

The Borneman Pennsylvania German Collection at the Free Library of Philadelphia is very fortunate to have a very small manuscript, Borneman Ms. 99, about 4" x 3" in size, entitled *Zimmerspruch beÿm Aufstecken des Straußes* or *What to Say While Fastening the Garland to the Gable*. It was most likely put together by a master carpenter for a topping out ceremony. Whoever it was mentions on the inside of the back cover that he wrote it in haste on September 10, 1787.

A topping out ceremony is a tradition in the building trade that goes back many hundreds of years, and is still much celebrated in the 21st century on both sides of the Atlantic. When the outer structure and roof of a building have been put into place by a group of skilled carpenters, it is time for the building owner, his neighbors and friends, the master builder, and the construction team to celebrate the event.

In the 18th and 19th centuries in German-speaking areas of Europe such as Hessen, Westphalia, Württemberg, and Bavaria when someone needed to build a new house, he found a master builder/carpenter, who could advise him on construction, and help him procure the proper wood and other necessary materials. He might also already have had what he needed for wood if he owned forest lands, or perhaps his relatives would donate several trees to be used in the construction of the new building.

More than likely the soon-to-be house owner and his family lived with next of kin while the master carpenter and his journeymen diligently fashioned the beams, joists (one of the horizontal supporting members that run from wall to wall, wall to beam, or beam to beam to support a ceiling), posts, rafters (one of a series of sloped structural members designed to support the roof deck and its associated loads), purlins (one of several horizontal timbers supporting the rafters of a roof), pegs, etc. for the future house. When the building began, the house owner was kept busy arranging for the transport of wood, sand, and lime to the construction site, and also had neighbors and friends who helped him with carting of these materials. His wife made sure that the carpenters, masons, neighbors, and acquaintances had enough to eat and drink. Again, neighborly kindnesses such as bringing by extra tableware and food to feed such a large crew were kindly remembered, and would be reciprocated when the need arose.

As soon as the builders had laid the first joists, they were sure to ask for a tip from the building owner and, of course, it is well known that laborers get very thirsty when working. What might seem rude to some was a custom among the workers, who only wanted a few pennies or so to buy drinks. During the framing of the house they would often remind the house owner that he owed them this courtesy. It was part of the house-building ritual. Such was also the case when an inquisitive stranger would stop by. If he didn't get the hint by their whispering

and gesturing, one of the carpenters would walk over to him, bow, take off his hat, and wipe the intruder's shoes with the following words:

“I've put my hat in my hand,
as you must understand,
to polish your shoe,
on behalf of my crew.
It's a gesture meant to be kind,
for which you must pay a little fine.”

After his apprenticeship, a carpenter would spend several years as a journeyman, wandering from area to area, working and learning the variations and styles of his craft. This custom is still prevalent in Europe although not as extensively as in the past. It gave the practical experience, as well as personal growth necessary to become a master carpenter or builder. The latter honor was conferred by the local carpenters' guild after the journeyman had satisfied all of the requirements, and contributed his membership dues.

When the framing of the building was almost complete, the builders faced one of the most difficult steps in the process: assembling the trusses—rafters and purlins—on site, and then raising them up on to the gable (generally the triangular portion of a wall between the edges of a sloping roof) walls. There were no cranes to do the lifting, only cables and sheer human strength. Extra manpower was needed, and so a courier was sent to invite neighbors, relatives, and friends to help raise the *Dachstuhl* (trusses) and to the topping out ceremony (*Hebfeier*, or *Richtfest*) and party that would follow.

On the evening preceding the house raising, after the carpenters had arranged all of the building parts that would be assembled the next day, the master builder and his crew sat down around a large block of wood and began banging on it with their tools. This was known as “beating the stockfish” and was intended as a notice to the house owner and neighbors that everything was ready, and a reward of drinks was in order. Finally, chains were fastened to this piece of wood, and it was dragged to the house where the house owner and his family were staying. Placed before his wife, it was a friendly reminder that she would be hosting a large party in twenty-four hours, and should be ready to serve a feast to everyone who had contributed to the success of the framing of the house.

