NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A Plasterer's Daybook
Attributed to Edward Evans

In the manuscript collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania is a plasterer's daybook covering the years from 1812 to 1818.1 Heretofore unattributed, this volume has been cited by historians of architecture and the decorative arts for references to specific buildings and as a source of information on the plasterer's trade.2 Its 276 pages refer to many significant early nineteenth-century Philadelphia buildings, important architects, clients, and building craftsmen, including the well-known plasterer William Thackera, Jr. The daybook contains a wealth of information about the plastering craft, particularly ornamental plastering, some of which is summarized below. Using internal evidence as well as other documents, a probable author of the daybook can now be named: one Edward Evans of Philadelphia. This new information allows us to attribute important examples of decorative plaster work, and it sheds light on the career of a previously obscure craftsman and the plasterer's trade in general.

The daybook indicates that its author's business was divided into three components. In the first place, he appears to have been a highly successful purveyor of cast plaster ornaments. Many of these seem to have been stock items that were sold by the piece or, in the case of moldings, by

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1 Manuscript Am b 6440 My thanks to Beatrice B Garvan who first suggested I look at the daybook Research for this article was undertaken as part of a larger investigation into the life and work of Robert Wellford, composition ornament maker of federal period Philadelphia, with the support of a Charles Peterson Fellowship from the Athenaeum of Philadelphia Thanks also go to the staff of the Manuscripts Department of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and to Robert L Alexander who gave me helpful information


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the foot. It is unclear whether he cast all these ornaments himself or if he imported some of them. Clearly, however, he possessed the skill to make ornaments in his own shop. For example, in some cases he charged for modeling as well as casting, indicating that he could carve molds for customized items, as he did in August 1813 for the architect John Haviland and in September 1815 for the plasterer William Jones.

Casting plaster ornaments in molds in the shop was an expedient substitute for the more difficult modeling in situ, which had traditionally been the highest form of the plasterer's art. Although casting was an ancient technique, it became much more prevalent in the late eighteenth century. The repeated enrichments demanded by the classical orders and the stylized ornaments characteristic of the Adam style, especially, lent themselves to casting instead of the more expensive modeling in situ.

Casting, which was done in wax molds, was a highly skilled craft and seems to have been a specialty within the plastering fraternity.

Evans seems to have supplied much of the ornament for other plasterers, who either did not have the skill to produce intricate ornaments or who found it more economical to buy ready-made ornaments from him. For example, he supplied William Thackera, Jr., with 1 grand rosette and guilloche, 90 oval beads, 132 spherical beads, and 4 15-inch rosettes.

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3 Examples include rosettes sent to Wilmington, June 12, 1814, ogee molding for Washington Hall for William Boyce, April 25, 1814, rosette and 24 stars for Tibbet and Stewart, Jan 11, 1816, and a large assortment of ornaments and moldings for Peter Wolford, June 8, 1816.

4 Aug 12, 1813 and Sept 13, 1815. That cast plaster ornaments were both imported and made in America by the same craftsman is shown by the advertisement of James Clow, stucco worker of London, who arrived in Philadelphia with a stock of ornaments for sale, but who would also execute ornaments of all kinds such as ceilings and enriched moldings Pennsylvania Journal, Dec 29, 1763, in Alfred Coxe Prime, Arts and Crafts in Philadelphia, Maryland and South Carolina, 1721-1785 (n.p., 1929), 290.

5 Late nineteenth-century writers attributed a marked decline in the plastering craft to the prevalence of casting over modeling in situ in the neoclassical era. For background on casting plaster ornaments, see William Millar, Plastering Plain and Decorative (London, 1897), 249ff and 302ff. The latter reference describes the technique for casting ceiling rosettes, one of the chief products of the author of the daybook. Rosettes were cast in multiple pieces, the number depending on the size of the overall ornament. For comments on the decline blamed on the neoclassical style, see Millar, 125.

