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Best Contractors and Builders 2005

A general contractor serves as the air-traffic controller of your renovation: overseeing day-to-day work, hiring and coordinating the subcontractors, and keeping in close touch with you throughout the project.

By This Old House Staff of This Old House magazine



PHOTO BY ERIKA LARSEN

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Most contractors specialize in one of three areas: new construction, remodeling, or historic restoration. Licensing requirements vary from state to state. In Oregon, for example, anyone who supervises construction or demolition must be licensed. In California, builders and contractors must be licensed if the project cost is \$500 or more. In any case, your contractor should meet or exceed the minimum state requirements. Contact your local building department for specifics. You can also check contractors-license.org for a state-by-state listing of licensing requirements.



PHOTO BY ERIKA LARSEN

Gary Geiselman and his crew work on Speedwell Forge, a nearly 250-year-old Lancaster County house that his firm is helping convert to a bed-and-breakfast.

START BY GETTING RECOMMENDATIONS

Ask friends and neighbors for firms they've used and liked. If you already have a construction lender, inquire about which builders have good track records. If you're working with an architect, he or she might work regularly with a particular general contractor. Local building associations will offer a list of members in good standing, or you can get names from the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (nari.org). Be cautious about Web searches: Some online directories are paid listings.

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ONCE YOU HAVE A LIST OF POSSIBILITIES, CALL EACH ONE

A distressing number will probably fail to return your phone call promptly. If a former customer sent you, say so — contractors often respond better to referrals. Some will be too busy or will decline for other reasons, but after this initial sorting, you should have at least four willing to bid.

DON'T JUST TAKE THE LOWEST BID

Advises TOH general contractor Tom Silva. "Visit each contractor's current job site to see how he or she works. Check for quality, neatness, and professionalism. Look at tools, materials, even the trailer. You can tell a lot about how a person works by how organized their trailer is."

WHATEVER IT TAKES

Duce Construction Corporation, New York, N.Y.; 212-316-2400; duceconstructioncorp.com

Rory McCreesh takes on seemingly impossible jobs from South Florida to the South Bronx. Case in point: In the wake of last year's devastating hurricanes, many Florida homeowners couldn't get local contractors, so they called the New York-based McCreesh. Within two weeks, he had eight of his key team members relocated and mobilized for eight months of rebuilding. Then there was the time a New York couple wanted to get married in the house he was renovating for them. McCreesh's crew put in 10-hour days, seven days a week to finish the job just in time for the nuptials — and two months ahead of schedule. "It was a tremendous challenge, but my guys were great," says McCreesh. So great that the contractor was invited to the wedding.

(continued below ad)

COMMITTED TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Olde York Homes, York, Pa.; 717-854-5401

Gary Geiselman didn't stop with just one, two, or even three of the condemned row houses on East Locust Street in York, Pennsylvania. Rather, he worked his way down the block for seven years, restoring 22 of the 34 late-Victorian-era houses, which have since anchored the redevelopment of an urban neighborhood.

The success of the Locust Street projects allowed Geiselman to open an in-house woodworking shop, where his father crafts rare cuts of trim for projects like a converted 19th-century Presbyterian chapel and a 1918 English-style manor — houses Geiselman admired growing up in York and is now engaged in saving.

HOUSE DETECTIVE

Hull Historical Restoration and Millwork, Fort Worth, Tex.; 817-332-1495

Brent Hull can estimate the age of a building by the nails in its walls: hand-cut rose heads in the 1700s, machine-cut shanks from the early 1800s. Hull is a kind of paleontologist, using nails as fossils, pairing carbon dating and carpentry, pulling his expertise from a library of over 1,500 volumes — two of which he wrote. For his clients, this means historical accuracy right down to determining if the iron in a period renovation should be cast or wrought.

CREATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

Fort Hill Construction, Los Angeles, Calif.; 323-656-7425; forthill.com

More than 30 years ago, then-photographer George Peper and then-musician Jim Kweskin shared an old house with fellow artists in Boston's Fort Hill neighborhood. It was there that the firm, now with offices in Los Angeles and Manhattan, got its name and also its trademark combination of innovation and practicality — the group sculpted the residence's door hardware from wire coat hangers, for instance. Now Fort Hill restores everything from prewar New York brownstones to Neoclassical Hollywood mansions.

