

“BEYOND THE RHETORIC”

Harry C. Alford

Black Construction: It's Legacy and Future

One of the richest legacies of African descendents is construction. From the pyramids of Egypt to the building of America, Blacks have been involved in this industry that will survive the times. We will always build. Even when we demolish existing structures it is because we are about to build something new to replace it. Yes, construction has a certain future. It is a producer of many jobs and can provide not only a living for the laborers in the business but wealth for entrepreneurs to be handed down generation by generation.

African slaves were brought to this continent in the early 1500's to build New York (New Amsterdam at the time), Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, DC and the entire Southeastern territories. The craftsmanship that was learned through this action gave freed slaves an advantage as we slowly approached the Industrial Revolution. America relied on the crafts learned by Blacks during slavery and passed along to offspring from generation to generation. Even “Chicken George’s” son in the Roots documentary owned a lumber yard to sell supplies to the local black craftsmen who were the builders of the community.

As I grew up in Ventura County, CA, it was marvelous to admire the parents of my friends. The Gaston's, from east Texas, were masters at drywall. The Drayton's, from Louisiana, could lay masonry like no one else. The Gordon's, from Georgia, were expert hod carriers. No one could build a spiral staircase like Frank Williams, from Louisiana. He was so good that the wealthy would fly him to Australia, Japan, etc. to build spiral staircases for custom designed mansions. He spent most of his local time doing it for homes in Hollywood and Beverly Hills. He raised 18 children from the profits of his craft. There were many more transplanted craftsmen in my Southern California home and they were barely literate and uneducated but they mastered their

crafts.

Due to the Jim Crow laws of the South, there were many Black southern craftsmen who would travel to perform their skills. Many would go to places like New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, etc. and would out compete local white contractors who could not perform as well as they did and could not settle for their affordable pricing. It was because of this, that construction unions in the North were formed to block out Black crews from coming into communities and providing a better service for a cheaper price. Soon after the unions were formed they set in motion the Davis-Bacon Act (named for two New York congressmen). This act set up arbitrary labor wage scales so that Black craftsmen could no longer under price their white counter parts. They all had to pay a certain price, prevailing wage, at a minimum and competition became no more. With the price competition out of the way, the whites moved in through political favor and blatant racism. This would be followed with Project Labor Agreements which meant some projects would be declared "Union Only". With the construction unions discriminating against Blacks, PLA's would also mean "Whites Only".

Construction unions have made it rough for Black laborers and downright lethal for Black owned construction companies. However, some of the best have made it through the years. Almost all of the longstanding Black construction companies have Southern roots. Let's look at three of the largest. Powers & Sons, SR Smoot and Russell began their businesses in Mississippi, West Virginia and Georgia respectively. The founders stressed education on their children and today the second generation is bearing the fruits of that education (Purdue, Michigan St. and Tuskegee respectively) and yielding great dividends. The third generation is settling in and they aren't just getting college degrees in engineering. The degrees are coupled with Construction Management, Architecture, Law, MBA, etc.

It is not just craftsmanship any longer. It is construction management, program management, urban development, design and build to order, etc. The construction industry demands political clout and the arrival of Black political power is right on time as city councils, school boards and mayoral offices have courageous leaders who happen to be of the same background as our Black contractors. The new generation in construction is something we can all be proud of. A new and better era is about to fully evolve.

Of course, racism still exists as well as conspiring unions and anti-affirmative action zealots who believe it is the destiny of Blacks to fail at business and not be considered a part of this economy. We will defeat them. In fact, we love to fight them at every corner as we have a rising inventory of great entrepreneurs who have derived from the craftsmanship that actually built this nation and empires from Timbuktu to Ramses II. A family tradition continues!

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