6 Advertisements cited in Prime, Arts and Crafts in Philadelphia, Maryland and South Carolina, 1786-1800 (n.p., 1929), 320, indicate a distinction between "plain plastering" and ornamental work that was referred to as "stucco-work." Stucco work apparently referred to both cast ornaments and those modeled in situ.
for the vestibule of the State House (Figure 1). On another occasion he supplied Thackera with eight honeysuckle ornaments after making a mold from the original casting at Benjamin Henry Latrobe's Bank of Pennsylvania. As part of his ornamental work, he occasionally repaired existing plaster moldings and enrichments for both plasterers (e.g., William Thackera, Jr., for an unspecified project) and homeowners (e.g., Pierce Butler's house at the corner of Chestnut and Eighth streets).

The second aspect of Evans's business was equally or more lucrative than the ornamental plaster trade: measuring the work done by other plasterers. Measuring involved the inspection and valuation of completed work by a knowledgeable and independent third party to arrive at the amount a client owed a builder or building craftsman. Unit prices were

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7 April 27, 1816, and Aug. 27, 1817.
8 Oct. 19, 1816, and March 13, 1815.
generally set by craft companies to insure uniform and stable rates of reimbursement for work, or they might be set by agreement between client and builder for a specific project. In any event, an independent agent, someone knowledgeable about the craft, was required to measure the different types of work and materials involved, to assure quality standards, and to arrive at a fair valuation of the work. For this work the measurer received a fee based on a percentage of the work valued.

Evans measured plaster work for most of the major plasterers of the day in Philadelphia and for many important buildings. This aspect of his work became more important in the later years represented by the daybook. For the last two years, 1817 and 1818, there were fewer entries overall and almost all of them recorded measuring jobs.

Examples of his measuring work shed light on the plastering trade. Evans was generally, although not always, paid by the plasterer for measuring completed work. William Thackera, Jr., paid him at various times to measure work done at the fireproof offices attached to the west end of the State House, the Sansom Street Baptist Church, the Unitarian Meetinghouse at Locust and Tenth streets, and elsewhere. For Peter Wolford he measured plaster work at the new Carpenters’ Company Hall. The plasterer William Jones employed him to measure work on the Sixth Presbyterian Church on Spruce Street between Fifth and Sixth streets. In 1814 he measured work for three different plaster contractors at Washington Hall, for which he was paid a total of $17.80. Three years later, however, the building committee of Washington Hall paid him $105 for measuring “plastering, rough-casting & stucco work of sd. Hall,” evidently a job encompassing a large amount of work and perhaps intended to settle disputes. Another client, Henry Pratt, Esq., also employed him to measure at his country seat, Lemon Hill.

The third and final department of his work was the sale of measuring tapes. Throughout the period covered by the daybook, he sold measuring tapes.

9 He measured the State House, Aug. 1814; Sansom Street Baptist Church, Dec. 16, 1812; Unitarian Meeting House, Jan. 8, 1813.
10 Nov. 2, 1812.
11 Dec. 30, 1815.
12 April 25, 1814, and July 5, 1814, for William Boyce; May 3, 1814, for Everet McCles; and July 5, 1814, for Thomas Stokes.
13 Jan. 11, 1817.
14 Oct. 24, 1816.
tapes (usually 50 feet in length but also in other lengths from 23 to 125 feet), often with a carrying box. Buyers were usually tradesmen such as plasterers, bricklayers, carpenters, and in one case a measurer of carpenters’ work. He also sold six tapes to the hardware merchant, Thomas Shipley, presumably for resale. He apparently made the tapes himself, as he specifically noted numbering or marking the divisions on tapes and also recorded repairs on broken tapes. Interestingly, the majority of tapes were sold during the months of November through February, when building construction was slow and when he would have had time to fashion the tools. The usual price for tapes was $3.50 for a 50-foot tape and its box.

