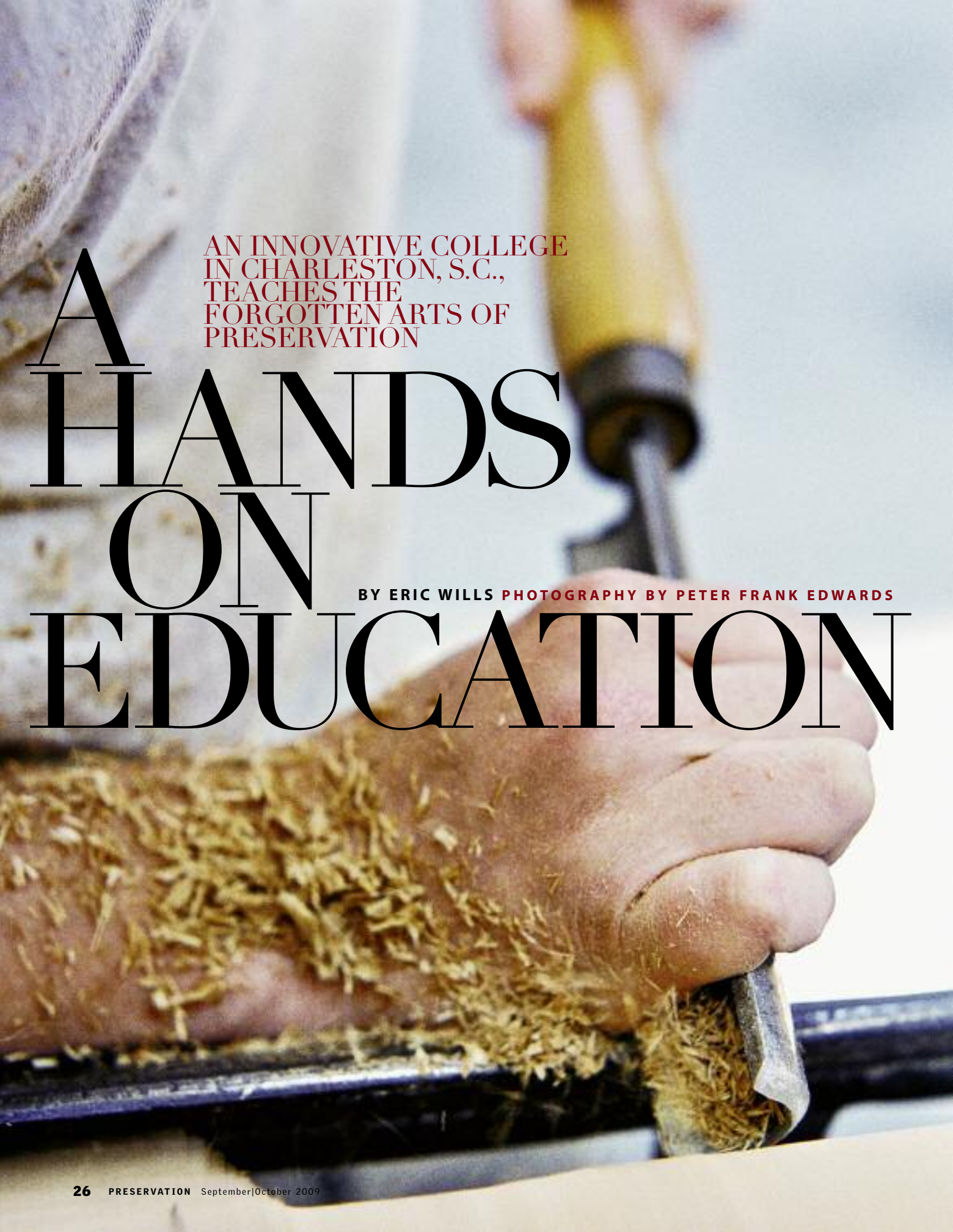


AN INNOVATIVE COLLEGE
IN CHARLESTON, S.C.,
TEACHES THE
FORGOTTEN ARTS OF
PRESERVATION

A HANDS ON EDUCATION

BY ERIC WILLS PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER FRANK EDWARDS



Isaiah Shaw has worked his way through the rigorous timber framing program at the American College of the Building Arts. "We're going to be part of only a handful of people in the United States who have these skills," he says.