And their ingenuity hasn't diminished as Fort Hill has grown and gone bicoastal. Once, to get around a New York City co-op's summer-only construction restrictions, the crew made a scale model and built the entire kitchen off-site, then installed six months' worth of work in a matter of weeks.

A MEASURED APPROACH

Allen J. Reyen Inc., Stamford, Conn.; 203-357-0218

Contractor Allen Reyen puts his own spin on the old adage, "Measure twice, cut once": "We measure twice," he says, "but we do it really well both times."

Precision is a hallmark of Reyen's work—a plan for one of the ornate, wood-paneled rooms he often builds can include 50 pages of shop drawings. One mistake, and the entire installation is compromised. Reyen estimates that more than 75 percent of his business is repeat customers, so when clients call back, it's usually not to complain but to hire him for another job.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Fraser Construction, Lyons, Ill.; 708-447-3262

Gale Fraser has upheld a standard of quality established by his father, a Scottish carpenter, and carried on by his sons, who serve as project managers for the company. A recent 50th-wedding-anniversary tour of Fraser's projects took more than three hours, proving that his firm's detailed craftsmanship has become a fabric of the greater Chicago community. "I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth," says Fraser, "it was a hammer in my hand."

BARNs REBORN

Jeremiah Parker Restoration, Shoreham, Vt.; 802-897-5555

If he had the time, Jeremiah Beach Parker would save every one of the 10,000 historic barns in the state of Vermont. As it is, he's spent 30 years working toward his goal, using local timber to rescue 18th- and 19th-century buildings at a rate of two a month. The barns are sometimes converted into living space, but Parker's goal is to keep them functioning for the state's emerging generation of organic farmers. "With a pile of stone, wood timbers, and some plaster," he says, "we can restore almost any barn in Vermont."

ROCK SOLID CONSTRUCTION

Plath & Company, San Rafael, Calif.; 415-460-1575; plathco.com

Restoring 19th-century Victorian homes of dubious structural integrity is difficult enough without the constant threat of earthquakes. But reinforcing structures to protect against unforeseen seismic shifts is business as usual for Steve Plath and Bill Ballas. Much of the California firm's work involves what Ballas

calls "shoehorn construction," fitting steel rods and bolts into old walls without damaging them. "You have to go through, around, and under historic fabric," he says. "Sometimes it's like trying to fit a thirty-foot building on a twenty-nine-and-a-half-foot lot. But if you have a big enough hammer," he jokes, "you can do it."

PRACTICAL PRESERVATIONIST

Recreate, Lyme, N.H.; 603-795-4345

More than 30 years in the business have made Ray Clark a pragmatist as well as a preservationist. "For homeowners who aren't spending grant money and need a modern-functioning house, we have to understand how to be true to the original architecture and still make a working home," he says. That's why he's worked on dozens of National Register projects, moved 35 historic structures, and refurbished more than a hundred houses, including one 18th-century Cape that he updated to meet 21st-century Energy Star standards.

THE CURATOR'S CONTRACTOR

Tidewater Preservation Inc., Fredericksburg, Va.; 540-899-8942

Fred Ecker will make your house look like a museum. At least he can if you want him to — his firm, Tidewater Preservation, has taken on museum houses as well as residences. The firm works all around the country, though Virginia's abundance of historic structures keeps him busy with local residential projects, such as the former governor's mansion Ecker is currently restoring. The result for homeowners: Everything's beautiful, and you're even allowed to touch it.

Chris Cochran
Vermont State Historic Preservation Office
Montpelier, VT
802-828-3211
historicvermont.org

Jennifer Goodman
executive director
The New Hampshire Preservation Alliance
Concord, NH
603-224-2281
nhpreservation.org

Elizabeth S. Kostelny
executive director
Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities
Richmond, VA

804-648-1889

apva.org

Mark C. McDonald

executive director

The Historic Savannah Foundation

Savannah, GA

912-233-7787

Neilie Simpson

J.T. Turner Construction

Savannah, GA

912-356-5611

Jerre Tracy

executive director

Historic Fort Worth Inc.

Fort Worth, TX

817-336-2344

historicfortworth.org

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