

Old-fashioned Brick

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Some workdays, Art Burkhart's responsibilities hit him: like a ton of bricks – and he likes it that way.

“In a small company, you wear a number of hats,” laughs the vice president of sales and marketing at Old Carolina Brick Company.

Based in Salisbury, this old-fashioned business proudly proclaims its status as the nation's smallest brick company, but the largest maker of genuine handmade brick. Larger brick companies may make upwards of 120 million bricks per year. Old Carolina produces about 10 million.

But each Old Carolina brick is made by hand – patted into shape, rolled into sand, and thrown into moulds – “just like in Egyptian times,” Art says. In those ancient days, bricks were dried in the sun on the banks of the Nile. Later brickmakers learned that applied heat increased durability. Colonial craftsmen made their bricks at each individual building site, collecting local clay, throwing it in their personal wooden moulds, then firing with wood or coal.

Today inside the Salisbury plant, the coal fed kiln roars with blazing heat, while the pleasing smell of baking bricks mixes with the scent of raw earth. A dozen workers line up along a conveyor belt, rolling clay slabs called “slugs” into trays of sand, then throwing them with lightening speed into wooden moulds. After a day of drying in a 500-degree dryer, the bricks are fired at more than 1,900 degrees for three days. The output is somewhere between 150,000 to 200,000 bricks per week.

Handmade brick stand out from mass-produced brick in several ways. Because they are thrown by hand, they are less compressed than regular bricks, allowing natural air pockets to form. These air pockets permit moisture to freeze and thaw without cracking the bricks or causing the bricks' faces to pop off. Handmade bricks are also larger, without the holes typically found in regular brick. Brickmakers created those holes, Art explains, to reduce the cost of material, firing, and shipping. A typical brick weights 4 pounds; an Old Carolina brick weighs in at 6 pounds, with smooth solid surfaces that allow mortar to better adhere to it.

The best features of handmade bricks, explains Art, are the durability and variety of colors. Houses made from handmade bricks 300 years ago are still standing. The variety of colors results from the sands used to coat the molds, similar to the way flour is used to coat baking pans. “The coal-firing process brings out magical colors – they're richer and softer than you find in regular brick. You can pretty much get any color you want,” Art says.

You can also get pretty much any style you want. Back in his office, Art picks up several samples from the floor and arranges them on his desk. There are bricks with imprints in the shape of ducks, flowers, shells, and pineapples; there are bricks with dates on them and single numerals; there are plain bricks with dents, notches, and even fingerprints.

“All these brick are the same kind,” Art smiles mischievously. “I dare you to find two that look alike.” That’s a dare no one should take. Each brick reveals individual folds and indentations that occurred in the moulding process.

At first, Old Carolina Brick’s special product was used primarily on restoration projects in such places as Colonial Williamsburg, Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, the Cincinnati home of President William Howard Taft, and Stratford Hall, the Virginia birthplace of Gen. Robert E. Lee.

As word grew, however, so did Old Carolina’s portfolio. Today, historic restoration accounts for only one fifth of its business. The remainder involves upscale homes in the United States and Canada.

Old Carolina Brick Company was founded in 1968 by Dudley and Katherine Frame. The owners are interested in reproduction, restoration, and construction of fine homes, Art explains. “They want us to make money, but they’re more interested in quality and doing it right,” Art says. “Theirs is definitely a labor of love.”