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# GARDEN & GUN

SOUL of the SOUTH

DECEMBER 2017 /  
JANUARY 2018

THE  
8TH ANNUAL  
MADE  
IN THE  
SOUTH  
AWARDS  
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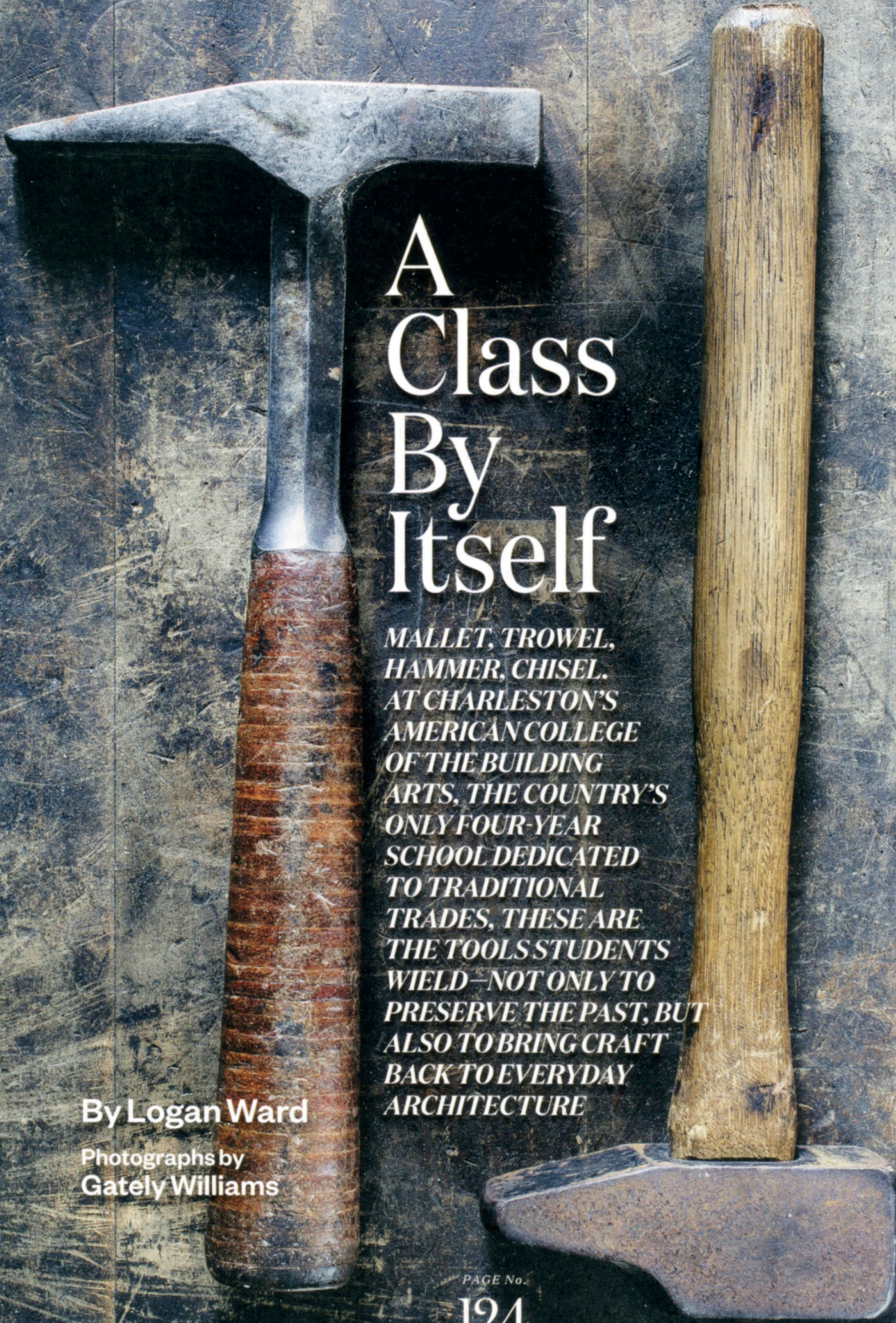
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# A Class By Itself

*MALLET, TROWEL,  
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AT CHARLESTON'S  
AMERICAN COLLEGE  
OF THE BUILDING  
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ONLY FOUR-YEAR  
SCHOOL DEDICATED  
TO TRADITIONAL  
TRADES, THESE ARE  
THE TOOLS STUDENTS  
WIELD—NOT ONLY TO  
PRESERVE THE PAST, BUT  
ALSO TO BRING CRAFT  
BACK TO EVERYDAY  
ARCHITECTURE*

