

# **Before You Buy the Brick House**

by Travis Nech

Free edition — [championbrickrepair.com](http://championbrickrepair.com)

# BEFORE YOU BUY THE BRICK HOUSE

## A Texas Homebuyer's Field Guide to Reading Brick, Mortar, Lintels, and Drainage Before You Sign

**Travis Nech**

---

© 2026 Travis Nech. All rights reserved.

ISBN pending KDP assignment.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the author, except for brief quotations in reviews.

This book is educational. It reflects 50 years of hands-on field experience in brick, masonry, and foundation work across Texas. It is not a substitute for an on-site inspection of a home you are considering, and it does not create any professional engineering relationship. The author is not a licensed engineer. Where this book raises structural questions about a house, hire a licensed structural engineer to evaluate that specific home before you act.

All examples in this book are hypothetical or composite teaching examples. They are labeled as such where they appear. They do not describe specific customers, specific jobs, or guarantees of any outcome on any particular home. Prices mentioned are general ballparks offered only to help you plan; prices vary by home, by market, and by the condition found on site. Get written bids for your own work, and get inspections for any home you are buying.

---

## Table of Contents

- Introduction: Look at the Brick Before You Fall in Love with the Kitchen
- Chapter 1: The Brick House Promise — and the Lie of Maintenance-Free
- Chapter 2: How a Brick Veneer Wall Is Actually Built
- Chapter 3: Reading Mortar Before You Offer
- Chapter 4: Cracks: Cosmetic, Concerning, and Call an

Engineer

- Chapter 5: Lintels, Windows, and Doors — The Steel You Cannot See
  - Chapter 6: Water Signs Inside and Out
  - Chapter 7: Chimneys, Fireplaces, and Caps
  - Chapter 8: Where Roofs Meet Brick
  - Chapter 9: Grade, Drainage, Trees, and Sprinklers
  - Chapter 10: Additions, Patios, and Past Repairs — Reading the Scars
  - Chapter 11: The Professional Inspection Walk
  - Chapter 12: After Closing — Your First-Year Care Plan
  - Conclusion: Buy the Wall, Not Just the House
  - Resources & Next Steps
  - About the Author
- 

## Introduction: Look at the Brick Before You Fall in Love with the Kitchen

Most people buy a brick house from the inside out. They fall for the kitchen, the floors, the light in the living room, and the shade in the backyard. The brick — the largest, most expensive surface on the home — gets a glance from the curb and a line in the listing that says "low maintenance."

That glance is where money gets lost.

Brick is honest. A brick wall that has been cared for looks cared for, and a brick wall that has been ignored, patched cheaply, painted over, or soaked for years tells that story too — if you know how to read it. The mortar joints tell you how old the care is. The brick above the garage tells you what the hidden steel is doing. The soil line at the base of the wall tells you where the water has been going. The chimney tells you what the weather has done up where nobody looks. None of that requires you to be a mason. It requires you to slow down, walk the outside of the house in a deliberate order, and know what normal looks like.

That is what this book teaches, in the order a careful buyer should walk it: the wall itself, the mortar, the cracks, the steel above the openings, the water signs, the chimney, the roof junctions, the ground around the house, the scars of past work, and finally the professional inspections that turn your observations into decisions you can negotiate with. The last chapter follows you past closing, because the best time to start caring for a brick home is the week you move in — while you still remember everything you saw.

I have spent 50 years in brick, masonry, and foundation work

across Texas. I am not a licensed engineer, and this book will point you to one whenever a question turns structural. What field experience gives you here is a practiced buyer's eye: what is cosmetic, what is a repair you can price, what is a warning you should pay a professional to answer, and what is a reason to walk away from an otherwise lovely kitchen.

Bring a flashlight, a phone for photographs, and this book's checklists. Let us go walk a house.

---

## Chapter 1: The Brick House Promise — and the Lie of Maintenance-Free

Drive through almost any Texas neighborhood built in the last fifty years — Fort Worth, Dallas, Waco, out to Hamilton County — and you will see the same promise repeated house after house: brick on all four sides, a neat roofline, a yard that looks solid and settled. For a lot of buyers, especially folks new to Texas, that brick is the reason they slow down in front of a listing. Brick feels permanent. Brick feels like Texas. Brick feels like a house that will take care of itself while you take care of everything else.

I understand that feeling. After 50 years of hands-on field experience working on brick houses across North and Central Texas, I have stood in more driveways than I can count while a buyer said some version of the same sentence: "We wanted brick so we would not have to worry about maintenance." That sentence is why this chapter comes first. Brick is a wonderful material when it is built right and looked after right. But brick is not maintenance-free, and believing it is can turn a good house into an expensive surprise in your first two or three years.

The reasons buyers love brick are real. Brick does not rot like wood siding. It does not need painting every few summers in our heat. Termites do not eat it. A hard hailstorm that tears up other exteriors often leaves brick standing with just a few chips. In August, when it is 104 degrees for the tenth day in a row, a brick house can feel a touch cooler and quieter inside, because all that masonry slows how fast heat pushes through the wall. And brick simply looks like it cost more, even when it did not. Neighbors notice it, appraisers notice it, and future buyers will notice it too.

Trouble starts when "low maintenance" quietly becomes "no maintenance," and when a buyer assumes the brick on the outside is the structure holding the house up. In almost every Texas house built since the 1970s, that is not how it works.

Most Texas brick houses you will tour are brick veneer houses. Veneer does not mean fake and it does not mean cheap. It means the brick is a single layer, usually three to four inches thick, standing in front of the real structure. Behind it is a wood or steel stud frame, sheathing, and a drainage plane meant to handle weather. The frame holds up the roof, the floors, and the interior walls. The brick is a durable raincoat and sun shield hung on the outside, tied to the frame so it does not lean or fall away. It is not carrying the house.

A solid brick house is different. You will still find them in older Texas towns — double- or triple-wythe walls where two or three layers of brick are bonded together and that masonry really is the structure. Solid masonry is heavier, stores heat differently, handles moisture differently, and needs a different kind of repair when mortar wears out. If you are looking at a home built before about 1950, ask whether it is solid masonry or veneer. Do not guess from wall thickness at a doorway alone. A good home inspector can help, and if there is any question about structure — cracks running through multiple materials, floors out of level, doors that will not close in a pattern suggesting movement — hire a licensed structural engineer for a proper evaluation. I am not a licensed engineer, and field experience does not replace an engineer's judgment when a structural question is on the table. What it does give you is a practiced eye for normal wear, poor prior repair, and what deserves that closer look before you offer.

Once you see modern brick as a veneer raincoat, other myths sort themselves out. Brick protects the frame from direct sun and a lot of driving rain, which matters where summer sun cooks any surface left in it. What brick does not do is waterproof your house by itself. Brick and mortar both absorb water. In a Gulf storm that blows rain sideways for hours, a brick wall takes on water like a hard sponge. A well-built veneer wall expects that and gives the water a way down and out before it can hurt the framing. A poorly built or poorly maintained wall traps it, and then you get hidden rot, rusted ties, and mold on the back side of drywall months later — while the brick outside still looks fine. That is why the next chapter spends so much time on the hidden parts: the gap, the ties, the flashing, and the little weep holes down low that owners accidentally plug with mulch or concrete.

Brick also does not protect you from Texas clay. Much of our region sits on expansive clay that swells when wet and shrinks hard when dry. In a wet spring the clay pushes up. In a long, dry summer, especially when a big oak is pulling moisture from one side of a house, it pulls away and drops. That seasonal movement is normal here, and most houses move a little with it. Because brick is rigid and mortar is not flexible, the veneer is often the first place you see that

movement — a stair-step crack through the mortar near a corner, a joint a little wider in August than in March. The crack is not always the problem itself. Often it is the messenger: the soil, the drainage, or the foundation needs attention. Painting over the message does not fix the movement, and neither does smearing hard patch mortar into a moving joint, as Chapter 3 will show. If you see a pattern of cracking with interior signs to match, get foundation and drainage looked at separately, and bring in a licensed structural engineer when the question is whether the structure itself is sound.

Then there is the resale myth — that brick automatically means more money, a faster sale, and no loss of value. The honest field version is narrower. A brick house that has been maintained — sound mortar, open weep holes, good flashing at windows and doors, no history of trapped water — holds its appeal very well in Texas. Buyers trust it for the same reasons you do. A brick house neglected under the maintenance-free spell can be harder to sell than a sided house in the same shape, because repointing and brick repair are less familiar to most buyers, and because inspectors write up deteriorated joints and mismatched hard mortar in plain language that makes the next buyer ask for a credit — just as you should. Brick gives a well-kept house a durable advantage. It gives a neglected house a very visible record of that neglect.