The time arrived for the raising of the *Dachstuhl*, and all the carpenters and neighbors were on hand to start the laborious job. In the meantime, the servant girls or the local women themselves appeared with dishes for the forthcoming meal. Also a fine beef soup with wheat rolls would be served (*Stutensuppe*). The guests who weren't working and the children amused themselves as best

they could, and were the only ones served lunch. After the noon meal was done, the musicians began to play and the dancing began...but not for the workers who continued unabatedly, only stopping to quench their thirst with the drinks provided by the house owner.

Finally, when they began to decorate the house gable with the liveliest of colors, everyone left out a shout of joy. A few days before the journeymen had found a lovely small pine tree that they had given to the local girls to decorate with festive ribbons, colored eggs, and little colored flags. The main decoration, however, was the garland which was attached to the tree at four corners. Then by shaking chains against the floor of the new house, the journeymen gave notice it was time to go to the lovely young decorators and request the tree-garland. The next person to visit was the house owner, who gave them a jug half full with coins as a tip for the carpenters, and half full of beer. The girls went about decorating all of the young carpenters' caps with evergreen sprigs, and then the procession began. The musicians were at the front followed by the pretty young ladies who carried the garland. The master carpenter, a full bottle of brandy in his hand, was not far behind, and the rest of the carpenters were in step behind him. Everyone else who had helped in any way brought up the rear. The master builder offered a sip from his brandy bottle to everyone he met along the way.

When all came full circle and were back at the new house, the garland was taken and fastened to the top of the front gable. Then either the master carpenter or the oldest carpenter climbed up to the top of the house, holding the jug of beer and coins, and began the ceremony. It was a combination of blessings and fun-filled sayings, with the requisite pauses left for the carpenter to take a swig of beer, and for the audience to laugh at his funny observations. Sometimes the comments were rather risqué, and the church stepped in. Such was the case in Duchy of Württemberg where on May 10, 1777 it was duly noted that any such sayings had to be reviewed by local clergy prior to the ceremony to censor out any rowdy or disagreeable passages.

Here follows the ceremony from the Free Library of Philadelphia's Borneman Ms. 99 *What to Say While Fastening the Garland to the Gable*:

Greetings and Salutations! Most revered owner of this house and all who are gathered here, and standing beneath me, you can surely see that the framing is complete, and that we all should give thanks to the Almighty for what we have achieved. Now take note that I climbed and then walked up here. Please do not fear. If I had a horse, you can be sure I would have ridden atop the house. Well, as you can also see, I have no horse, so it's really not worth a saus.

It's good that God protects the head of the Emperor, not to mention the dukes, counts and other such important men, who, left it be said, can't do without the handiwork of the honorable carpenters' hands. God bless all of you who have gathered here: By this I mean the lovely ladies, and maids, both large and small, to whom I send a special hello. If I only greeted one, and not the other, you would think me impolite, and not the courteous genuine Carpenter that I am. And you most noble sirs, I greet you one and all, and trust you will listen true to what I have to say to you about all that has happened here in this last half a year. By God's kind grace and power we've raised the house.

Now we wish to thank our beloved Master that He kept every hand so steady, and that no one suffered any mishaps or other damage. Also may we bid the Father that He continue to keep us safe, and that we ever keep this foremost in our minds. And so the carpenter shall happily recite his verses. We get our work done piece by piece according to the owner's wishes. As you can see, it's done, the house stands framed before your eyes. You gentlemen, ladies, and maids who stand there looking, who've come especially to hear how well I know my speech: Pray, laugh not should I miss a line or two, and every now and then misspeak.

Last night when I was planning to study all my lines, a girl appeared so charming and fine. I scarcely dare mention how she tempted me away to her room where I did stay, and sat with her the whole night through, my studies for naught, and now alas, what am I to do? Most revered owner of this house, please confirm that all's been done according to the plan, and whether everything is straight and true. The master builder and his crew measured with careful eye and tool to make this house according to the rule.