JOHN PAUL HUGULEY WON'T BE HAPPY THAT THIS ARTICLE BEGINS WITH HIM.

He'll tell you that it's the students at the American College of the Building Arts who are the real story. But he was the one who started the Charleston, S.C., school 12 years ago—the first in the country with a four-year program teaching trades that seem to have vanished from the modern world. Timber framing. Stone carving. Ironworking. An entire curriculum aimed at equipping a generation of students with the skills needed to preserve America's historic heritage.

Huguley, 39, is as much an entrepreneur as he is a preservationist. In 2000, he purchased Charleston's 1802 jail—a 22,000-square-foot facility that sat vacant for more than half a century and was threatened with demolition—and turned it into the centerpiece of a fledgling school. Not only do students today attend classes in the jail, where Union troops were held during the Civil War, they are also using what they learn to help restore this neglected vestige of Charleston's history.

"This was the original door they put here in 1802," Huguley says, standing in front of an iron gate at the jail. "It's still here, still swinging, has been for 200 years. That's what good building is all about." Good building is precisely what the professors at this college teach. And Charleston seems to be ideally suited for their lessons. "What better place



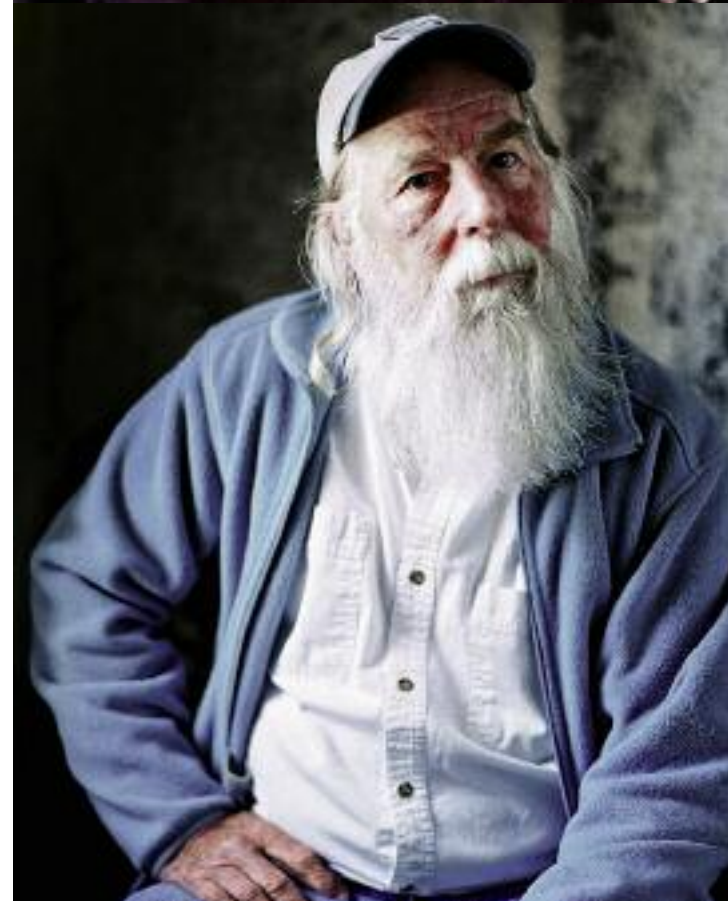
The old Charleston jail, which retains many 19th-century features including this iron staircase, provides a working laboratory for students, and classroom and office space.

to learn the trades than in the city that started the whole process of historic districts?" says Rudy Christian, executive director of the nonprofit Preservation Trades Network. "You're immersed in historic architecture, and the demand for tradespeople is as great in Charleston as anywhere."

For all its merits, the American College of the Building Arts certainly faces its share of challenges. But anyone with even a passing interest in historic architecture should care about the success of this ambitious experiment, intent on returning tradespeople to the prominence they once enjoyed. (In medieval times, for example, the builders of Europe's magnificent cathedrals were heralded for their artistry and held in great esteem.) Bob Ogle, the preservation director at Colorado Mountain College, who runs a two-year trades program there, puts it this way: "Unless we have artisans trained in professional preservation there, we might just as well document the buildings and then let them go."