**By Logan Ward**

Photographs by  
**Gately Williams**

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*Sophomore Bryson  
Youngblood Keefer holds a  
door latch, his forged  
architectural ironwork  
project. Opposite:  
Hammers reproduced  
in the traditional style,  
used by ACBA students.*



**I**T'S EARLY SEPTEMBER, AND AS HURRICANE Irma churns in the Caribbean, the administrative halls of the American College of the Building Arts in Charleston, South Carolina, buzz with nervous energy. The latest models show Irma, which will be the strongest Atlantic Ocean hurricane ever recorded, bouncing off Miami and careening straight into the coastal city's harbor. The school's chief operating officer has left to buy plywood to cover the windows. But remarkably, the mood is upbeat. If any institution of higher learning is prepared to batten down its own hatches, after all, it's ACBA, the country's only school offering a four-year degree in the traditional building trades.

Along with pens, paper, books, and computers, students here learn with trowels, chisels, hammers, and anvils. They shape timbers into soaring architectural statements, carve fireplace mantels from limestone, twist red-hot iron into filigreed gates. They're a scrappy, can-do lot by nature. Besides, hurricanes are in the school's DNA.

After Hurricane Hugo battered Charleston in 1989, preservation groups leaped into action, assessing historic-district damage and collecting donations for repairs, only to find that there weren't enough old-school craftsmen—in Charleston or nationwide—to rebuild in a way that met the city's stringent standards. Some homeowners hired tradesmen from as far away as Europe to replace carved eighteenth-century cornices, piazza balustrades, and ornate plaster moldings. Others winged it.

The Historic Charleston Foundation, a preservation nonprofit, worked to bridge the deficiency, starting a summer building-crafts training program for high-school students in 1992. Seven years later, a young, idealistic preservationist named John Paul Huguley folded the concept into the newly created School of the Building Arts, or SoBA, a community workshop with specialties in architectural ironwork, masonry, stone carving, plasterwork, carpentry, and timber framing. In 2004, SoBA added a liberal-arts curriculum, became a four-year degree program, and changed its name to the American College of the Building Arts to reflect its new ambitions.

It's no surprise that at a time of skyrocketing higher-ed costs, swelling student debt, and mass defections to online degree programs, starting a college from scratch has been an uphill battle. Even century-old liberal-arts colleges with endowments and supportive alumni networks have struggled. When the housing and financial markets collapsed in the late 2000s, raising money for a building-trades college—with a backward-looking program focused on slow building in an ever faster and more technology-dependent world, preparing to graduate its first class of seven students—didn't get any easier.

But things are turning around for this little college that could. In 2008, a new president, the retired army general Colby Broadwater, implemented a plan of fiscal discipline and sustainable growth that seems to be working. In September 2016, using funds raised from a capital campaign and a public-private partnership, ACBA moved from the charming-but-cramped 1802 Old Charleston Jail, where it had been holding classes, into an 1897 brick warehouse that once housed Charleston's first electric trolleys. The school rehabilitated the space, carving out workshops, offices, classrooms, and a library.

The truest proof of concept, however, may be the school's growing body of work. Along with restoration projects in Charleston, ACBA students and graduates have repaired the U.S. Capitol dome's ironwork, restored stonework in England's thirteenth-century Lincoln Cathedral, and rebuilt a garden folly at Germany's Hundisburg Castle. Not only that, but their projects have expanded quickly beyond preservation. Thanks to a flourishing appreciation for craft across the

culture—food, beer, spirits, furniture, knives, clothing, you name it—more and more commissions involve starting from scratch. An elaborate stone gate carved for the University of Arkansas, for instance, or the new timber-frame welcome center at Charleston's Drayton Hall estate.

"At first, the school was bent on the idea of preservation because of Hugo," says William Bates, a professor of architecture and allied arts. "The icing on the cake was the realization that a lot of graduates are going into new construction."

Perhaps the ACBA artisans were simply ahead of their time.

**T**he charcuterie plate at Edmund's Oast is a wonder to behold. A small group of ACBA staff and faculty sits in rapt silence as a server at the Charleston gastropub explains the style and provenance of each ham, cheese, and pâté. The setting—a breezy timber-frame bower made from cypress—equally impresses. Bruno Sutter, the chair of ACBA's carpentry and timber-framing department, built it with one of his former students three years ago, yet another of those new-construction projects putting ACBA to work.

"In your country, graduate students complete a thesis or dissertation," Sutter says between sips of a house-made Belgian-style ale, explaining his education back in his native France. "We had to complete a masterpiece."