So what does maintenance look like, if it is not painting every few years? It is smaller, less frequent, and mostly about water. Every year or two, walk the house slowly. Look for mortar crumbling or falling out, especially on the south and west sides that take the worst sun. Look down low for weep holes and keep them open. Check sealant where brick meets windows, doors, and trim — those joints are maintenance items, not lifetime parts. Check whether downspouts dump right against the brick and foundation, soaking the same patch of clay over and over. After a big storm, look inside for any sign water got past the system. None of that takes a weekend or makes you a mason. It just requires dropping the idea that you never need to look at all.

Composite example: A couple buys a handsome 1990s brick veneer home outside Fort Worth in October. The inspection notes "minor mortar wear, typical for age," a relative tells them brick is maintenance-free, and they set the comment aside. The next summer they raise fresh mulch high against the house because it looks neat — covering most of the weep holes on the south side. The summer after is brutally dry, then a tropical system drops inches of rain in two days. Weeks later a bedroom smells musty and the drywall behind the baseboard is soft, while the brick outside still photographs beautifully. What failed was not the brick. What failed was the system behind it — blocked drainage at the base and sun-side

joints worn enough to let in more water than the wall could shed. A sided house might have warned them with peeling paint. The brick kept looking proud while damage stayed hidden.

That is not a reason to avoid brick. It is a reason to buy it with the right picture in mind. You are not buying a maintenance-free box. You are buying a system — frame, drainage plane, air gap, ties, flashing, brick, and mortar — sitting on Texas clay that never sits entirely still. Built right and given a little attention, it will serve you for decades and still look good doing it. Ignored or repaired wrong, it remembers. Keep that system in mind as the next chapter takes the wall apart layer by layer, so you know what you cannot see from the driveway.

## Chapter 2: How a Brick Veneer Wall Is Actually Built

Most buyers see a brick house from the street as a single solid thing: a brick wall. To buy well in Texas, picture it the way a builder does — a stack of separate layers, each with its own job, with a narrow empty space in the middle that does more work than most homeowners ever realize. You cannot see most of those layers once the house is finished. That is why you need to understand them before you buy: when a veneer wall has trouble, the trouble usually starts in the part you cannot see.

Build the wall from the inside out, the way it goes up on a job site.

It starts with the framing. In most Texas homes from the last fifty years, that is wood studs — typically two-by-fours or two-by-sixes — standing on the foundation and carrying the roof load. Drywall fastens to the inside face. The outside face is covered with sheathing: plywood, oriented strand board, or in older work, fiberboard or gypsum sheathing. Sheathing braces the frame and gives the next layer something to sit against. Hold onto this: in a veneer house, this frame is the house. If the frame gets wet and stays wet, no amount of pretty brick outside can hide it for long.

Against the outside of the sheathing goes the drainage plane, also called the weather-resistive barrier. The products differ — building paper, house wrap, fluid-applied coatings on newer builds — but the job is always the same: shed water that gets past the brick, send it downward, and protect sheathing and framing while it does. Think of it as the inner raincoat behind the outer raincoat. It is lapped like shingles, upper layers over lower layers, so gravity works for you. Where it is torn, reversed, skipped, or punched full of sloppy

holes around windows, water that should have drained harmlessly finds its way into the wall. After the brick goes up you will never see whether this layer was done with care or done in a hurry in July heat. The house will know the difference as long as you own it.

Next comes the part that surprises most buyers: empty space. Between the drainage plane and the back of the brick, a properly built veneer wall leaves an air gap, commonly about an inch wide. Shouldn't a solid wall be stronger? For veneer, no. That gap is the drainage and drying space. Brick and mortar absorb rain, and on a hot afternoon after a morning storm, that water works through the brick to its back face, enters the gap, and runs down the drainage plane to the bottom of the wall, where it should exit. The gap also helps the back of the wall dry between wettings and breaks the path that would let water bridge straight from wet brick into sheathing. Fill the gap with dropped mortar — very common when work is rushed — and you create bridges and dams up and down the wall. Water ponds behind the brick instead of draining. In our climate, where a wall can be soaked in a spring storm and baked over 100 degrees the next day, that trapped cycle is hard on everything behind the brick.

Holding the brick to the frame across that gap are wall ties — usually corrugated or adjustable metal ties today, fastened to the studs and embedded in the mortar joints as the mason lays the veneer. Older homes may have different patterns, and some old or poorly built work has too few ties, ties never properly embedded, or ties rusted after years in a damp gap. Ties do not hold the house up. They hold the brick in place — resisting wind, keeping the veneer plumb and attached, and making a tall, thin layer of masonry behave as part of the building instead of a freestanding skin that could bow or separate. When ties fail or were never adequate, you may see a slight bulge, a veneer pulled away at a corner, or horizontal cracking suggesting the skin is moving separately from the frame. Those are not cosmetic notes. If a wall looks like it is leaning, bowing, or separating, pause and get a proper evaluation — and if structure is in question, hire a licensed structural engineer. I am not a licensed engineer; from 50 years of hands-on field experience, my role is to recognize signs that deserve that review before you buy, not to replace it.

At the bottom of the wall and around openings, two quiet parts do essential work: flashing and weep holes. Flashing is a thin, durable material — metal, specialized membrane, or both — installed at the base of the wall, over windows and doors, at roof-to-wall intersections, and anywhere the veneer is interrupted. It collects water inside the gap and directs it outward through the face of the wall before it can go inward or sit at the bottom and wick up. At the base, flashing turns

outward right above the foundation. Set in the mortar just above that flashing are weep holes — small openings in the vertical joints, or fitted inserts, spaced regularly along the wall. Those are the drains. If the gap and drainage plane are the plumbing inside the wall, weep holes are where the plumbing empties outside where you can see it.

Crouch near the foundation of almost any Texas brick house. In a well-built wall you should find those weeps one after another, just above where brick meets slab or stem wall. They are easy to miss and even easier to defeat — smeared shut in a repointing job, buried behind raised beds, covered by sidewalk poured too high, hidden under mulch piled deep for a listing photo, or filled with pest-control foam. Every one turns a draining wall into a bathtub with a brick face. Inside, the first clue is often quiet: a musty smell in a low corner, paint bubbling on a wall backing up to brick, baseboards soft in an otherwise immaculate house. Put weep holes on your showing checklist. Look for them, note whether they are open, take a photo.

Around windows and doors, look for the lintel — the horizontal support carrying brick over an opening so the veneer does not bridge a window or garage door on good intentions. In many Texas homes it is steel angle iron. You can often see its bottom edge as a thin dark line above a window, sometimes painted, sometimes showing rust if water has sat where it should not. Brick over a wide garage opening is a lot of weight, and the lintel and its supports need to be sound. Flashing belongs above the lintel too, with its own weeps, so water collected over an opening exits instead of dripping into the frame below. On a tour, look above wide openings for sagging, a joint opened in a shallow arc, and heavy rust staining down the face. A little surface color at a steel edge in our humidity is common. A visibly bowing or heavily corroded lintel is a different conversation — flag it for your inspector, get a specialist opinion, and if framing or structure is involved, get an engineering opinion before you proceed.

Finally, there is the brick and mortar itself — the only layer you actually see. Texas veneer is commonly modular clay brick in reds, browns, buffs, and lighter blends popular in newer subdivisions. But two houses with identical brick color can have very different walls if the joints, workmanship, and hidden layers differ. Listing photos are not evidence of a sound wall. The prettiest brick on the street can be tied poorly, flashed poorly, and drained not at all. The plainer house next door, with a clean gap, sound flashing, and open weeps, will outlast it.

Hypothetical example: Two 2005 brick homes on the same Dallas-suburb street, priced within a few thousand dollars. House A has fresh landscaping, mulch mounded high, and not

one weep hole visible — all behind soil. Above the garage the brick sags faintly and a joint has been caulked shut. House B has plainer beds set lower, weep holes every few feet, clean flashing above the windows, and mortar worn in places but uniform. House A photographs better. House B is very likely the safer buy, because its drainage still works while House A's has been decorated out of existence. A buyer reading the wall system budgets to open those weeps and fix the grade before closing, or walks away if the seller will not address a trapped wall.

One more Texas note. Our heat tests the wall every day. The sun side can be dramatically hotter than the shaded side, season after season. That cycling, plus clay movement, is why longer walls and openings have control and sealant joints — places designed to allow a little movement without random cracking. When a later owner fills a movement joint solid with hard mortar because it "looked like a crack," the next crack appears somewhere less convenient. If you see long walls with no movement joints, or joints packed hard, note it.

You cannot open a seller's wall to inspect the gap, ties, and drainage plane. What you can do is read the evidence those layers leave on the surface: open or blocked weeps, flashing where it should be, rust and staining, bowing or separation, and mortar condition. That last one is the record you can read most closely of all — and it is where we go next.

## Chapter 3: Reading Mortar Before You Offer

If brick is the face of the house, mortar is the handwriting. Before the full tour, the joints between the bricks will tell you how the wall is aging, how it has been cared for, whether someone tried to help it with the wrong materials, and whether you are likely to be paying for repointing in your first years of ownership. You do not need to be a mason to read the basics. With 50 years of hands-on field experience, I can tell you most of what matters is visible at arm's length in good daylight, if you know what to look for — and what to feel for with a coin and a fingernail.

