

The New Roof, *Pennsylvania Packet*, 29 December 1787

The roof of a certain mansion house was observed to be in a very bad condition, and insufficient for the purpose of protection from the inclemencies of the weather. This was matter of surprize and speculation, as it was well known the roof was not more than 12 years old, and therefore, its defects could not be ascribed to a natural decay by time. Altho' there were many different opinions as to the cause of this deficiency, yet all agreed that the family could not sleep in comfort or safety under it. It was at last determined to appoint some skilful architects to survey and examine the defective roof, to make report of its condition, and to point out such alterations and repairs as might be found necessary. These skilful architects, accordingly went into a thorough examination of the faulty roof, and found

1st. That the whole frame was too weak

2d. That there were indeed 13 rafters, but that these rafters were not connected by any braces or ties, so as to form a union of strength.

3d. That some of these rafters were thick and heavy, and others very slight, and as the whole had been put together whilst the timber was yet green, some had warped outwards, and of course sustained an undue weight, whilst others warping inwards, had shrunk from bearing any weight at all.

4th. That the lathing and shingling had not been secured with iron nails, but only wooden pegs which, shrinking and swelling by successions of wet and dry weather, had left the shingles so loose, that many of them had been blown away by the winds, and that before long, the whole would probably, in like manner, be blown away.

5th. That the cornice was so ill proportioned, and so badly put up, as to be neither of use, nor an ornament. And

6th. That the roof was so flat as to admit the most idle servants in the family, their playmates and acquaintance to trample on and abuse it.

Having made these observations, these judicious architects gave it as their opinion, that it would be altogether vain and fruitless to attempt any alterations or amendments in a roof so defective in all points; and therefore proposed to have it entirely removed, and that a new roof of a better construction should be erected over the mansion house. And they also prepared and offered a drawing or plan of a new roof, such as they thought most excellent for security, duration, and ornament. In forming this plan they consulted the most celebrated authors in ancient and modern architecture, and brought into their plan the most approved parts, according to their judgments, selected from the models before them; and finally endeavoured to proportion the whole to the size of the building, and strength of the walls.

This proposal of a new roof, it may well be supposed, became the principal subject of conversation in the family, and the opinions upon it were various according to the judgment, interest, or ignorance of the disputants.

On a certain day, the servants of the family had assembled in the great hall to discuss this important point; amongst these was James the architect, who had been one of the surveyors of the old roof, and had a principal hand in forming the plan of a new one. A great number of the tenants had also gathered out of doors and crowded the windows and avenues to the hall, which were left open that they might hear the arguments for and against the new roof.

Now there was an old woman, known by the name of Margery, who had got a comfortable apartment in the mansion house. This woman was of an intriguing spirit, of a restless and inveterate temper, fond of tattle, and a great mischief maker. In this situation, and with these talents, she unavoidably acquired an influence in the family, by the exercise of which, according to her natural propensity, she had long kept the house in confusion, and sown discord and discontent amongst the servants. Margery, was, for many reasons, an irreconcilable enemy to the new roof, and to the architects who had planned it; amongst these, two reasons were very obvious—1st, The mantle piece on which her cups and platters were placed, was made of a portion of the great cornice, and she boiled her pot with the shingles that blew off from the defective roof: And 2dly, It so happened that in the construction of the new roof, her apartment would be considerably lessened. No sooner, therefore, did she hear of the plan proposed by the architects, but she put on her old red cloak, and was day and night trudging amongst the tenants and servants, and crying out against the new roof and the framers of it. Amongst these she had selected William, Jack, and Robert, three of the tenants, and instigated them to oppose the plan in agitation—she caused them to be sent to the great hall on the day of debate, and furnished them with innumerable alarms and fears, cunning arguments, and specious objections.

Now the principal arguments and objections with which Margery had instructed William, Jack, and Robert, were,

1st. That the architects had not exhibited a bill of scantling for the new roof, as they ought to have done; and therefore the carpenters, under pretence of providing timber for it, might lay waste whole forests, to the ruin of the farm.

2nd. That no provision was made in the plan for a trap door for the servants to pass through with water, if the chimney should take fire; and that, in case of such an accident, it might hereafter be deemed penal to break a hole in the roof for access to save the whole building from destruction.”

3d. That this roof was to be guarded by battlements, which, in stormy seasons would prove dangerous to the family, as the bricks might be blown down and fall on their heads.

4th. It was observed that the old roof was ornamented with 12 pedestals ranged along the ridge, which were objects of universal admiration; whereas, according to the new plan, these pedestals were only to be placed along the eaves of the roof, over the walls; and that a cupola was to supply their place on the ridge or summit of the new roof.—As to the cupola itself, some of the objecters said it was too heavy and would become a dangerous burthen to the building, whilst others alledged that it was too light and would certainly be blown away by the wind.

5th. It was insisted that the 13 rafters being so strongly braced together, the individual and separate strength of each rafter would be lost in the compounded and united strength of the whole; and so the roof might be considered as one solid mass of timber, and not as composed of distinct rafters, like the old roof.

6th. That according to the proposed plan, the several parts of the roof were so framed as to mutually strengthen and support each other, and therefore, there was great reason to fear that the whole might stand independent of the walls and that in time the walls might crumble away, and the roof remain suspended in air, threatening destruction to all that should come under it.

To these objections, James the architect, in substance, replied,

1st. As to the want of a bill of scantling, he observed, that if the timber for this roof was to be purchased from a stranger, it would have been quite necessary to have such a bill, lest the stranger should charge in account more than he was entitled to; but as the timber was to be cut from our own lands, a bill of scantling was both useless and improper—of no use, because the wood always was and always would be the property of the family, whether growing in the forest, or fabricated into a roof for the mansion house—and improper, because the carpenters would be bound by the bill of scantling, which, if it should not be perfectly accurate, a circumstance hardly to be expected, either the roof would be defective for want of sufficient materials, or the carpenters must cut from the forest without authority, which is penal by the laws of the house.