Measuring tapes made of cloth were fairly common by the early nineteenth century, although few survive owing to their fragile nature. Tailors made their own tapes as early as the beginning of the eighteenth century, and indeed many craftsmen continued to fashion their own tapes as the need arose. By the late eighteenth century, tape measures had become fairly sophisticated in England and at least some of this technology had come to America. For example, John McAllister and his heirs imported and made wooden rules, tape measures, and other measuring instruments in Philadelphia from 1783 to 1853. Several other makers of measuring instruments, including cloth tape measures, are known from early nineteenth-century Philadelphia.

The identity of Evans as an important plasterer and author of the daybook can be deduced by a process of elimination from internal evidence and from a list of the original members of the Master Plasterers’ Company of Philadelphia. The charter of this company was signed in 1804 by

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15 For example, on Oct 28, 1815, he sold to Reuben Haines a 23-foot tape that was numbered for 22 feet on the back side and a 26-foot tape marked out in twelfths of an inch. Thus he seems to have made tapes to custom orders.

16 Tape measure sales occur throughout the daybook. Examples include May 21, 1812, to Jacob Keyser, a plasterer; Jan 25, 1813, to William Thackerer, Jr.; Feb 7, 1814, to Thomas Tomkins, a bricklayer; Feb 22, 1814, to Timothy Desmond, a painter and glazier; Jan 7, 1815, to James Gibson, probably an attorney; Jan 26, 1815, to Henry Gravel, a carpenter; April 7, 1815, to Nathan Smith, a measurer of carpenters’ work, for whom he also repaired a tape; Dec 4, 1815, to Alphonso Ireland, a carpenter; and Jan 27, 1816, to Thomas Shipley, a hardware merchant.

17 Information on early measuring instruments was kindly provided by James and Ray Hill, who are preparing a complete study of the subject. Alexander James Hill and Ray Hill, Measures and Makers, forthcoming.
seventeen plasterers representing the elite of the city's plastering trade. Among them were William Thackera, Jr., Peter Wolford, and William Jones, all of whom, as we have seen, were plasterers of major Philadelphia buildings. Almost certainly the man who measured the work of these plasterers was himself a member of the company, for he must have known the intimate secrets of the craft and the rates to be charged for work, information normally hidden from those outside such craft companies. Moreover, a measurer had to have a certain standing in the craft community, which could only have come from experience, leading to the supposition that he would have been a member for some years. Thus it is highly likely that the author of the daybook was one of the original signers of the 1804 charter.

Of the seventeen signers of the charter, fourteen appear in the daybook as clients of its author. For the three who are not listed in the daybook, Philadelphia directories for the years 1813 through 1818 were consulted. Two of the three—Thomas Thomas and Peter Jones—have no listings in these years indicating that, probably, they were no longer practicing the craft in Philadelphia. The remaining signer was Edward Evans, to whom we can attribute the daybook.

This attribution is strengthened by Evans's listing in the directories for those years. In 1813 and 1814 he called himself a plasterer and measurer of plasterers' work, with a shop at Ninth and Maple, above Race (probably the same place later identified as 113 [old number] Race). In 1818 he listed himself only as a measurer of plaster, a change corroborated by the daybook which lists no plaster work but only measuring jobs for this final year of the book. In subsequent directories (1820-

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18 The Philadelphia Carpenters Company was notorious for its secrecy regarding prices. Even Thomas Jefferson could not obtain a copy of their price book, it was against the company's rules for anyone but a member to see one. William Thackera, Jr., complained about this secrecy, which may be why the Plasterers' Company was somewhat more open. See Talbot Hamlin, Benjamin Henry Latrobe (New York, 1955), 146-47, and Thackera to Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Dec 22, 1817, quoted in John C. Van Horne, ed., The Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe (3 vols., New Haven, 1988), 3 977, n 3

19 The seventeen signers were William Thackera, Jr., Samuel Jarden, James Glasgow, Peter Wolford, Ben Meredith, William Jones, Alexander Whiteside, Joseph Justice, Edward Evans, Thomas Stokes, Thomas Thomas, Peter Jones, Jacob Keyser, Joseph Jarden, George Lawrence, Isaiah Conrad, and William Jackson. List taken from Crompton, "William Thackera, Jr."
1828) he listed his occupation as “ornamental stucco work,” evidently a return to a craft he had almost given up for several years.\footnote{His lack of ornamental work in 1817 and 1818 and, indeed, the relatively smaller number of items for those years may reflect the depressed economic conditions of the late 1810s}