At nineteen, against the wishes of his father, an Alsatian postal worker who pushed his son to study the classics, Sutter became a guild apprentice in a program called the Compagnons du Devoir that dates back to the Middle Ages. For a decade, he lived, studied, and worked with a series of master timber framers. He spent twelve hundred hours on his masterpiece, a loveseat-sized scale model of the timber-frame roof system in a four-hundred-year-old former Jesuit chapel in Normandy. He climbed around the chapel's roof taking measurements, then carved more than four thousand tiny mortise-and-tenon joints, each fastened with even tinier wooden pegs. Only when the guild accepted his masterpiece did he become a master himself.

A soft-spoken forty-one-year-old with heavy black stubble crawling down his neck, electric blue eyes, and ramrod-straight posture, Sutter has been teaching at ACBA for a dozen years and builds beautiful timber structures on the side. Just last month, he finished a soaring two-story yellow-pine interior next door at the Exchange, Edmund's Oast's new beer-and-wine retail store.

"The architecture sends a message of quality and respect," says Stephen Zoukis, the developer of Edmund's Oast and its surrounding properties, about investing in Sutter's handcrafted work. "I spent second grade in a public school with huge brick columns and steps that seemed to go on forever. By the time I got to the top, by God, I knew I was going to do something special."

The next morning, Sutter gathers four juniors to begin timber-framing class. While they wait for a shipment of donated yellow pine for a new mezzanine they will erect above the high-ceilinged workshop floor, Sutter asks them to work on their drawings. Jacob Jackson pulls out a bottle of glass cleaner and wipes down his desk and carpenter's triangle. "You don't want sawdust and other stuff messing up your drawings," he says. "It's a good habit to get into."

Jackson, a stout, baby-faced twenty-year-old, grew up a little more than an hour northwest in Orangeburg, South Carolina, population fourteen thousand. There, the per capita income averages around \$18,000, putting it in the bottom half of the state. The son of a single mother, Jackson was finishing high school and facing what he calls a "dead end." He liked to build doghouses and other projects but had no idea where to take his passion—until he took a field trip to ACBA. The school's workshop stopped him cold. "It had all the tools, all the equipment," he says. "I felt like I could build anything. I saw my whole future in one place."

*ACBA student Jacob Jackson (left) and instructor Bruno Sutter, the chair of the school's carpentry and timber-framing department.*





Jackson applied, enrolled in 2015, and is working to pay his way through school. He planned to build stick-frame houses, but the sight of heavy timbers—Sutter cutting mortise-and-tenon joints and connecting them without metal fasteners—blew his mind, and he switched his focus. First-year classes started with the basics, including lumber science—“This is a tree. This is how it grows. This is how it’s fed,” explains a woodworking instructor leading another student in traditional carpentry in another room. Hands-on learning started immediately, too. Even the liberal-arts curriculum is designed to fit each craft specialty. Science, for instance, might relate to material qualities and the physics of why materials fail. History classes spotlight architecture. Instead of lots of random math, students learn geometry that can help them make complex cuts and joints.

Jackson excelled, even in second-year geometry, a course notorious for driving students away. “Geometry just came to me,” he says. “If you don’t love what you’re doing, this school’s going to eat you alive.”

Last summer, Jackson interned at New Hampshire’s Bensonwood, the most prestigious timber-framing company in the country, founded by Tedd Benson, who helped revive the craft in the 1970s. Jackson got to work under the top brass. “It was pretty fun to hang out with the OGs of timber framing,” he says. While there, he used mallet and chisel to square up mortise joints that had been roughed out by computer-automated saws. Sutter and his ACBA colleagues are not opposed to that kind of computer-aided design, or power tools, or gas-fired forges. But they first teach students to master hand tools to gain a deeper understanding of the materials and the craft.

William Bates, the architecture instructor, is equally adamant in his design classes. “We have them do hand drawings to train their hand to do what they tell it to do,” he says. “Drawing something in the old-fashioned way, you’re able to absorb it in its totality and understand it more completely. In the end, that makes you a faster thinker. If you can pick up a pencil and put down what you’re thinking, you can impress clients.”

The students need every advantage they can get—the odds have been stacked against them for generations.

**I**n April 1968, two decades before Hurricane Hugo, the National Trust for Historic Preservation released the *Whitehill Report*, warning of the near extinction of the traditional building trades during the post-World War II building boom. “These ancient crafts are a significant part of our national cultural resources,” the report stated. Yet they had been methodically replaced and forgotten. Priorities had shifted to speed, convenience, and white-collar employment. Technology—chemicals, plastics, computerized production—ruled the day. By the late 1960s, according to the report, there wasn’t a single training center for traditional building crafts in the country.