To the second objection he said, that a trap door was not properly a part in the frame of a roof; but there could be no doubt but that the carpenters would take care to have such a door through the shingling, for the family to carry water through, dirty or clean, to extinguish fire either in the chimney or on the roof; and that this was the only proper way of making such a door.

3d. As to the battlements, he insisted that they were absolutely necessary for the protection of the whole house.—1st. In case of an attack by robbers, the family would

defend themselves behind these battlements, and annoy and disperse the enemy.—
2dly. If any of the adjoining buildings should take fire, the battlements would screen the roof from the destructive flames: and 3dly. They would retain the rafters in their respective places in case any of them should from rottenness or warping be in danger of falling from the general union, and injuring other parts of the roof; observing that the battlements should always be ready for these purposes, as there would be neither time or opportunity for building them after an assault was actually made, or a conflagration begun. As to the bricks being blown down, he said the whole was in the power of the family to repair or remove any loose or dangerous parts, and there could be no doubt but that their vigilance would at all times be sufficient to prevent accidents of this kind.

4th. With respect to the 12 pedestals he acknowledged their use and elegance; but observed that these, like all other things, were only so in their proper places, and under circumstances suited to their nature and design, and insisted that the ridge of a roof was not the place for pedestals, which, should rest on the solid wall, being made of the same materials and ought in propriety to be considered as so many projections or continuations of the wall itself, and not as component parts of the wooden roof. As to the cupola, he said that all agreed there should be one of some kind or other, as well for a proper finish to the building, as for the purposes of indicating the winds and containing a bell to sound an alarm in cases of necessity. The objections to the present cupola, he said, were too contradictory to merit a reply.

To the 5th objection he answered, That the intention really was to make a firm and substantial roof by uniting the strength of the 13 rafters; and that this was so far from annihilating the several rafters and rendering them of no use individually, that it was manifest from a bare inspection of the plan, that the strength of each contributed to the strength of the whole, and that the existence of each and all were essentially necessary to the existence of the whole fabric as a roof.

Lastly. He said, that the roof was indeed so framed that the parts should mutually support and check each other, but it was most absurd and contrary to the known laws of nature, to infer from thence that the whole frame should stand self supported in air, for however its component parts might be combined with respect to each other, the whole must necessarily rest upon and be supported by the walls. That the walls might indeed stand for a few years in a ruinous and uninhabitable condition without any roof, but the roof could not for a moment stand without the support of the walls; and finally, that of all dangers and apprehensions this of the roof's remaining when the walls are gone was the most absurd and impossible.

It was mentioned before, that, whilst this debate was carrying on in the great hall, the windows and doors were crowded with attendants. Amongst these was a half crazy fellow who was suffered to go at large because he was a harmless lunatic. Margery, however, thought he might be a serviceable engine in promoting opposition to the new roof. As people of deranged understandings are easily irritated, she exasperated this

poor fellow against the architects, and fill'd him with the most terrible apprehensions from the new roof; making him believe that the architects had provided a dark hole in the garret, where he was to be chained for life. Having by these suggestions filled him with rage and terror, she let him loose among the crowd, where he roar'd and bawl'd to the annoyance of all bye-standers. This circumstance would not have been mentioned but for the opportunity of exhibiting the stile and manner in which a deranged and irritated mind will express itself—one of his rhapsodies shall conclude this narrative.—

“The new Roof! the new Roof! Oh! the new Roof!—Shall demagogues, despising every sense of order and decency, frame a new roof?—If such bare-faced presumption, arrogance and tyrannical proceeding will not rouse you, the goad and the whip—the goad and the whip should do it—but you are careless and insecure sinners, whom neither admonitions, entreaties and threatnings can reclaim—sinners consigned to unutterable and endless woe—Where is that pusillanimous wretch who can submit to such contumely—oh the *ultima Ratio Regium*: (He got these three Latin words from Margery.) oh the *ultima Ratio Regium*—oh! the days of Nero! ah! the days of Caligula! ah! the British tyrant and his infernal junto—glorious revolution—awful crisis—self-important nabobs—diabolical plots and secret machinations—oh the architects! the architects—they have seized the government, secured power, brow beat with insolence and assume majesty—oh the architects! they will treat you as conquered slaves—they will make you pass under the yoke, and leave their gluttony and riot to attend the pleasing sport—oh that the glory of the Lord may be made perfect—that he would shew strength with his arm and scatter the proud in the imaginations of their hearts—blow the trumpet—sound an alarm—I will cry day and night—behold is not this my number five—attend to my words ye women labouring of child—ye sick persons and young children—behold—behold the lurking places, the despots, the infernal designs—lust of dominion and conspiracies—from battle and murder and from sudden death—good Lord deliver us.

Figure to yourselves, my good fellows, a man with a cow and a horse—oh the battlements, the battlements, they will fall upon his cow, they will fall upon his horse, and wound them, and bruise them and kill them, and the poor man will perish with hunger. Do I exaggerate?—no truly—Europe and Asia and Indostan deny it if you can—oh God! what a monster is man!—A being possessed of knowledge, reason, judgment and an immortal soul—what a monster is man! But the architects are said to be men of skill—then the more their shame—curse on the villains!—they are despots, sycophants, Jesuits, tories, lawyers—curse on the villains! We beseech thee to hear us—Lord have mercy on us—Oh!—Ah!—Ah!—Oh!” —

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