Start with what mortar is supposed to do, because most bad repairs get this backwards. In a veneer wall, mortar is meant to be the sacrificial part. Masons use that word on purpose. Mortar should be a little softer and more forgiving than the brick it surrounds. It seals the joint against bulk water, holds the units together as a skin, accommodates tiny movements, and over decades of Texas sun, wind-driven rain, and seasonal clay movement, it is supposed to wear first — slowly, evenly, and in a way that can be renewed by repointing. Brick is expensive and hard to replace well. Mortar is renewable.

Reverse that relationship — pack a hard, dense patch mortar against a softer brick — and the brick becomes the sacrificial part. Moisture and movement then damage brick faces instead of joints. You will see spalling, where the brick face flakes or pops off, and tight cracks running through bricks instead of stepping through joints. That damage does not undo easily. Keep this principle in your pocket for every house: the joint should give before the brick does.

Walk a wall slowly, as you would on a final showing before an offer. Start on the south or west side, because in Texas those elevations live the hardest life — hours of peak summer sun, driving storms, and a bake-and-dry cycle that tests mortar faster than the shaded north wall. Compare sides as you go. More wear on the sun side than the protected side is normal. One patched area in the middle of a wall that looks completely different from everything around it is not.

Look first at joint depth and profile. A sound joint is full, reasonably uniform, and tooled — worked with a tooling iron while setting, compressing the surface and shaping it to shed water. Profiles have names like concave and weather-struck, but you do not need them memorized to judge a joint. A good tooled joint feels smooth and firm, holds a consistent shape, and does not form a little horizontal shelf where water can sit. A worn joint is recessed unevenly, crumbly at the edges, and in advanced wear may be missing a quarter inch or more, leaving the top edge of the brick below exposed like a tiny ledge. Run your eye along a bed joint, the long horizontal: full and even is sound; hollowed, sandy, and irregular is a joint giving up its weather seal. Head joints — the short verticals — often wear first around windows and corners where water concentrates, so check those too.

Then touch it, with your two simplest tools: a fingernail and an ordinary coin. For the fingernail check, press and scratch lightly across a joint in an inconspicuous spot, down low near a side gate rather than beside the front door. Sound mortar resists your nail — you may polish it, but you will not gouge a groove or raise a pile of sand. Mortar at the end of its life scratches away, powders, or crumbles, and loose grains feel like beach sand with almost no binder left. The coin check adds a little controlled pressure. Scrape the edge of a coin gently along the joint — not gouging — and watch what comes off. A sound joint gives very little. A failing joint sheds sand and crumbs freely. Try two or three places on different walls. If every sun-side joint powders under a coin while the listing calls the exterior pristine, you have learned something about both the house and the description.

Test more than one spot. Wear is rarely uniform, and patches mislead in both directions — low and high, sun and shade, original wall and any repaired area. That leads to the most

valuable skill of all: spotting prior repointing and patch work, good and bad.

Good repointing is almost boring, and that is a compliment. Color is a close match, allowing for new mortar lightening as it cures. Texture matches — similar sand and grain, not glassy where the original is sandy. The tooling profile matches, so repaired joints shed water the same way. Edges are clean: mortar in the joint, not smeared across brick faces.

Poor patch work announces itself once you know the tells. Most common in Texas resale homes is the mismatched patch — bright gray, almost concrete-colored mortar troweled into a wall whose original joints are warmer, sandier, and softer in tone, often in small rectangles near a hose bib, a window corner, or the base. Color mismatch alone is cosmetic, but it often flags something worse: that patch is frequently a high-cement mix, much harder than the original mortar and potentially harder than the brick. A hard patch concentrates stress and moisture damage at its edges, and a year or two later the bricks beside it may flake while the patch still looks new. Also watch for flat, smeared tooling, overfilled joints lapping onto brick faces, and cracks merely bridged with a surface smear — a thin skin over a hollow joint that can look tidy in a photo and fail in the first long bake of the next summer.

Step cracks deserve a careful word. A stair-step crack following the joints diagonally near a corner or opening is the veneer's common way of showing movement — often seasonal clay movement, sometimes lintel or foundation related. If the crack runs cleanly through the joints and the mortar on either side is otherwise sound, movement chose the weakest path, which is what joints are for. If the crack runs straight through bricks, if bricks are split and displaced, or if the crack is wide and tapered and paired with interior cracks, sticking doors, and sloping floors, stop treating it as a mortar question. That pattern deserves a foundation evaluation, and for any structural judgment, hire a licensed structural engineer. I am not a licensed engineer, and no mortar opinion should stand in for an engineering evaluation when the structure itself may be involved. The field can tell you which cracks are commonly maintenance issues and which have earned that next level of scrutiny before you offer.

Two more checks cost nothing. Look for efflorescence, the white powdery deposit that sometimes appears on brick faces. A little after a wet season can be simple salt moving out as water dries, and it often brushes away. Heavy, recurring efflorescence in the same spot, especially with joints damp long after rain, suggests excess water moving through that part of the wall — look uphill for a leaking gutter, a flashing problem, or a sprinkler soaking the wall each morning. A

drifted sprinkler head wears one patch of mortar faster than twenty years of weather. Also check joints at the base: mortar buried below soil or mulch stays damp and deteriorates faster, and that raised grade is probably burying your weep holes.

What does worn mortar cost? General ballparks only, because an honest number depends on access, height, scope, matching, and your market. In North and Central Texas in recent years, professional repointing on a typical single-story veneer home might run a few thousand dollars for one elevation or a substantial partial scope, and well into five figures for a full house cut out, matched, and retooled correctly — especially on a two-story home. Grinding out a small hard patch early can be modest; waiting until surrounding bricks have spalled and need matched replacements costs painfully more. Treat those ranges as planning context, not an estimate. Get a written scope from a qualified brick repair contractor before your option period expires, so you negotiate with a real scope instead of a guess.

Hypothetical example: You tour a 1988 brick home in Granbury that shows beautifully inside. Outside, your coin test on the west wall raises sand with almost no pressure, joints are recessed deep enough to catch your fingertip, and around the living room window a bright gray patch — harder and differently tooled — bridges a step crack that continues above and below it. The north wall tests firm and looks original. The story is coherent: original mortar at end of life on the sun side, plus a cosmetic hard patch over a movement crack it could not fix. Budget for proper repointing of the west elevation, removal of the hard patch, and a foundation and drainage check — then write the offer with those costs in mind, or choose a different house with eyes open. The mortar told you the truth before the closing table did.

Take this habit with you: do not just look at brick. Read the joints. Test them gently, compare walls, spot the patches, respect the sacrificial principle, and sort houses into three piles — sound and maintained, worn but honestly priced for the work ahead, and patched in ways that will cost more than the seller admits. That third pile is where Texas buyers lose money. Now that you can read mortar, you do not have to be one of them.

---

## Chapter 4: Cracks: Cosmetic, Concerning, and Call an Engineer

If you walk around any brick house in Texas long enough, you will find cracks. That is not a reason to panic, and it is not a reason to shrug and move on, either. Brick and mortar are

strong, but they sit on soil that moves. In most of Texas, that soil is expansive clay. It swells when it gets wet and shrinks when it dries out. A house can ride that slow movement for decades, and the brick will tell you the story if you learn how to read it.

After 50 years of hands-on field experience in Texas, I can tell you: the crack itself is rarely the whole problem. Where it is, how wide it is, which direction it runs, and whether it is still moving matter far more than the fact that a crack exists. This chapter sorts cracks into three buckets — cosmetic, concerning, and call an engineer.

I am not a licensed engineer, and this chapter is not an engineering report. If you see the kinds of cracks in that third bucket, hire a licensed structural engineer licensed in Texas to evaluate the house before you close. A good engineer works for you, not for the seller, and will give you a written opinion you can use to negotiate, repair, or walk away.

## Start With What Is Normal

Hairline cracks in mortar joints are common, especially on older homes. Mortar is meant to be the softer, more forgiving part of the wall. It expands and contracts a little with heat and cold. Tiny vertical cracks at corners, near expansion joints, or along a long wall with no break in it are often just the wall doing what walls do in Texas heat.

Cosmetic cracks usually look like this: they are hairline thin, you cannot fit the edge of a credit card into them, they follow the mortar joint in a fairly straight line, they are not offset — meaning one side is not pushed in or out compared to the other — and they do not line up with cracks inside the house.

Ask when mortar was last touched up. Fresh mortar in a slightly different color is not a red flag by itself, but fresh mortar over a wide, active crack is a different story.

