MAY THEME CROSSWORD

Yellow blocks contain the theme words, which come from the text of the newsletter. The solution appears on page 8 of this newsletter.



Across

- 6 Bullwinkle, e.g.
- 7 Friendly
- 10 Journal
- 11 Recount
- 12 Region in Spain
- 13 Cutting a design in wood
- 14 WHERE CLAY IS MIXED
- 19 Backslide
- 21 Passing notes?
- 23 Persistent
- 25 Written messages
- 26 Developed into a sore
- 27 Deserved

Down

- 1 Revise written material
- 2 Written personal memories
- 3 Animal load holding device
- 4 HOT SPOT FOR BRICKS
- 5 Caustic substance
- 6 COLONIAL CHIMNEY
- 8 Drop by parachute
- 9 Despot's duration
- 13 Held in check
- 15 Stretch
- 16 Attend to your grooming
- 17 BUILDING BLOCK
- 18 Gladden
- 20 Princely
- 22 Native of Qatar
- 24 MATERIAL IN A BRICK

Brickmaking soon became an essential activity and most every town had a brickmaker. The brickmaker's home base, aka a brickyard, was usually located next to a source of good quality clay where he would build mixing and drying areas, a kiln and other areas for storage. On larger jobs/orders they would travel to a job site and set up their brick making operation on the site.

Brickmaking at that time was a manual operation – made one brick at a time. Yet with a crew of three laborers, one to work the clay, one to wheel it to the molder's table and a third to take the bricks from the molder one at a time and arrange them in the drying area, a brickmaker (a/k/a the molder) could make 2000 bricks/day.

Brickmaking in Frankestown was the domain of Saville Starrett who operated a brickyard on Old County Road So. In the area of Brennan Brook. This brickyard was in operation from 1800-1860. Little is written about this operation other than "it ceased to be remunerative and was closed up". It was in the same time period (1800-1850) that manufacturing technology was springing up and this included brickmaking technology. Among these inventions was the "pug mill" which mixed the clay and other aggregates which allowed the brickmaker to produce higher quality bricks that were more uniform and durable. Smaller brickmakers could not compete with this technologically more advanced brick making operation, and possibly the reason that our local small manual brickmaking operation could no longer compete.

Just how were bricks made in these small manual brickmaking businesses? The process:

1) Making bricks required a good quality clay. Once a source of clay suitable for use in bricks was located the clay was dug from the ground and aged over a winter. Exposing the clay to winter temperatures dried out the clay and made it easier to work with. Continual and repeated digging out of the clay from one area resulted in the creation of a clay pit which was a dangerous work environment. The walls of these pits would sometimes collapse and fall on top of the workers below. Setting the clay aside for the winter also proved to be a good time to remove any rocks, debris, roots and other foreign matter.



2) The winter-weathered clay was next prepared and mixed into a batter consisting of the clay, water and sand. The amount of each used depended on the clay being used. Some clays already contained some sand, meaning of course less sand needed to be added to the batter. These were all mixed together to form a "mud". The mixing of these ingredients would be every child's delight, since in smaller operations it was done in what is known as a "treading pit". Here the ingredients were placed in a shallow pit and rather than being admonished by their mother not to get in the mud, they would be told to go and stomp around in the pit. Probably not a great job in winter.



A TREADING PIT RE-ENACTMENT
AT COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG



While this was not a very efficient way to mix the ingredients it met the needs of a small brickmaker. A brickmaking facility of any size would utilize a mixing pit. In this case a shallow circular hole would be dug and the ingredients added. A pole with a wheel was anchored to a pivot in the middle of the pit. This pole had a wheel on it inside the pit area. As a horse that was hitched to the pole walked around the pit the wheel would mix the ingredients in the pit. The ingredients were mixed until they were in a putty form.

MIXING PIT



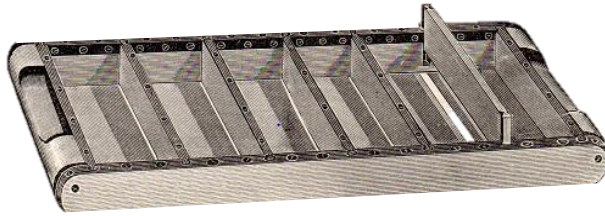
3) Once this putty consistency was obtained the mixture was taken to the molding table where the brick maker would form it into the brick (most of which are 2"x4"x8"). This was done using a wooden brick mold. The lump of clay and/or the mold itself was first dusted with a fine sand to keep the clay/brick from sticking to the mold. The brickmaker would then push the clay into the mold removing any excess.