For all its alarmism, though, the *Whitehill Report* wasn’t the wake-up call its authors hoped it would be. Hurricane Hugo was. Still, those advocating for traditional-trades education have run into some brick walls. John Paul Huguley, the School of the Building Arts founder, remembers meeting with President Clinton’s secretary of education, Richard Riley, a South Carolinian, to argue for federal funding. “Secretary Riley told me, ‘John Paul, America is moving away from hands-on learning; we’re moving to technology-based education,’” Huguley recalls.

That didn’t jibe with the enthusiasm Huguley was seeing back in Charleston. “Once the students got to school and started working with their hands, it was like a drug,” he says. “If you teach a kid advanced math and show him where it can be applied to his field, he gets excited. I know. I was that kid.”

Today, there are U.S. trade schools where you can learn to be a plumber, an electrician, or an HVAC technician, but fewer than a

dozen teach traditional building crafts. Those that do typically offer a two-year associate of applied science degree. Only ACBA adds a liberal-arts core curriculum—including math, science, English, and Spanish—and confers a four-year bachelor of applied arts degree. The four-year degree is important, in part, argue ACBA faculty and staff, because it helps restore the prestige building-arts craftspeople once had and still deserve. In addition, Bates says, “Our goal is producing thoughtful, well-rounded artisans who can think beyond the next job”—graduates who become industry leaders with vision.

When Vince Graham began developing l’On—an award-winning New Urbanist community in Mount Pleasant, across the Cooper River from Charleston—more than twenty years ago, he sought quality builders with the kind of vision that dovetailed with his own. He came up empty-handed, so he picked ten of the most reputable local residential builders he could find, pointed across the Cooper, and said, “You have Charleston in your backyard. There’s your inspiration.”

Now Graham can rely on ACBA. He recently commissioned Simeon Warren, an architectural stone carver from England and the chair of ACBA’s masonry department, to build a wall and gate for a church facing l’On’s town square. The gate also features ironwork made at ACBA. Part of the design process required figuring out how to use fourteen hundred old bricks donated from a Charleston building. “I said, ‘What are we going to do with these bricks that has value?’” recalls Warren, a pensive man who embodies a stone carver’s patience. “These were on East Bay Street for two hundred years. They will be here two hundred years longer.”

Warren wonders if the traditional building trades and their promise of longevity, though, will ever amount to anything but a tiny niche in an industry still preoccupied with speed and disposability. Seeding society with more ACBA graduates might help. At the moment, only sixty-eight students attend the college, but its business plan calls for up to two hundred. Finally receiving accreditation will be a turning point; administrators hope to secure the designation by next summer, now that they’ve moved from the cramped quarters of the old jail. Without accreditation, ACBA doesn’t qualify for U.S. government Title IV programs, including federal loans, grants, and work-study. Currently, only around 38 percent of its total annual budget is covered by tuition, which is \$20,000 per year. The rest comes from donations and private grants. With the additional students accreditation would support, that figure could easily jump above 70 percent.

That seal of approval would also boost legitimacy, which the college is currently building brick by brick through word of mouth and the work of its graduates. Warren wishes the building industry were benefiting even more from the recent cultural premium on artisanal goods. “How does what we do,” he muses, “become the same as the farm-to-table movement?” He’s well aware of the differences between food and the building arts, namely time and money. Traditional building trades won’t become mainstream, Warren says, until enough people embrace the notion that quality craftsmanship is worth the investment. That enduring architecture is its own legacy. For proof, see Charleston—or l’On.

An 1820 house being rehabilitated on nearby James Island offers further evidence. The contractor, an ACBA alum named Guyton Ash, is a Sutter protégé whose company, Artis Construction, has hired a slew of ACBA graduates. As Irma’s storm clouds gather beyond the live oaks, the forty-year-old builder walks through the stately home, pointing out sections of wall where the plaster and lath have been removed, revealing a timber frame where a modern-day stud wall would be. The construction doesn’t have the finished beauty of Sutter’s exposed-timber work, but it has the heft. Craftsmen of yore ensured that this home stood above the hurricane-prone marsh for nearly two hundred years. Thanks to ACBA, it may stand for two hundred more. **■**

*From top, left to right: Bruno Sutter; a plaster reproduction of Drayton Hall’s ceiling; William Bates, ACBA’s chair of architecture and allied arts; Simeon Warren, the chair of masonry; a tong and a mini-vise; students at a forge; an undergrad in the timber-framing workshop; historic Charleston artifacts in the school’s library; Jacob Jackson.*