

“Rites and Ceremonies Associated With Building” (excerpt)
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There are some ceremonials still followed in building in this country that it would be worth while to study closely. Such, for instance, is the custom that obtains in all parts of the country of fastening up the “roof-tree” when the framework of the roof is finally in place. We have heard it said that the symbolic meaning of this ceremonial is that the framework of the house is supposed to have made use of the trunk of the tree, and consequently the topmost crown of the tree itself is hoisted up to occupy its old place once more. If this was the origin of the custom, it was doubtless a rite of propitiation. In this prosaic age, however, the purpose of the ceremonial is evident. It is an invitation from the builders to the owner to recognize the progress that has been made by a donation of liquor or cigars. It is a hint that is almost always efficacious and that brings out the expected reward. A particularly interesting feature of this ceremonial is the modification that has come about with changed conditions in building. The “roof-tree” is not confined to wooden houses, but it is changed into a flag in the great steel structures that are erected in our cities.

In this connection it is interesting to note the important part that donations of liquor have played in building in the American colonies, especially in those which had a large proportion of Dutch settlers. It was long a standing complaint that the most onerous part of the expense in church building was the enormous bill for liquors for the workmen. Fortunately, we have some exact records. A detailed example of the imperative furnishing of liquor to workmen is found in the bills that have come down to us for the erection of the first stone house in Albany, in 1656. This was a Government house or fort; and it cost 12,213 guilders in wampum, or about \$3,500. Jan de la Montague, the vice director of the fort, was the official in charge of construction. Although of stone, it might almost have been floated in the liquor that it took to build it. When the old wooden fort on the site was torn down, a tun of strong beer was furnished to the workmen. When the first stone of the new edifice was laid, an anker (33 quarts) of brandy, and 32 guilders’ worth of other liquor were called for by the workmen and duly served. So much as a start for the masons; the turn of the carpenters came when the cellar beams were laid. They were satisfied with two barrels of strong beer, three cases of brandy, and 72 florins worth of small beer. This satisfied them until the second tier of beams was laid, when they had two more cases of brandy and a barrel of beer.

There was no chance for dry rot to attack these beams, for they had all been "wet" previous to laying. They were stacked up without the walls and were brought inside one by one by eight men, as they were wanted. For each beam carried these men were given half a barrel of beer, and there were 33 beams in all! All of the teamsters, wood-carriers, carpenters, stone cutters and masons had a daily allowance of a gill of brandy and three pints of beer apiece at dinner, besides the special treats they forced out of Jan de la Montague. This did not satisfy them, however, and they "struck" for another daily pint of beer. Every man who was even remotely connected with the building had to be taken care of in the matter of liquid refreshment. The carters who brought the wood from the forests and the sawpits, and the boatmen who floated spars down the river had access to the liquor barrels of the fort.

When the roof-tree was set in place, the carpenters were satisfied with a half barrel of beer, surely a most modest demand. Under the name of "tiles beer" a half barrel went to the tile setters. A winding staircase was a feature of the fort, and when this was finished, five guilders' worth of liquor gave the workmen the necessary winding gait to test it.

Perhaps there were other drinks "on the side," although the records do not specifically mention them. When the fort was finally completed, the workmen loudly demanded a *kraeg* or housewarming of both food and drink for all the workmen and their wives and families. But the patience of Jan de la Montague was exhausted, and he incontinently refused to pay out another stiver for drinks. Perhaps he had just been figuring up his bills for liquid refreshments, for when he presented his report, no less than 716 guilders was set down for the cost of drinks. One-eighteenth of the cost of the building went down the throats of the workmen! What a noble thirst there was in the old days! Fortunately, the building customs have changed from those strenuous times, or only brewers would be able to build houses.