## The Three Main Patterns

**1. Vertical cracks.** A straight or slightly jagged vertical crack that runs through mortar joints, sometimes stepping a little as it drops, often shows up near corners or in the middle of a long wall. Small vertical cracks are frequently from thermal movement or minor settlement. Watch them more closely if they are wide at the top and narrow at the bottom, or the reverse, because that taper can point to rotation or settlement. If you can fit a pencil tip into it, note it as concerning and keep investigating.

**2. Stair-step cracks.** These follow the mortar joints up in a stair pattern, stepping diagonally across the wall. Stair-step

cracks are the classic sign of differential movement — one part of the foundation is moving differently than another part. A short, hairline stair-step near a corner might be old and stable. A long stair-step that runs from a window corner down to the foundation, opens wider in the middle, or shows up on two sides of the same corner is concerning. If the bricks themselves are cracked through, not just the mortar, take it more seriously.

**3. Horizontal cracks.** Pay close attention here. A long horizontal crack in the mortar, especially in the middle third of a wall, or just above the foundation or just below the roof line, can point to pressure pushing on the wall. Causes vary — rusting steel above openings pushing up, soil pressure, or foundation movement — and you cannot diagnose it from the sidewalk. Horizontal cracks that are wide, long, or paired with bowing or leaning belong in the call-an-engineer bucket.

Also look for diagonal cracks from the corners of windows and doors, where brick is weakest. A single fine line may be minor; the same crack at several openings on one side is a pattern, and patterns matter.

## The Width Guide — Bring a Coin and a Card

You do not need fancy tools. Bring a dime, a credit card, and your phone. Use them the same way on every house so your notes mean something.

- **Hairline — less than 1/16 inch:** About the thickness of a credit card edge. If the card will not slide in, call it hairline. Usually cosmetic if it fits the pattern above, but photograph it anyway.
- **Narrow — 1/16 to 1/8 inch:** The card slides in, a dime on edge is tight. This is the watch zone. Note location, length, and whether it lines up with anything inside.
- **Moderate — 1/8 to 1/4 inch:** You can fit a pencil or the edge of a dime easily. This is concerning, especially if it is stair-step, horizontal, or offset.
- **Wide — over 1/4 inch:** You can fit your fingertip or a pen in places. Do not guess at this one. Get an engineer involved, especially if the crack goes through brick, is offset, or has recently been patched and has reopened.

Width alone does not decide it. A wide but old, stable crack with an engineer's letter from a prior repair is different from a narrower crack that is fresh and growing. Fresh cracks tend to have clean, light mortar inside and sharp edges; older cracks are darker, rounded, filled with dirt or paint. Also check for offset: run your fingertip across the crack. If one side sticks out, the wall has moved in more than one direction and deserves professional attention.

## Seasonal Movement in Texas Clay

This is where Texas is different. Our clay soils act like a slow sponge. After a wet spring, the soil under the edge of a slab may be swollen. By late August, after weeks of heat and no rain, that same soil can shrink and pull away. You may even see a gap open between the soil and the foundation in a dry summer. That seasonal cycle can open and close hairline cracks by a small amount each year.

Good drainage and consistent moisture reduce that swing. Look for gutters dumping at the foundation, beds built higher than the slab, sprinklers that soak one side and leave another dry, and big trees close to the house drinking moisture from one corner — that side often shows more movement.

Do not dismiss every crack as "just Texas clay." Seasonal movement explains small, stable patterns — not a leaning wall, a growing horizontal crack, or doors on one end that will not latch. If a seller says "all houses here do that," thank them and still measure and, when warranted, hire your own engineer.

## How to Photograph and Measure So It Counts

Your phone is enough. For every notable crack, take a wide photo showing where it is, a medium photo showing its full length, and a close photo straight on with a coin or card edge for scale. Note the date, the side of the house, and what is inside that wall.

Write down length — "about 6 feet, from top of kitchen window down toward slab" is useful. Note if it goes through brick or only mortar, and if a matching crack appears inside on drywall, tile, or a fireplace. Inside and outside cracks that line up raise the concern level.

Composite example: A buyer finds a stair-step crack on the west side of a home, about 1/8 inch wide, running from a bedroom window down to the slab, with a matching diagonal drywall crack inside that same corner. The seller's fresh mortar patch on the outside has already hairline-cracked again. That combination — width, location at an opening, inside match, and a failed patch — moves it out of cosmetic and into get-an-engineer-before-you-close, even though any one clue alone might have seemed minor.

## When to Negotiate and When to Walk Away

Negotiate when cracks are limited, the engineer says the structure is serviceable, and the fix is known: correct mortar repair, corrected drainage, lintels addressed (next chapter),

and, if foundation work is recommended, a clear plan. When an engineer recommends lifting or stabilization, the method to discuss is pressed concrete piles — sectional concrete cylinders pressed to a point of resistance. Get that recommendation first, then written bids that match it, and ask for transferable warranty paperwork for any prior work.

Walk away — or pause until you have full answers — when you see several of these together: wide or offset cracks on multiple sides, horizontal cracks with bowing, cracked brick through the unit itself in many places, doors and windows badly out of square on one end of the house, sloping floors that match the cracked side, or a seller who will not allow an engineer to look. Also walk away if the price only works if the cracks turn out to be nothing. A good house at the right price can handle a repair budget. A house priced as if it is perfect, when it is not, leaves you holding the risk.

You do not have to decide on the driveway. The goal is not to find a crack-free house — in Texas, that search will frustrate you. The goal is to buy a house whose cracks you understand and whose price reflects what you now know.

## Chapter 5: Lintels, Windows, and Doors — The Steel You Cannot See

Most homebuyers look at brick and think it holds itself up. Over a flat wall, it mostly carries its own weight down to the foundation. Over a window, a door, or a garage opening, brick needs help. That help is usually a piece of steel called a lintel — a horizontal steel angle that sits hidden above the opening and carries the brick above it, transferring that weight to the brick or framing on either side.

You cannot see most of the lintel. You can see its edge — a thin line of steel just above the window or garage door — and you can see what happens when it starts to fail. After 50 years of hands-on field experience, I have learned that lintel trouble is one of the most common and most missed issues on Texas brick homes, because it starts slowly, hides behind paint, and is often patched cosmetically until the brick above it has nowhere left to go.

I am not a licensed engineer. If a lintel is badly rusted, bent, or has allowed a wall section to shift significantly, hire a licensed structural engineer to advise you before you buy. Most lintel evaluations by a qualified brick repair contractor will tell you whether you are looking at routine replacement or something that needs that extra engineering step.

## How a Lintel Is Supposed to Work

Picture the wide opening of a two-car garage. There may be several feet of brick and mortar above it — that is hundreds of pounds. The lintel spans the opening like a small shelf. The brick above it is often laid in a rowlock or soldier course — bricks turned upright — that looks decorative but also depends on that steel being sound, level, and long enough to have proper bearing on each side.

A good lintel is protected from water and supported so it does not sag. Water is the enemy. Brick and mortar are porous, and rain, sprinklers, and condensation find their way in over years. If water reaches poorly protected steel and stays there, the steel rusts — and rust expands.

## Rust Jacking — The Slow Lift You Did Not Ask For

When steel rusts, the rust takes up more space than the original steel — several times more. As that rust builds on and around a lintel, it pushes. It pushes up on the brick above it and down or out in other places. Contractors call this rust jacking, and it explains a pattern you can learn to spot in five minutes.

Look above windows and garage doors for these signs: horizontal cracks in the mortar just above the opening, brick that looks lifted or stepped up in the middle, mortar joints that are wider above the opening than elsewhere, vertical cracks at the corners of the opening, and brick that has cracked through right above the lintel ends. You might also see the steel edge itself swollen, flaking, or bubbling with rust, even if someone has painted over it. Paint over active rust may look tidy for a season, then it blisters again because the expansion continues underneath.

Rust jacking is progressive. It does not heal in dry weather. Once the steel has lost section and swelled, cleaning and painting the exposed edge alone will not restore the brick above it. That is why proper repair involves removing brick to expose and replace the steel, not just grinding the visible edge.

Early rust staining alone — a faint orange streak below a lintel end — may be a warning, not yet a failure. Heavy flaking, a lintel edge that is no longer straight, or brick displacement above it means the process is well along and should be priced as a real repair, not a touch-up.

## Sagging Above Garages and Windows

Steel can also sag. A lintel that was undersized, too short,

damaged by rust, or overloaded can bend down slightly in the middle. The brick above it follows, and you will see a gentle dip along the top of a garage door, a soldier course that is no longer straight, or diagonal cracks stepping down from the center. Run your eye along the mortar line above the garage from an angle, not directly in front of it, so the line shows its shape. A dip you can see from the street deserves a closer look.

Garage lintels deserve special attention in Texas. They are the longest span in most homes, they carry the most brick, and the garage often gets the most water exposure from the driveway and roof runoff. Check the clearance: does the garage door scrape or bind at the top in the middle? Is the gap between door and brick tight in the center and loose at the ends? Those are clues the lintel above may have moved.

