

## Preserving the Past, One Roof at a Time

Posted by Molly Reid May 31, 2008 6:43AM

THE ARTISTS: Lionel and Lonnie Smith

THEIR CRAFT: Copper, tile and slate roofing; sheet-metal work

YEARS IN THE TRADE: Lionel, 39; Lonnie, 15

THE BEST PART: 'My favorite part is to work inside and outside, to meet with people,' Lonnie Smith said.

Historic-restoration roofer Lonnie Smith held up a dirty, semicircular tile. "See, it still has fungus growing on it from Colombia," he said.

Smith, who owns and runs Guaranty Sheet Metal Works with his father, Lionel Smith, was inspecting one of several thousand terra-cotta tiles that will be cleaned and used to roof a Creole cottage in the French Quarter. All of them were salvaged from old Colombian villas, and bear the gentle wear and tear that historic preservation junkies love best. The tiles will be laid in an overlapping pattern and secured individually with copper wiring.

All this effort for a roof? After 15 years in the business, on top of his father's 39 years, Smith understands the lengths to which a certain type of customer will go for an authentic-looking job. In New Orleans especially, historic buildings are sacred, and maintaining them is practically a full-time job for an owner; for the Smiths, it's a full-time business.

"We're not roofing Wal-Marts," Lonnie Smith said. "We're roofing the Soniat Hotel. The Quarter has a character and a charm that is its own, and you want to keep that. You don't want to look like every house in Metairie or Kenner."

And for any type of character a homeowner desires, the Smiths have the tile: French tile, barrel tile, fire-flashed tile, Spanish slate, Chinese slate, aged slate. The owners of Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop in the French Quarter went with an aged Vermont slate, while Oak Alley Plantation's representatives searched through the Vacherie estate's archives to select a tile that most closely resembled the original.

"People want things the way it was," Smith said, and it's this father-son team's job to give them that.

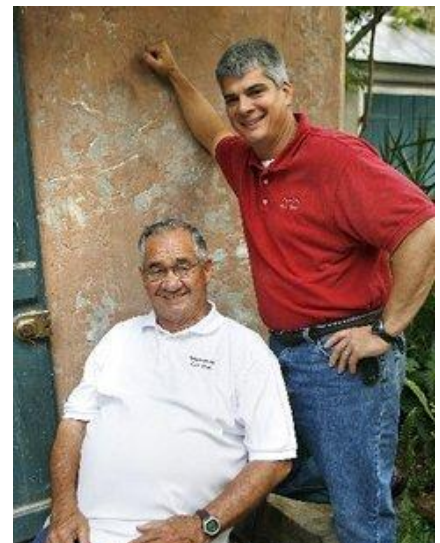
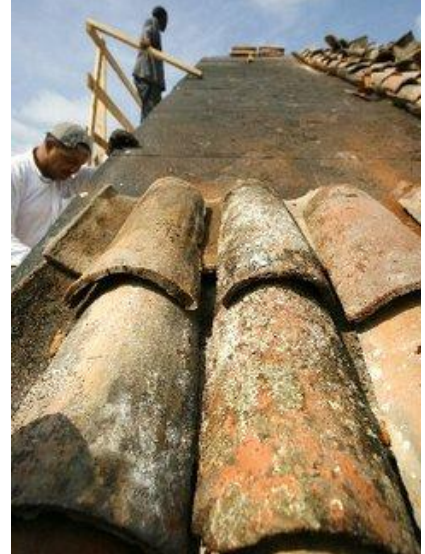
### Restoration education

The elder Smith, 67, grew up in Arabi but moved to Kenner after Hurricane Betsy. He got his start in the trade working with a restoration contractor in the 1960s and gaining an entree to the world of wealthy homeowners willing to pay top dollar for historical restoration work.

He went into business for himself in 1969, and has maintained a core group of clients for decades, while adding new ones through word-of-mouth advertising. The high-end clientele keeps business humming, Smith said, but also keeps quality the top priority.

"All it takes is one high-society dinner to ruin you," he said. "Someone says, 'Oh, he didn't do a good job,' and that's it."

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER  
Barrel tiles handmade in Colombia are laid out on a roof in the French Quarter.



STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER  
Lionel Smith, left, and his son, Lonnie, are slate and copper roofers.

## Continued

The younger Smith, 39, studied journalism in college and worked at the Baton Rouge Advocate, but decided in the early 1990s that he wanted to get into the family business. At first, his father gave him the grunt work of an apprentice, sending him to get permits at City Hall, "which is a real punishment," Smith said. But since then, he has taken over running the show at Guaranty.

In the first year or so after Katrina, the Smiths scrambled to take care of their longtime clients, even losing a few in the process because of the backlog of work. However, in the past year, Guaranty has found a new market in repairing jobs botched by fly-by-night contractors after the storm. Many of them, Smith said, reused old flashing -- seams reinforcing any transition in the roof, found, for example, around chimneys, eaves and skylights -- instead of installing new materials.

The demand has been so great that Smith estimates Guaranty to have done more than 100 slate roofs since the storm, "when we normally would do four to five a year," he said.

## Out in the field

Despite, or perhaps because of, the surge of activity since the storm, Lionel Smith has taken more of a figurehead role at his business. Lonnie Smith has taken over managing the shop and doing the paperwork, while his father prefers to be outside visiting job sites and working in the sheet-metal shop. For him, it's a luxurious return to what he loves most about his work: the hands-on sweat equity.

"You think he'd get burnt out and not want to do it, but he enjoys it," the younger Smith said. "He'd rather go out and work than sit in the office talking on the phone all day."

Lionel Smith appeared again this year at the Architectural Trades tent at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, demonstrating sheet-metal work to appreciative onlookers. He's become a regular, and even made a pair of thin copper buckles for a woman who needed them for her son's pilgrim costume.

"You'd think I did her the greatest favor in the world," he remembered.

"It's great, because you get to see people really enjoy something that we do every day and sort of take it for granted," Lonnie Smith said, adding, "It's very enriching to work with him and learn what he's learned."

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STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER  
The Colombian barrel tiles are laid in an overlapping, over-under pattern and are secured with copper wire.



STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER  
The Colombian barrel tiles crown a Creole cottage on St. Ann Street in the French Quarter.