The molds themselves were wooden and could be reused time and time again. The brickmaker would often carve his name into the bottom of the mold so that the finished brick would have the name formed into the finished brick.



Molds of that time were usually single or double molds but molds that could form multiple bricks simultaneously were also available.



4) The mixture in the mold was considered to be a “raw brick”. So now that you have a formed raw brick, it still contains a lot of water. The next step is the drying of the raw brick to prepare it for the kiln. A prime consideration in drying the brick is to protect it. At this stage it is still very soft and easily damaged/disfigured making it useless so that it would have to be discarded. In order to lessen the chance of damage and ensure the protection of the raw brick it was necessary to minimize any handling of it or exposure to adverse conditions. This was usually accomplished by taking the raw brick directly from the molding table to where it was going to be laid out to dry. The bricks weren’t fussy. They could be laid outdoors in the sun or on shelves in covered racks. At some point in the drying the bricks would also have to be turned over so the bottoms would dry. It would take several days for these raw bricks to dry and during this time they had to be kept dry and above freezing which could be problematic if stored outdoors for several days. If it rained or the temperature dropped below freezing they could not be used which meant the preferred method of drying was on shelves in covered racks. After this they could be stored for another 6 weeks before being “fired”.



BRICKS LAID OUT TO DRY

5) The final step in the process –

In this final step the bricks were “cooked” in a kiln. We are not talking about cooking as in roast beef. The temperature in the kiln reached 2,000°. Firing in the kiln required that the bricks be stacked over a fire in a closed clay structure.



A BRICK KILN

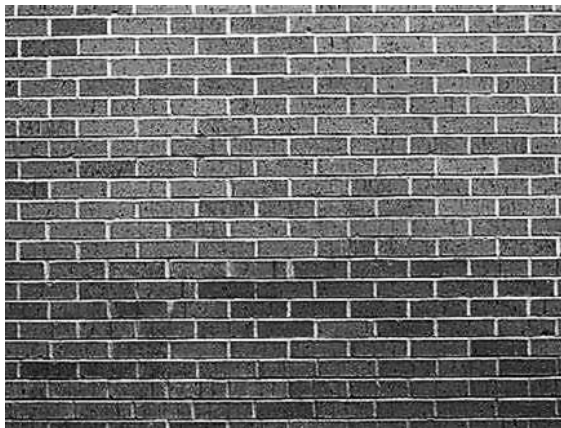


TENDING THE FIRE IN A BRICK KILN

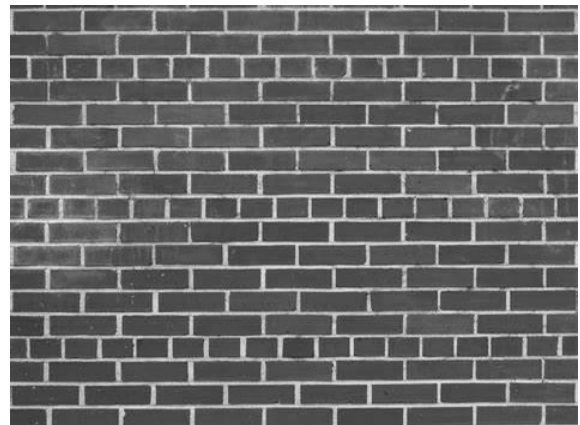
The fires would burn for several days until the bricks glowed yellow, at which point the fires were allowed to burn out. Once cooled, the bricks could be removed and sold for use.

However, this process of cooking the bricks was not without problems as it was difficult to keep the temperature uniform in the kiln. Those bricks stacked closest to the fire might be scorched while those away from the fire were not. Too much heat could warp or crack a brick and it would have to be discarded. Not enough heat would result in the brick having to be refired. Variations in heat could change the natural color of the brick.

So now that you are a qualified brickmaker, can you recognize a brick building when you see one? Only one of these walls is part of a true brick building. The other is a wooden building with a faux brick veneer. No guessing, which is the real brick building and which is the wooden building with a brick veneer and how can you tell the difference?