THIS SPRING, AFTER MORE THAN A DECADE SPENT building the tiny college—attracting students and faculty, shaping a comprehensive curriculum—Huguley and the school's administrators saw their first senior class graduate. The weeks prior to graduation were a flurry of activity, with students busy

THE TEACHERS Clockwise from upper right: John Paul Huguley, the college's founder: "If you don't have skilled labor, the most damage [to historic buildings] happens during restoration." Bruno Sutter, timber framing professor: "We're not just training the hands; we're training the mind." Darryl Weiser, adjunct timber framing professor: "What are we preserving? We're preserving the trade." Lance Crowe teaches iron working: By the end of freshman year, students are "making hand-forged, riveted scrolls, which is beyond the skill level of 90 to 95 percent of blacksmiths working today."



WHEN IN THE MODERN WORLD A CARPENTER CAN'T BUILD A WINDOW, CAN'T EVEN REPAIR A WINDOW, THERE'S SOMETHING FUNDAMENTALLY WRONG.

—SIMEON WARREN, DEAN OF THE COLLEGE

in their workshops and deadlines looming. In the stone carving shop on the jail's ground floor, junior Mimi Conlon took her mallet and chisel to a mantelpiece, decorating each corner with intricate leafwork modeled on flourishes found at St. Albans Cathedral in Hertfordshire, England. A short drive away, more students congregated at the college's other training site, a warehouse at a former naval base in north Charleston—a structure so large you could build an entire house in there. And indeed, the students were constructing part of a wood frame for a barn, an exercise in building on a grand scale. In one corner of the warehouse sat an exact replica of the ceiling at Drayton Hall (a National Trust historic site), which plastering students had cast themselves. In another corner, flames rose around the ironworkers manning a series of forges.

Amid the clanging hammers and buzzing saws stood Bruno Sutter, a timber framing professor who was teaching the so-called *trait de charpente* system of using geometrical drawings to construct compound roof joints. The method, thought to have been invented by medieval monks, works well for preservation projects, Sutter explains, because beams in old buildings are rarely plumb.

It's one thing to fake your way through an English paper on *Hamlet*. It's quite another to fake your way through building a compound roof joint when your professor is Sutter, a steely-eyed Frenchman who trained in the renowned Compagnon system, a European carpenters' guild that dates to the Middle Ages. Says student Moyer Fountain, a senior specializing in timber framing,

"The first week we were here, we had 8-by-8 timbers and a framing square. We hand-sawed for a week straight. Bruno just stood there and smiled. 'What the heck is he doing to us?' we thought."

The students soon realized that Sutter was starting with the basics. Before you can entertain grandiose visions of building a curved wood staircase, you need to learn how to work the material. Fail to split your pencil line in half when cutting a piece of wood? Do it again. Forget to carry a numeral when making calculations and end up with a shoulder that's too short? Do it again. "He broke it all down, then started building us up with training," says Fountain.

Like many of his classmates, Fountain took a circuitous path to the American College of the Building Arts. He dropped out of college, decided he wanted to work with his hands, got a job installing wood flooring, but tired of the tedious, mind-numbing labor. Then he started his own valet business and by all accounts built a thriving enterprise. So why did he decide to come here? "This work seems more honest to me, makes me feel a little better about what I'm doing," he says. "It makes my mind work. And it gives me satisfaction."

Perhaps most important, it will keep him away from an office job. Fountain and many of his classmates are pursuing careers that allow them to work with their hands, to produce

something tangible. And given our flailing economy, not to mention the frustration that many have experienced in cubicleland, it's no surprise that students at this college find the building arts so satisfying. The trades represent a return to the basics—the creation of tangible products with clear value.



Julian Williams consults his sketch as he works on a hand-forged window grill, following in the footsteps of Philip Simmons, the Charleston craftsman who for more than 75 years enhanced the city's collection of decorative ironwork.



Students Mike Lauer (left) and Cody Donahue plaster the ceiling of the jail, which the college is slowly restoring with help from Save America's Treasures, a partnership between the National Trust and the National Park Service.

earlier buildings whose properties are part of the craftsmen's lore."