On windows, look at the top corners. Cracks that start at the lintel end and step up and out, patched mortar that keeps reopening at the same corner, and windows that are no longer square in their openings can all trace back to a lintel that has rusted and lifted one end more than the other.

## Sticking Doors and Windows — What They Are Really Telling You

Almost every buyer tests a few doors. Do it with intention. A door that sticks a little at the top corner in August may move freely in January — Texas clay movement, covered in the last chapter, can do that seasonally, and so can humidity swelling a wood door. What matters is pattern and severity.

Pay more attention when: several doors and windows on the same side or end of the house all stick the same way, latches no longer line up, there are diagonal drywall cracks above those same doors inside, and the sticking matches a cracked or sagging area outside. That cluster points away from a simple hinge adjustment and toward movement — foundation, lintel, or both — moving the opening out of square.

A single bedroom door that rubs, with no cracks around it inside or out, is usually a minor carpentry fix. A front door, two windows, and a garage lintel all showing distress along the same wall is a different conversation. Map them on a simple sketch of the house as you walk. Patterns sell the story.

Also check windows for operation. Older windows may be painted shut — note it, but do not force them. Newer windows that bind or will not lock can signal a shifted opening. Is the gap around the window even on both sides, or is caulk stretched thin on one side and squeezed out on the other?

Hypothetical example: A shopper loves a home with a wide crack in the mortar directly above the garage, about 3/8 inch wide in the center, with bricks visibly lifted. The exposed lintel edge is thick with flaking rust under new black paint, and the garage door rubs at the top center. That pattern is classic rust jacking with sag — not a paint-and-caulk fix. A buyer should expect a bid for full lintel replacement on that opening and should confirm no additional wall movement needs an engineer's opinion.

## What a Proper Lintel Replacement Actually Involves

Understanding the real scope protects you from both overpaying for a cosmetic patch and under-budgeting for the correct job.

A proper replacement generally goes like this: the contractor shores or carefully plans support for the brick above, removes enough courses of brick above the opening to fully expose the old lintel, removes the rusted steel, checks and repairs any damaged backup or flashing, installs a new steel lintel of proper size and length with adequate bearing on each side, protects it with a suitable coating, installs or restores flashing and weep provisions so water can exit the wall (more on weep holes in the next chapter), and then relays the brick — reusing sound original brick where possible or matching new brick and mortar as closely as the existing wall allows. Where the home uses the LintelLOCK approach, understand it correctly: LintelLOCK is a field-developed system for supporting and replacing failed lintels, developed from hands-on repair work — ask any contractor exactly what will be installed, in writing.

What proper replacement is not: grinding the rust off the front edge, painting it, and repointing the cracked mortar above. That hides the symptom and leaves the expanded, weakened steel in the wall to keep pushing. If a seller says "the lintel was just repaired," ask for the invoice and photos taken during the work. A real replacement will have photos showing brick removed and new steel in place before the brick went back. A tube of caulk and a paint receipt is not the same repair.

Ask how many lintels are affected — lintels of the same age on the same side of a house are often in similar condition, and doing them together may cost less than one at a time. Get work priced opening by opening, in writing, and allow time for weather and material matching. If displacement is severe or walls are bowing, hire a licensed structural engineer first.

Walk the openings slowly on every house. The steel you

cannot see will tell you its condition through the brick you can see — lifted mortar, stepped cracks, a sagging line above the garage, and doors that no longer fit their frames. Learn those signs, and you will not be surprised after the moving truck leaves.

## Chapter 6: Water Signs Inside and Out

Water does more quiet damage to brick houses than almost anything else. It stains, it swells, it rusts the steel discussed in the last chapter, it rots wood behind paint, and it feeds the musty smell that hits you when a front door opens. Brick itself handles water better than most materials — a brick can get wet and dry out for a hundred years. The trouble is what water does on its way through the wall, where it gets trapped, and what it reaches behind the brick.

Texas gives water plenty of chances: heavy downpours, Gulf Coast humidity, daily summer sprinklers in Dallas-Fort Worth, and dry spells followed by sudden rain running toward the foundation. After 50 years of hands-on field experience, I look for water first on every walk-through, because it explains so many other clues — efflorescence, stains, rot at baseboards, and buried weep holes.

I am not a licensed engineer. Use this chapter to spot and document water signs, then bring in the right professional for each system — a licensed structural engineer for structural questions, a roofer for flashing, and a qualified masonry contractor for the wall.

### Efflorescence — The White Powder That Is Trying to Tell You Something

Efflorescence is the white, powdery or crusty deposit you see on brick and mortar. It forms when water moves through masonry, dissolves natural salts inside the brick or mortar, carries them to the surface, and evaporates, leaving the salts behind. Brush it with a dry hand — it often feels powdery, and a splash of water may make it seem to disappear briefly, then return as it dries.

A little efflorescence after a wet season can be minor. Heavy, recurring efflorescence in one area is a water-path sign: water is repeatedly moving through that section. Look for the source — an overflowing gutter, a roof valley dumping behind the brick, a sprinkler hitting the wall daily, or a bed holding wet mulch against it. Low efflorescence paired with mortar that never dries can point to wicking from wet soil or beds built too high.

Washing it off removes the deposit, not the water path. Photograph it and note whether the mortar behind it is soft or crumbling. If brick faces are spalling — flaking off in thin layers — in that wet area, especially after a freeze, that is more serious: water inside the brick is doing damage, and those bricks may need replacement.

## Stains Inside and Out — Follow Them Up, Not Just Out

Outside, look for dark streaks below window sills, green or black staining in shaded damp corners, rust streaks below lintel ends and metal fixtures, and white or brown streaks below the roof line. Each stain marks a path water takes often enough to leave evidence. Take a wide photo so you can later match the stain to the detail above it.

Inside, water shows as discoloration on ceilings and walls, bubbling or peeling paint, swollen or soft baseboards, and flooring that cups near exterior walls. Pay special attention below windows and at chimneys — flashing failures and lintel-area entry often appear there first. Open closets on exterior walls; closets hide stains that living rooms get painted over.

Use your nose, honestly. A musty smell stronger in one room, closet, or along one exterior wall — especially paired with baseboard damage or a stain — suggests moisture has been present long enough for mildew in hidden materials. Do not claim mold you have not tested; record what you found: "musty odor, stronger in the primary closet on the north wall, with baseboard swelling." That precise note is what an inspector needs.

Check window interiors: peeling paint, soft wood at bottom corners, cracked caulk, and sills that feel spongy under a firm thumb press are rot clues. Outside those same windows, look for failed caulk, cracked mortar at the sill, and sills that slope toward the house. Water entering at a window can travel and show up as baseboard rot several feet away, so map inside and outside together. Get low with a flashlight at baseboards on every exterior wall — look for wavy, swollen sections, cracked paint at the bottom edge, and gaps at the floor. Sound wood is firm; deteriorated wood gives a little under a thumb press.

## Weep Holes — Small Holes That Must Stay Open

This is the detail most homeowners have never been told about, and it matters enormously. A brick veneer wall is not waterproof. Rain will get behind the brick over time through

mortar pores, tiny cracks, and around openings. Behind the brick is a small air gap and a water-resistant barrier. Water that gets in is supposed to drain down that gap and exit at the bottom through weep holes — small openings left in the mortar joints just above the foundation and above lintels and other flashings, typically spaced a few feet apart along the wall.

Walk any brick house slowly at foundation level and look for them: small vertical gaps in the mortar between bricks in the first course above the slab or flashing, sometimes with a short piece of rope, a plastic insert, or an open joint. They look like someone forgot to mortar a spot. They did not forget. That hole is doing a job.

Problems come in three common forms. First, weep holes buried: flower beds, mulch, soil, concrete patios, or new landscaping built up so high that the bottom course of brick — and its weep holes — is below grade. Water now cannot exit, soil moisture wicks up, and the wall stays wet. You will often see efflorescence, damp mortar, and interior baseboard issues on that same wall. Second, weep holes blocked: mortar droppings, caulk, paint, or pest plugs seal them shut. Sealing weeps to keep insects out traps far more water than it keeps out pests; there are proper vent inserts for this, caulk is not one of them. Third, weep holes covered by later work — coatings, overlays, or thick paint bridging the openings.

Photograph buried or blocked weeps and note how much of the wall is affected. Uncovering weep holes and lowering beds to expose the foundation and the weep course is usually straightforward work, but if a wall has been trapped wet for years, the hidden damage behind it — rusted lintels and ties, rotted sheathing or trim — is the real question, and it may need professional opening-up to assess.

## Painted Brick Traps

Painted brick is popular, and it deserves an honest, balanced word. A properly prepared brick wall painted with a suitable breathable masonry coating by a knowledgeable contractor is one thing. A wall painted with the wrong non-breathable film, or painted to hide problems right before a sale, is another — and as a buyer you often cannot tell which you have from the curb.