Other documents give us a bit more information on Evans. He was probably the son of Isaiah Evans, also a plasterer of Philadelphia; at least Edward was one of Isaiah's executors.\footnote{Philadelphia County Deed Book IC 4, p 627 (June 7, 1808)} Isaiah's wife (and thus probably Edward's mother) was Barbara Evans. In the 1800 directory, Isaiah Evans is listed as a “stucco plasterer” residing at 93 North Sixth Street. He is also known to have been the plasterer of Ann Pemberton's house.\footnote{Pemberton Papers, vol 54, p 39, Historical Society of Pennsylvania}

Isaiah Evans died in 1808 and only afterwards does Edward appear independently in Philadelphia directories. Presumably Edward lived with his father, as he was clearly practicing the craft by the time of the 1804 Plasterers' Company charter. In 1810 Edward bought a house on the east side of North Ninth Street from John H. Brinton and Edward Shippen Burd and their wives for $1,000, the location at which he is listed in the directories.\footnote{Philadelphia County Deed Book I 14, p 480} In that same year he bought a similar house on the west side of the same street about a block away.\footnote{Philadelphia County Deed Book I 8, p 332, 336} He lived there during the years of the daybook, and in 1820 he purchased another, much larger, house at the northeast corner of Sixth and Race for $6,000. Apparently he was successful in his trade.\footnote{Philadelphia County Deed Book IW 6, p 590} He disappears from the directories forever in 1828.\footnote{From that time another Edward Evans (presumably a son) practiced as an apothecary from that same address Philadelphia directories were reviewed for the years 1800 through 1833}

This sketchy biography raises an interesting question regarding the signers of the 1804 charter. Philadelphia directories and other documents suggest that Edward Evans was not practicing independently in 1804 when the charter was signed, but that he was probably still living, and perhaps working, with his father. In 1804 Edward would have been a relatively young man just starting his profession. His working life was encompassed roughly by the years 1800 to 1830.

A search in Philadelphia directories for the seventeen signers of the charter reveals a similar pattern. Most seem to have been of the generation
that came of age about 1800. One of the oldest was William Thackera, Jr. (1770-1823), who was only thirty-four at the time of the signing and who practiced plastering from about 1793. Seven were practicing until 1830 or later, indicating a relatively young age in 1804. Eleven make their first appearance in the directories in 1800 or after, and eight first appear in the 1804 charter and do not appear in directories until later, again indicating that they were probably living or practicing with others, probably of an older generation. 27 Thus the Master Plasterers’ Company of Philadelphia seems to have been the creation of a younger generation of craftsmen, an organization with which their fathers’ generation had little to do. 28

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27 An 1856 plasterers’ price book listed the seventeen as having signed the company charter in 1804 noted in Crompton, “William Thackera, Jr.” Interestingly, the signatures of the older men, such as Thackera, came first. The signatures of most of those who do not show up in the directories until the 1810s are at the bottom of the list, suggesting that it may have taken a decade for all the “original” seventeen signers to be enrolled. Presumably a plasterer could not be a member until he had served an apprenticeship, been a journeyman with someone else, and established his own shop.

28 It is also possible that the impetus to found the company came from new immigrants who would have known a plasterers’ guild in Great Britain. An attempt to trace the signers of the charter through naturalization records was not successful. Directories were consulted for the years 1785, 1791, 1796, 1800, 1805, 1810, 1816, 1820, 1825, and 1830.

London had a Plasterers’ Company from 1501 when it was given a charter by Henry VIII. It was much weakened by laws of the late seventeenth century, which allowed outside plasterers to work in London in order to complete the rebuilding after the Great Fire of 1666, and by late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century developments in the methods of bidding and construction organization. On these issues see Millar, Plastering Plain and Decorative, 27ff.