WALL 'A'

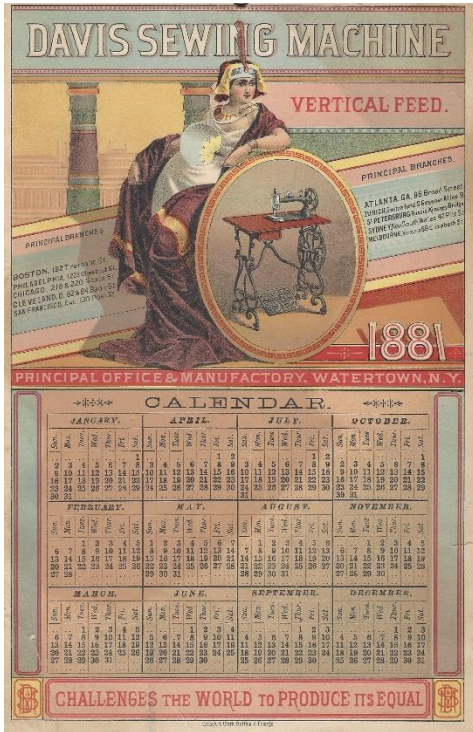


WALL 'B'

The answer lies in the June issue of the Heritage Museum Newsletter.

GIFTS from NEW BOSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Our mail recently contained an envelope from the New Boston Historical Society. In going through their files they found a folder of old advertisements (we're talking 1881 here). In going through them they found several that they knew related to exhibits we have in The Frankestown Heritage Museum and passed them on to us. Among these was a Davis Sewing Machine calendar

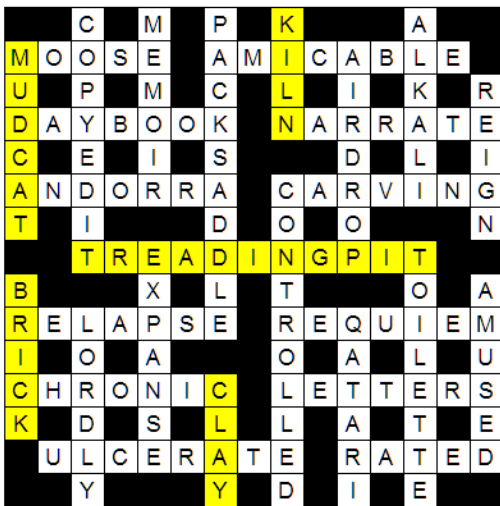


The 1881 calendar features the Davis Sewing Machine. One of these machines is included in the Heritage Museum Domestic Collection.



The Davis Sewing Machine Company was started in 1868 in Watertown, NY. The machine was considered far superior to all others due to a new “vertical feed that soon took over the sewing industry and Davis was shipping machines to Paris and elsewhere.

Solution to the MAY CROSSWORD



Solution to the APRIL CROSSWORD and BONUS WORD



Bonus Word: HERITAGE MUSEUM

THE GOOD OLD DAYS – School discipline (from the August 1897 issue of The Granite Monthly)

Clark Hopkins – “He it was who came to begin a school of limited repute and informed the scholars that he had ordered twenty coffins which he should proceed to fill from the ranks of the unruly, which doubtless caused young teeth to chatter.” He later reported there had been no problems with unruly or ill behavior. ED. NOTE – I guess this preceded the era of “spare the rod and spoil the child”. Better to just terrify them.

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APRIL 2021

VENDOR PROFILE

Olive & Honey



Most folks know Baklava, the delicious traditional Greek dessert pastry, but have you tried Koulourakia, Melomakarona, or other Mediterranean sweets? Here's your chance.

Just down the 2nd NH Turnpike is the home of the Law family and Frankestown's own authentic Greek bakery called Olive & Honey!

Kaela and daughter Demetra are the baking duo behind the operation. Their recipes were all handed down by Kaela's Yiayia (grandmother) who grew up in a small village in Greece.

"I remember all our years together in her kitchen," Kaela reminisced. "Old recipes are family history to remember and collect."

Kaela and Demetra also keep bees. Fresh golden honey is a key ingredient in many Greek recipes. "So important it's part of our name, Olive & Honey!" says Demetra. True indeed. The pure natural sweetness comes out in all their scrumptious cookies, pies, and pastries.



Olive and Honey's treats are always fresh out of the oven and come packed in small baker's boxes ready to take home and enjoy. They make great gifts as well. Just \$5 per box. Look for the Olive & Honey banner and booth at the Francestown Community Market every Friday evening from 4:00-7:00. The flaky and delicious Baklava goes quickly, so don't be late!