Paint changes how a wall handles water. Unpainted brick absorbs a little rain and then dries to the outside. A tight, non-breathable paint film can slow that drying, trapping moisture in the brick and mortar behind the film. Over time, especially through freeze-thaw cycles, trapped moisture can contribute to mortar deterioration and brick face spalling that shows up as paint bubbling, peeling in sheets, and brick faces

coming off with the paint. Look closely at painted houses for bubbling, peeling that reveals powdery mortar, cracks telegraphed through paint, and — critically — painted-over weep holes. Run your hand along the bottom course and check whether the weeps are open.

Paint also hides things: mortar color differences from recent repairs, efflorescence until it pushes the paint off, and hairline cracks until they crack the paint. That does not mean never buy a painted brick house. It means budget more uncertainty, inspect carefully at openings and the base of walls, and ask when it was painted, with what product, and why — an answer from three years ago with a product name is very different from fresh paint applied last month over a wall you can no longer read.

Composite example: A buyer tours a freshly painted white brick home. The paint looks crisp, but at the base of the south wall the flower beds are built up over the first course of brick, no weep holes are visible, several areas of paint are bubbling near the ground, and inside that same wall the baseboards are swollen with a musty odor in the adjoining closet. Together they suggest trapped moisture at the base of a painted wall that can no longer drain or dry as designed — a house that needs inspector and masonry evaluation before any offer assumes it is merely a cosmetic refresh.

## Your Water Walk — A Simple Order That Works

Start outside, high to low: roof edges and gutters, flashing at chimneys, windows and lintels, wall surfaces for efflorescence and stains, then the base for weep holes and grade. Then walk the same walls inside, checking ceilings, window trim, and baseboards. Photograph outside-and-inside pairs of the same spot, and tie notes to compass directions — "north wall" stays true after the furniture leaves.

Water signs rarely mean an automatic no. They mean: find the source, judge how long it has been active, and price what it has reached. A blocked weep hole caught early is a small fix. Years of trapped water behind painted brick above a rusted lintel is a larger, layered repair.

---

## Chapter 7: Chimneys, Fireplaces, and Caps

A chimney takes the hardest beating and gets the least attention. It sticks up above the roof with no shade, no protection from driving rain, and no easy way to get a close

look at it. Wind hits it from every side, summer sun bakes it, and on hard freeze nights, cold works on any water soaked into the mortar.

A chimney problem is rarely just a chimney problem. Water that gets in at the top can travel down inside walls, stain ceilings, rot wood you cannot see, and show up as a mystery leak two rooms away. A leaning or cracked chimney can also be a safety issue, not just a repair bill. This chapter will help you read what you can see from the ground and know when to call for a closer inspection before you buy — and before anyone lights a fire.

## Start With the Crown at the Very Top

The crown is the flat or slightly sloped surface at the top of a masonry chimney. It is usually concrete or mortar, and its job is simple: shed water off the top and away from the flue opening, the way a hat sheds rain off your head. When the crown is sound, water runs off. When it is cracked, water goes straight in.

Crown cracks are the most common chimney defect on an older Texas brick home, and they are easy to miss from the ground. Hairline cracks may not sound serious, but a cracked crown lets rain pour into the chimney structure with every storm. Over time that water softens mortar from the inside out, rusts metal parts, and can crack the flue tiles that carry smoke and heat safely out of the house.

From the ground, use binoculars on a bright day and look for dark lines across the top, pieces shifted or missing, and old patch coatings. A patch can help for a while, but a patch over a badly cracked crown is often a sign the real repair was put off. Ask when the crown was last repaired, and ask for paperwork if the seller says it was rebuilt.

A proper fix is more than a bucket of sealer. A badly cracked crown often needs to be removed and repoured with the right slope, a proper overhang, and a gap around the flue so heat can expand without cracking it again. That is ladder-and-roof work for an experienced mason, not a weekend project. Finding a bad crown before you buy lets you price that work into your decision.

Look also for a chimney cap — a metal cover over the flue opening, raised on legs so smoke can escape. It keeps rain from falling straight down the flue and helps keep birds and raccoons from moving in. A missing cap does not mean the chimney is ruined, but rain has had a clear path inside for as long as it has been gone. Rust stains running down from the top and a cap that is tilted or half off are clues worth writing down.

## Leaning, Cracking, and Mortar Loss Up High

Now step back and sight down the chimney from two sides. Does it stand straight, or lean away from the house? A small lean in a very old chimney is not automatically an emergency, but any lean deserves respect. Chimneys can lean because the footing shifted, because mortar washed out more on one side, or because the stack is slowly pulling away from the framing behind it.

Look for a gap where the chimney meets the house wall, and for stepped cracks through the mortar joints. If bricks look loose or bulged, that is a stop sign. Loose brick overhead is a falling hazard, and it tells you water and movement have been at work for a long time.

Mortar loss up high follows the same pattern as down low, only faster. Joints near the top take the most weather, so they often crumble years before the wall below. Through binoculars, look for joints recessed deep, sandy, or missing in chunks, especially on the south and west faces — the sides that take the hardest wind, rain, and sun after a storm.

Hypothetical example: Imagine a 1980s brick ranch with a tall chimney on the north end. From the street it looks fine. With binoculars, the buyer spots deep mortar loss on the top ten courses and a crown split in two places. The home inspector notes it, a mason prices a top rebuild and repointing before closing, and the cost is handled in the negotiation. Without that close look, the same buyer would likely have learned about it a year later, when pieces of mortar started landing on the roof shingles below.

Repointing a chimney top is skilled work. Old mortar has to come out to a sound depth without damaging the brick, and new mortar has to match the strength of the old material. Mortar that is too hard for older, softer brick can cause brick faces to crack and pop in later winters. The cheapest quick patch at height is often the most expensive choice over five years.

## Flashing: Where the Chimney Meets the Roof

Flashing is the metal work that seals the joint where the chimney passes through the roof. It is one of the most important details on the whole house, and one of the most common leak points. A chimney is a big brick box punched through a sloped roof. Every time it rains, water running down the shingles hits that box and has to be directed around it and back onto the roof surface. Flashing does that directing.

Good flashing works in layers. Step flashing runs up the sides, woven in with the shingles. Counterflashing is cut into the mortar joints and folds down over it, so water cannot get behind it. On the uphill side there should be a wider piece — sometimes a saddle called a cricket on wider chimneys — that splits the flow so water does not pond behind the stack.

Bad flashing is easy to recognize: thick tar smeared around the base, surface metal just nailed on and caulked, rusted-through pieces, and flashing pulled out of the mortar joint. Caulk and tar are short-term helpers. When they are the whole system, the leak has usually already started; it just may not have stained a ceiling yet.

Inside the house, the partner clue is staining. Look at the ceiling and walls around the fireplace, and in the attic if access is safe and allowed during your showing or inspection. Brown rings, bubbling paint, and musty smell near the chimney chase often trace straight back to flashing or crown trouble above. A fresh coat of paint on just that one section of ceiling, with no explanation, is worth a polite question.

## What to Check Around the Fireplace Inside

Inside, start with your nose and your eyes. A working fireplace has a faint, dry, woody smell. A wet or animal-occupied chimney has a stronger, sour, or musty odor that gets worse on humid days. Look up the flue with a flashlight if you can do so safely from the firebox. Leave a full inspection to a qualified chimney sweep, but note obvious gaps, fallen chunks of tile or mortar in the firebox, heavy black buildup, and daylight where it should not be.

Check the damper. It should open and close without forcing. A damper rusted shut, open, or missing tells you water has been coming down the flue. Look at the firebox, too: cracked firebrick and missing mortar let heat reach materials it was never meant to touch. Cracks where the hearth meets the floor, a settled or tilted hearth, and soft flooring next to the fireplace can point to water entry or movement below.

## The Safety Rule That Comes First

Here is the plain rule of this chapter, and it is not negotiable: do not use a damaged fireplace until it has been inspected.

A cracked flue, a blocked flue, heavy creosote buildup, or missing mortar between flue tiles can let heat, sparks, and carbon monoxide go where they do not belong. Carbon monoxide has no color and no smell. A house can feel fine and still be unsafe to heat with a fire. If there is any sign of chimney damage, animal nesting, water entry, or a long period with no use and no records, budget for a proper

chimney inspection and cleaning before the first fire — ideally before you close, so you know what you are buying.

This is also a place to be clear about limits. Fifty years of hands-on field experience teaches a mason a great deal about brick, mortar, crowns, and flashing. It does not make a mason a licensed structural engineer, and chimney movement that ties into footing or framing questions belongs in front of a licensed structural engineer as well as a mason and a chimney professional. Good tradespeople will tell you when a question is outside their lane. Listen for that honesty when you interview anyone to do this work; it is a sign of care, not weakness.

Before you make an offer, write down what you saw: crown, cap, lean or gap, mortar up high, flashing, and any interior stains. Photograph what you can from the ground. That list turns a vague worry into a clear inspection request — how a buyer gets real answers while there is still time to use them.

