

FINDING THE RIGHT CONTRACTOR

Finding and Screening the Right Contractor for Your Project

Ward Hamilton — Olde Mohawk Masonry & Historic Restoration

Pick up any home improvement magazine or journal and you can't help but find articles and stories on how to get three bids and verify a contractor's license and insurance. But these articles always fail to address a topic critical to the success of your next project: finding the right contractor for the project at hand. While it seems like an obvious statement and a simple enough obstacle to overcome, it is the single-most important element to the success of the project and ultimate satisfaction of you, the consumer.

No contractor is a master of all skill sets in a given trade. Let's look at roofing as an example. There are some roofing outfits that do nothing but install standing-seam metal roofs. Because it's all they do, they're set up for it: the tools, equipment and crews who are proficient in their work. This allows them to offer a quality product at a competitive price. Now consider the roofer whose company primarily installs asphalt shingle roofs for residential customers on a regular basis. He may be able to successfully complete a standing-seam metal roof project, but there's a lot more planning and set-up involved, and he may have less-skilled workers for that particular project. Hence, his price is likely to be higher and there'll be less examples of his work for you to consider. The contractor you hire must have the tools, equipment, craftsmen, and experience needed to successfully complete your project.

Consider this analogy as it applies to restoration work. The knowledge and skill sets required to successfully rebuild a copper-lined, Philadelphia-style gutter on an old Colonial with a slate roof bring three trades into action: metal work, carpentry, and slate roofing. There are many carpenters who would find the copper metal work and slate aspects of the job intimidating and outside of their skill set. And many slaters are not capable of replicating the ornate cornice, corbels and detail of a built-in gutter. It is critical that a contractor provide you with more than a fancy proposal and attractive price for your project. He needs to demonstrate and prove himself through pictures, documentation and references for similar projects that he has already successfully completed.

Being a successful restoration contractor requires knowledge of the tools, materials and practices of tradesmen from yesteryear. One cannot rely on the best practices of modern construction, alone, as a basis of knowledge. Constant research through hundred-year-old trade manuals, the internet, and hands-on experience are the foundation on which a preservation worker bases his decisions and guides his crew through a project. It is a constant learning process and one that requires a high degree of interest and commitment to professional development. Make sure your prospective contractor is genuinely interested in the work on your home or building.

While we're on topic, some words of caution are in order.

Being a successful restoration contractor requires knowledge of the tools, materials and practices of tradesmen from yesteryear.

Make certain that he's licensed and insured, as your city and/or state may require. Some states, like Massachusetts and Rhode Island, require a construction supervisor's licensing or registration with the state contractor's board. Verification of this information is easily accessed through the internet, but don't stop there — make certain to call your town or city building department to confirm what you find. If a permit is required, the contractor must secure it. If you fall for the old, "You pull the permit and I'll give you a price break," watch out! If anybody is injured or property damaged during the job, it'll fall on your shoulders — you were the sneaky little devil who pulled the permit to save a few bucks. Most contractors who try this scam do not have the insurances

your town or city requires to grant the permit! You are making a significant investment in your home or building; don't cut corners when it comes to a permit.

It never ceases to amaze me how few clients ask for proof of the right insurance. Your contractor must have liability and workers compensation insurances. General liability insurance

for a minimum \$1 million personal injury and minimum \$1 million property damage are not cost prohibitive for a restoration worker proposing to do high end work. A common scam many contractors employ is to purport that they have liability insurance, and that's good enough. Of equal or possibly greater importance is workers' compensation insurance. This one costs the big bucks and is what drives a legitimate contractor's prices up. However, it is also his protection and yours if an employee gets hurt on the job. If an employee gets injured on your property and files a workers' comp claim where coverage was not in effect, he can sue his employer and you! Verify that your restoration contractor has workers' compensation insurance and provides you with a general liability certificate naming you and the property as "additionally insured parties."

Before you invest in the next project on your home or building, do your homework. Exercising proper due diligence when screening contractors is crucial to success. Following these guidelines will help you find the right outfit for the job and get things moving in a positive direction. ☒

Ward Hamilton is the owner of Olde Mohawk Masonry & Historic Restoration, a slate roofing, masonry and preservation firm with offices in Boston and New York. He is a 2012 candidate for the Masters of Science in Historic Preservation at the University of Massachusetts.