So, once again I ask you sir quite unabashed if we've done as you have asked, and if this house is to your taste. Ah, then you like it, you do? The master builder, and we carpenters like it, too. Well then, I wish the new owner the best of luck with this house, the same to the master and the money he is due. For us carpenters though I make a simpler wish: that we may be blessed with money galore to buy out the liquor store. The chief builder and his team spared no effort, and not one thing is out of place. Please review what stands before you: Nothing's amiss! The wood and the workmanship the very best. Everything duly noted, constructed to please. No doubt! Just as I thought. You all are impressed. Now that the house owner is assured that the house won't fall down, but will remain standing, may I ask you once more if you'll all stay standing for a while at least while I keep expanding.

Dear God, Creator of the entire world, Who by Your power keeps everything going, won't You please protect this house from hail and bad weather, so it might stand forever and ever. Then too, if You please, keep it safe from water and fire, not to mention the whole fatherland. Also, please give the owner a healthy and long life, the same for his wife. Don't forget his children and those who are his. Along with all this, we wish our dear owner that each year his cattle grow fat, and his wife bring forth another brat. May the servant girl give birth yearly to at least a set of twins, and the daughter triplets so that house and hearth might resound with mirth.

I'm known as a journeyman, and that's why I'm holding this garland in my hand. Since I'm able, I'll fasten it on the gable, not in corners or under the table for it's purpose is clear: to show that the framing is done. I'll while away some time by twirling the garland about in my hand. The owner I suppose has given it some thought to the money he's reserving as a gift to us deserving: a dozen thalers aren't too much; two dozen, of course, puts us closer to our goal. However, if he begs us just a bit, we'll agree that three dozen are more than fit.

I found this saying in Saxony where beautiful girls grow on trees. You know, had I only thought of it, I would have been sure to have picked maybe one, maybe two, or even three, and brought them back for my friends duty-free. But then it seems to me, that surely there must be pretty girls here that grow on trees. If I could only crow like a rooster, swim like a fish and swan, caress and love like a song bird, I would be the darling of every lovely blonde. Since I'm not able, not even a lady of the street will agree with me to meet.

I've traveled through Austria, and while there made seven master carpenters rich. Since then, the first has died; the second is ruined; the third had to sell his house; the fourth had to abscond; the fifth has nothing everywhere; the sixth is lying in the hospital, and the seventh is in Venice pushing daisies, awaiting the others. I've also traveled through all of Hessen where there are large bowls but little to eat, bitter beer, and wine sour-sweet. Whoever would want to be a resident of this place? If they didn't have wooden apples and black thorns, they'd have nothing to boil or to fry. Dear house owner, if I'm not speaking the truth, give me the meat. You keep the bones. This house has doorways, locks and beams, so I think the man who owns this house owes us all a good meal with wine, and enough beer to turn the mill wheel. Also, sufficient white bread for leftovers, cooked food that make the tables bend.

We ask for a minstrel, and some muscatel wine. Good friends and brandy, too must be part of this feast, for a proverb relates that carpenter folks are generous at the very least. Sunny weather, not too hot, little cabbage but a lot of meat. Also might the days be short, and the pay be great. Then the carpenter crew will be able to visit the tavern where all can drink a glass of wine.

Apropos! My friend, now give me a glass of wine. I toast in the best of humor to our house owner, and wish him good health. Not only to our most revered house owner but also to all his next of kin. So, I'll soon be finished with the wine, and shall let the glass fall to splitter. May God assure that all will go well. Once again I toast in all humility to the health of my most revered house owner and his wife, as well as all his kith and kin. Prost, dear house owner! Whoever wants to drink some of this wine should go to his own house, and pour himself a glass. For you know, for me to come down is too dangerous, and to bring you up here is just too crass. So, I've drunk to your health, and emptied the glass. Now I'm letting it fall. May it shatter. I'm easy to please. If there's no beer, no matter. Just give me water. Prost to your daughter!

Written hurriedly 10 September in the Year 1787.

Please be sure to visit our [Facebook gallery](#) for more images pertaining to topping out ceremonies.

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