## Chapter 8: Where Roofs Meet Brick

More brick problems start at the roof line than most homeowners guess. The wall itself may be sound for decades, while the joints where roof planes run into brick quietly fail, soak the wall from the top down, and leave stains blamed on everything except the real cause. This chapter is about every place a roof touches a brick wall besides the chimney — side walls, gable ends, valleys, and places where a lower roof dies into a taller brick wall.

These joints move. A roof deck expands and flexes with heat and load. Brick moves at its own slow pace. Wind drives rain sideways into these seams in a Texas thunderstorm. The flashing that seals them has to handle all of that for years without anyone looking at it. When you buy a brick house, you are also buying the condition of every one of those joints.

### Step Flashing Along Sloped Walls

Where a sloped roof runs alongside a brick wall — think of a garage roof rising next to a two-story wall, or a porch roof meeting the front of the house — the joint is sealed with step flashing. Step flashing is a series of small metal pieces, one for each shingle course, bent to run up the wall and out onto the roof. Over them, counterflashing set into the brick mortar joints folds down and covers the top edge, so water running down the wall is kicked back out onto the roof instead of slipping behind the metal.

From the ground with binoculars, you can often see the

counterflashing line. It should be straight, tucked into a mortar joint, and continuous, with no gaps or heavy caulk doing the job the metal should be doing. A wavy, patched, or tar-covered line is a warning the joint leaked before and was treated on the surface.

You may also see weep holes, small openings in the mortar just above the flashing line. Those are a good sign, not a defect. Brick walls are built expecting a little moisture to get behind the brick; weep holes let it drain out at the flashing. If they are caulked shut or buried under tar, water will find another way out — often inside.

Inside the house, leaks from failed step flashing usually stain the ceiling near that wall, often some distance from where the water entered, because water travels along framing before it drips. If a seller discloses a past leak on a wall that has a roof joint on the other side, ask what was actually replaced. New shingles alone do not fix bad flashing, and roofers and masons sometimes each assume the other trade owns that joint. Before closing is the time to find out who did what.

## Kickout Flashing: The Small Piece That Prevents Big Damage

At the bottom end of a roof-to-wall joint, where the sloped roof ends and the wall continues down, there should be a special piece called kickout flashing. Its job is exactly what the name says: kick the water running down that joint out and away from the wall, into the gutter, instead of letting it pour down behind siding, trim, or brick details below.

A kickout is a small, angled piece of metal, and its absence causes outsized damage. Without it, every rain sends a concentrated stream of water into the same vulnerable spot at the end of the wall. Over years, that one spot can rot framing, soak sheathing, stain brick, and feed mold inside the wall — all from a piece of metal that costs very little compared with the repair.

From the street, look at the lower end of each roof-to-wall joint. Can you see a small metal diverter angled out toward the gutter? Or does the joint simply end, with staining, dark streaks, or damaged material directly below it? Dark vertical staining below the end of a roof joint, crumbling mortar in just that area, and trim or paint failure at that one spot are classic kickout clues. Write them down even if the inside looks dry on the day you tour. Water damage at a kickout location is a pattern an experienced eye recognizes quickly, and it is a very reasonable item to put on your inspection list.

Composite example: Picture a two-story brick front with a

one-story garage roof running into it. Below the end of that joint, the brick shows a dark streak and the mortar is soft for about two feet, while the rest of the wall is sound. That pattern, labeled here as a composite drawn from common field patterns rather than one specific house, is what a missing or failed kickout often leaves behind. The fix starts with the flashing, not with repointing the stained mortar first — repair the water source, then repair the damage it caused, in that order.

## Valleys, and Where They Dump Water at Walls

A valley is the inside angle where two roof slopes meet, and it is a verberbed in a storm. All the water from both slopes collects there and runs fast. Where a valley ends near a brick wall, or discharges close to one, the volume matters. A valley that dumps its flow beside a chimney, at the foot of a wall, or behind a detail that cannot drain will overwhelm ordinary flashing and soak the brick at that point again and again.

Note where each valley aims. Does it empty into a gutter that can handle it, or pour onto a lower roof that sends water against a wall? Are there splash marks, heavy staining, or eroded mortar at the receiving point? Also look for patch tar, exposed fasteners, and debris dams in the valley. Leaves collect there, hold moisture, and slow drainage. You do not need to become a roofer in an afternoon. Just connect the dots: heavy water delivery plus a wall joint equals a place to inspect closely.

## Gutters and Downspouts Against Brick

Gutters are unglamorous, and they protect brick every single rain. A gutter that overflows pours a sheet of water down the face of the brick below it. Do that often enough and you will see the results: dark staining, algae growth in shaded areas, mortar joints wearing faster under the overflow line, and soil eroded at the base of the wall.

From the ground, check whether gutters are present where needed, slope toward their downspouts instead of sagging, and show rust or drip stains at seams and end caps. A gutter pulling away from the fascia will spill behind itself and soak the top of the wall — a leak that masquerades as a brick problem when the brick is only the messenger.

Downspouts deserve the same minute. Each should be intact, fastened to the wall, and connected at the bottom to something that carries water away, which the next chapter covers in full. Note any that are crushed, disconnected, missing their bottom elbow, or staining the brick along their run. Also note where an upper downspout empties onto a

lower roof right beside a wall. That concentrated dump is hard on shingles, flashing, and mortar, and a short extension to the lower gutter is a simple improvement worth asking about.

## Reading Roof-to-Wall Joints From the Ground With Binoculars

You do not need to climb on a roof to learn a great deal about it, and as a buyer you should not climb on a seller's roof at all. A decent pair of binoculars, a bright day, and a slow, systematic pass from the street and yard will show you most of what matters at the brick joints.

Work in a pattern so you do not skip a side. At each roof-to-wall joint, look for: a straight counterflashing line tucked into the mortar; tar or caulk serving as the main seal; rust, gaps, or lifted metal; staining below the joint; and weep holes that are open rather than sealed. Then check the ends of each joint for a kickout, and each valley for where its water lands. Photograph what you find — one wide shot of each side and one tight shot of anything that worries you.

Finally, know the boundary of a ground-level look. Binoculars cannot tell you whether the layers under the counterflashing were installed in the right order, and they cannot see the inside of a wall. If the joints show age, patching, or staining, the right next step is a qualified home inspector, and where structure or movement is in question, a licensed structural engineer. A mason with long field experience can read the brick side of these joints and tell you honestly what the mortar and flashing are saying. That combination — inspector, engineer when structure is involved, and mason for the masonry — is how a buyer gets the full picture instead of one trade's slice of it.

Roofs and brick will keep meeting each other for the life of the house. Bought with open eyes, those joints are maintenance items you can plan for. Bought blind, they are the source of the leaks that make new owners say the house surprised them. A half hour with binoculars is how you stay in the first group.

## Chapter 9: Grade, Drainage, Trees, and Sprinklers

If roofs decide how much water hits the top of your walls, the ground decides what happens at the bottom — where some of the most expensive damage in a Texas brick home quietly begins. Soil piled against brick, water draining toward the house, a big oak drinking moisture from one side of a

foundation, sprinklers spraying the wall every other morning: none look dramatic on tour day. All work on the house every week.

This is also where a buyer can do the most good for the least money after closing. Flashing and crowns take tradespeople. Grade, drainage, and sprinkler aim are often homeowner-level corrections — a weekend with a shovel, a downspout extension, an adjusted spray head — that protect brick and foundation at the same time.

## Soil and Mulch Against the Brick

Start every walk-around at the base of the wall. The brick on most Texas homes sits on the concrete foundation, and there should be a clear view of that relationship: brick above, a visible band of foundation concrete below it, and the ground sloping away beneath. Trouble begins when soil, mulch, or flowerbed fill is piled up so high that it buries the bottom of the brick and sometimes the weep holes with it.

Brick is not meant to sit in wet soil. Soil holds moisture against the wall long after rain ends, wicks it up into the mortar, and invites termites to travel up behind the brick where no one can see them. Building practice and pest control both want several inches of foundation exposed for those reasons. A bed built up against the house may look tidy, but if it covers the weep holes and keeps the bottom courses damp, the wall pays for that look.

Mulch is the most common culprit because it gets refreshed every year, raising the bed a little more until the mulch line is above the bottom of the brick. Look for a damp, dark band on the lowest courses, white mineral crusting on the brick face, and mortar at the base softer than the mortar a few feet up. Push a little mulch back with your shoe at a showing, respectfully, and see whether the soil under it is soggy.

Hypothetical example: Suppose a garden-home front bed is mulched level with the third brick course, and the bottom mortar is crumbling while the wall above is sound. The likely story is not bad original work. It is years of buried weep holes and soil moisture working on the base. The remedy in such a case usually starts with pulling grade and mulch down to expose the foundation and weep holes, letting the wall dry, and then repointing what was damaged — in that order.