Or, as Simeon Warren, the dean of the American College of the Building Arts, puts it, "When in the modern world a carpenter can't build a window, only has the ability to install a window, can't even repair a window, there's something fundamentally wrong. We've become a culture where you just go out and buy something new."

Warren was once a stone carver at England's Wells Cathedral and serves as a direct link to a long and storied craft tradition. Like his colleagues, Warren believes in developing a new kind of craftsman, someone who can communicate effectively with architects and designers, someone who can exert influence on a building's restoration. To this end, students get a thorough liberal arts education, reading Shakespeare and taking courses in Spanish, math, economics, history, and business, as well as architecture and design. There isn't a crash course in carpentry, but a comprehensive higher education.

Of course, running such an ambitious program does not come cheap. And some students have struggled with tuition payments because they

don't qualify for federal financial aid, which is possible only after an institution earns accreditation. Huguley and other administrators have applied for accreditation and should know whether they've received it by year's end.

But there are promising signs, including enrollment numbers—about 60 students will attend this fall, nearly double the number from last year. The college has also just secured a new workshop site, Charleston's 1897 trolley barn—dilapidated and

THE NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION first sounded the alarm about the declining numbers of skilled tradespeople as far back as 1968. "Technology has displaced the traditional building craftsmen," read the organization's Whitehill Report, which pinpointed weaknesses in preservation education. "Not only has prefabricated and disposable construction destroyed the general need for such craftsmen, but artificial materials have replaced many of the natural materials used in

I DON'T THINK YOU CAN FIND THIS PATH ANY OTHER WAY THAN BY COMING HERE. IT'S REALLY AN ALL-ROUND EDUCATION.

—WILLIAM DENTON, STUDENT

forgotten much as the jail was, another historic hands-on laboratory where students will hone their craft.

Students are already leaving their imprints in different fields. A senior timber framing student named James Murphy spent a summer working at the Shaker Village in Mt. Lebanon, N.Y., helping restore America's only surviving Shaker granary. In Charleston, a group of seniors assessed the structural condition of the c. 1854 main house at the McLeod Plantation, recommending to the Historic Charleston Foundation that rotting sills and beams be replaced. Students have done similar work inside the downtown jail. Projects like these, Huguley says, teach students "how to be building detectives and diagnose problems, much like a doctor diagnoses a patient."

FOR MORE THAN THREE-quarters of a century, blacksmith Philip Simmons helped define Charleston's inimitable architectural style, crafting elaborate ornamental ironwork—gates, fences, stair rails. He also helped inspire John Paul Huguley to found the American College of the Building Arts.

One afternoon in May, Huguley drove to Simmons' workshop on Charleston's east side. The modest, tool-filled shed behind a single-story, white clapboard house needed—and still needs—

considerable work. (In 2007 the National Trust included the workshop on its list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places.) Huguley brought along freshman timber framing student Sam Wilson to help with the restoration. Known at the college for his sketching prowess, Wilson instantly began drawing designs for a rehabilitated tool shed and coal bin. And Huguley watched, surely with a measure of pride, as his student set to work, taking lessons learned in the classroom and applying them in the field.

Huguley had also come to pay homage to a mentor. He remembered the day when Simmons visited *him* at the college. On that afternoon, after getting a tour, Simmons appeared visibly moved by the sight and sounds of students shaping red-hot pieces of wrought iron—doing the same kind of work to which he had devoted a lifetime.

Not long after, the first senior class graduated from the American College of the Building Arts. And weeks later, Philip Simmons passed away at the age of 97. "Before I die," he had confessed to Huguley, "I want to make sure my trade is carried on." No doubt Simmons was at peace with the knowledge that his wish had come true. **■**

To learn more about the American College of the Building Arts, call 877.283.5245 or visit buildingartscollege.us.



Mimi Conlon at work on a fireplace mantelpiece. "I get up in the morning, have a cup of coffee, and come to the workshop to chill out," she says.



THE STUDENTS Clockwise from upper right: Stephen Browning replicated an existing historic banister as part of his project to fix the jail's staircase; Adam All, an ironworking student, was part of the first graduating class; Susan Collins entered the college's two-year stone carving program after a career in the entertainment industry; Kyle Dooley followed a curriculum that specialized in timber framing