

The Manual Process of Making Bricks in Lewiston-Auburn

IN THE PIT: The three basic ingredients in brick making (clay, water, and sand) are mixed together in a pit, an empty sunken shell, similar to a swimming pool. The pit is filled with clay and water which soaks all night to eliminate any dry lumps that could crack the brick during drying. The next morning, a dump truck load of sand is deposited alongside the pit for mixing into the clay. The pit is completely filled and emptied once every day.

THE “WATER STRUCK” BRICK MACHINE: A brick machine processes clay, water, and sand from the pit into a mixture suitable for making bricks. The interior contains a large auger or screw that mixes the clay. A person in the pit shovels the clay into the top at one end, and the two men at the other end, “strickers”, compress the clay into their molds at the bottom.

DIPPING THE MOLD: Wetting the mold before it is filled with clay allows the formed bricks to slide out of the mold more easily, forming better bricks. Brick molds are frames made out of wood, open at the top and bottom, with spaces to hold 6 bricks each. The frames each have a removable flat bottom that keeps the bricks in place so they don’t prematurely fall out of the mold between being molded and being laid down to dry.

MOLDING THE BRICKS: A mold and its removable bottom are briefly dunked in water and inserted into the front of the brick machine. The striker then pushes a handle forward which inserts the mold into the machine so it is ready to receive the clay. They then step on a “machette” or pedal to compress the clay into the mold. Finally, they pull the handle back which pulls out the mold loaded with clay.

STRIKING THE MOLD: The striker “strikes” or levels off the molds with a stick. After the molds have been struck and laid on a cart, the strikers clean the area by throwing the excess, or strikings, back into the machine. The strikers then bring the filled molds to the yard to be laid and dried.

LAYING IN THE YARD: Bricks must dry slowly in the yard, a flat clay area, before being fired. The yard is “luted”, smoothed over each day, and sand sprinkled on top. To form the bricks, the striker takes a filled mold and flips it upside down onto the yard. The bottom of the mold, now on top, is lifted up, releasing the bricks. The bricks are sprinkled with sand, preventing them from drying too quickly, developing cracks, and fusing together when firing.

DRYING BRICKS IN THE YARD: Bricks are first dried flat, and later flipped onto their edges. “Edging” bricks dries them evenly by exposing all of their sides. Following further drying, the laborers “hick” or stack the bricks into rows. Hicked bricks are stacked onto “hicking planks” which keep them off of the ground and ensure better drying. To prevent rain damage, the hicked rows can be covered with a peaked roof, a “whaler board” or “whaler cap”.

MAKING AND FIRING THE KILN: Firing bricks both hardens them, and gives them their characteristic brick-red color. It evaporates the water, melts the sand, and fuses it with the clay. Kilns were not always permanent structures, but rather structures of green (unfired) and fired bricks, stacked so that they formed their own oven. Workers transport bricks from the yard to a covered area, and then toss them up to a “setter” who stacks them to build the kiln. When firing, the heat rises through the cracks all the way to the top. “Barkers,” unmarketable fired bricks, form the outside or “scoving”. In the final step, the whole kiln is plastered over with “daubing”, a mixture of clay and sand. Bricks fired for 14 continuous days.