## Negative Grade and Where the Water Goes

Grade is simply the slope of the ground. Positive grade falls away from the house. Negative grade falls toward it, delivering every rain and every sprinkler run to the base of your walls and foundation. It is astonishing how many houses

have at least one side with negative grade, often where a patio, driveway, or neighbor's yard directs water the wrong way, or where soil has settled along the foundation over the years.

You can read grade without instruments. Sight along the foundation line: does the ground fall away, or cup toward the house? Look for soil lines and splash stains on the foundation, sediment fans where runoff drops its dirt, low spots where mulch has floated and collected, and algae on concrete near the wall. After a rain is the ideal time for a second showing. Puddles standing against the foundation an hour after rain tell you more than any brochure.

Pay special attention to hard surfaces. A driveway or patio sloping toward the house can deliver a remarkable amount of water to one place, and cracks in those slabs let water under them and against the foundation. Also check the other side of the fence: if the neighbor's yard is higher and drains this way, find out whether a swale — a shallow drainage channel — exists and is clear, or has been filled in by landscaping.

Downspout discharge ties directly into grade. Every downspout should release water onto a splash block, into a drain pipe, or through an extension that carries it several feet away from the foundation, downhill if possible. A downspout ending at the base of the wall pours that roof section's water into the worst possible spot. Extensions are inexpensive; missing extensions, year after year, are expensive. Follow each downspout to its end and note which ones dump at the wall.

## Large Trees Near Walls

Texas buyers love shade trees, and rightly — a mature oak cuts summer heat on a brick wall like nothing else. But a large tree close to a house is also a powerful pump. Its roots draw moisture from the soil, and in clay soils, uneven drying is the story of foundation movement. A tree a few feet from a wall will dry the soil on that side far more than the open yard, especially in a drought summer, and the foundation edge can settle toward the dry side.

Roots are often blamed for directly pushing foundations, but the moisture effect is usually the bigger factor in clay country. Note the big trees: how large, how close, and whether one side of the house is heavily treed while another is open. Then look back at the brick. Cracking worst near a large tree, doors on that side that stick, and separation at corners can all fit the pattern of uneven soil moisture.

None of this means you should cross a house with a beautiful oak off your list, and it certainly does not mean cutting down

healthy trees on a guess. It means the tree belongs in your inspection conversation. A licensed structural engineer is the right person to judge foundation movement and what, if anything, it needs; that judgment is outside a mason's license and outside this book's authority. What field experience does say, plainly, is that consistent soil moisture is the goal — many foundation professionals recommend foundation watering programs in dry months in clay areas, and even, steady moisture beats cycles of soaking and baking. Ask the seller whether they water the foundation, and how. A thoughtful answer is a good sign for the whole house.

## Sprinklers That Water the Brick

Automatic sprinklers are nearly standard in Texas suburbs, but heads drift, get knocked, get replaced with the wrong pattern, and end up spraying the house. A head that soaks the brick every cycle keeps that wall wet far more often than rain alone would. Mortar in the spray zone ages faster, mineral deposits build on the brick face, algae grows in the shade, and in freeze-prone weeks a saturated wall is more vulnerable.

Walk the beds and look at the heads closest to the house. Are any aimed or tilted toward the wall? Look for the telltale fan-shaped stained pattern at head height and below, and check behind shrubs — hidden heads in overgrown beds are common, and a wall section that never dries will show softer mortar than the open wall beside it. The fix is easy — adjust the arc, swap a head, or cap a misdirected one — so spot it before you buy and stop an active cause of mortar wear on day one.

## Texas Clay: The Shrink and Swell Every Buyer Should Understand

Under much of Texas sits clay soil that behaves like a slow sponge. When wet, it swells and lifts. When dry, it shrinks and drops. A foundation on that clay rides those seasonal movements, gently in most years, more sharply when a wet spring follows a drought. Brick, being rigid, shows movement as cracks — most often stepped cracks through mortar joints, wider at one end than the other, that may open a little in late summer and close a little in spring.

For a buyer, the takeaway is not fear; it is pattern recognition. Modest seasonal movement is a fact of life in clay country and is managed with consistent drainage and moisture — everything this chapter has covered: grade falling away, downspouts discharging away from the wall, trees understood, sprinklers aimed at plants not brick, and no beds buried against the foundation. Houses that have had that steady care usually show it in their brick.

What you should not do is diagnose foundation condition from cracks alone, in either direction — neither panic over every hairline nor wave off a wide, growing crack. If you see cracks that are wide enough to fit a pencil, cracks that run through brick units themselves, doors and windows badly out of square, or floors that slope noticeably, put a licensed structural engineer on your inspection team before you buy. That recommendation comes from the same place as everything in this book: fifty years of hands-on field experience with brick and mortar teaches you where masonry ends and structural judgment begins, and respecting that line protects the buyer every time.

The houses that age best in Texas are rarely the ones with the fanciest brick. They are the ones where water was politely shown the way off the roof, away from the walls, and out to the street, year after year. You now know how to tell whether the house in front of you has been treated that way — knowledge worth money at the negotiating table and peace of mind after it.

---

## Chapter 10: Additions, Patios, and Past Repairs — Reading the Scars

Every brick house has a history, written right on the walls if you know how to read it. A Texas house that has stood twenty or thirty years has almost always been patched, added onto, painted, or repaired. That is not automatically a problem — good repairs keep a house healthy for decades. Trouble starts when a repair hides a problem instead of fixing it, or when an addition was tied to the original house in a way that creates new stress. As a buyer, you are buying every decision made about that brick before you ever walked up the driveway.

You need no special tools for this work — just good light, a slow walk, and a willingness to ask why something looks different. When brick or mortar changes color or pattern in one spot, there is a reason. Your job is to learn whether it was honest maintenance or a cover-up before a sale.

### Mismatched Brick and Mortar Patches

Stand across the street and look at each wall as a whole. Brick color may vary a little from course to course — that is normal — but the overall tone should feel unified. Then look for the rectangle that does not belong: brick redder, darker, smoother, or smaller than the rest. That patch almost always marks a change — a filled-in window, a rebuilt corner after a vehicle strike, a plumbing repair, or a section redone after movement.

None of those stories is automatically bad. What matters is quality. Check three things. First, do the mortar joints in the patch line up with the original wall? A careful mason keeps courses level; a rushed patch drifts where new meets old. Second, does the patch sit flush, or bulge out or sink in? A bulge can mean wall ties behind the brick were not replaced. Third, look at the edges. Good work is toothed in — half-bricks removed in a staggered pattern so new work locks into old. A straight vertical seam is a butt joint, two walls simply placed against each other, and butt joints crack first because nothing ties them together.

Hypothetical example: Imagine a Fort Worth house where the lower four feet of brick beside the garage door is a different shade of red, and the seller says a truck clipped the corner five years ago. If the joints line up, the wall is flat, and the weep holes are open, that story fits. Now change one detail: the same patch has a straight seam, a faint outward bow, and fresh caulk in a crack at the edge. That version was put back for looks, not for structure — and it deserves a mason's evaluation before you close, not after.

Mortar tells the truth even more plainly. Original mortar weathers as one surface, with consistent color, shape, and hardness. Repairs interrupt all three. Look for bright mortar in a wall of darker joints, or dark patches in a light wall. Color mismatch alone is mostly cosmetic. The deeper concern is hardness. Many older Texas homes were built with mortar softer than the brick, by design — mortar is meant to be the sacrificial part of the wall, weathering first so it can be replaced without damaging brick. A common, costly mistake is using a very hard, modern mix on softer older brick. It does not flex, so when the wall moves, the brick cracks instead of the joint. Dense mortar that looks almost like concrete, with chipped brick edges beside it, is the warning sign.

Test a joint in an out-of-the-way spot with a house key. Sound mortar is firm but scratches slightly and feels a little sandy. Mortar crumbling to powder is worn out and ready for repointing — normal maintenance. Also beware thin surface patches: a cracked joint that was never ground out, just skimmed with a skin of new mortar. It looks fine for a few months — exactly long enough to sell a house — then pops off. Look in low, raking light, early or late in the day; a skin coat often shows a raised edge. Joints that look slightly puffy compared with the rest of the wall belong on your questions list.

## Painted Brick: An Honest Look

Painted brick is common in Texas now, and it needs honest thinking. Painting brick is not automatically wrong, but it is essentially permanent, it changes how the wall handles

moisture, and it creates a repainting obligation unpainted brick does not have. Brick is meant to absorb a little water and then dry out; many paints slow that drying. Over time, trapped moisture can damage mortar joints and, in a freeze, contribute to brick faces flaking off. Breathable mineral coatings made for masonry behave differently from standard paints, but you usually cannot tell what product was used, and sellers often do not know either.

So read the condition. Look for bubbling, peeling, and flaking, especially low on the wall and behind shrubs, and for white, salty deposits pushing through the paint — a sign water is moving through the wall. Check whether mortar joints feel soft behind the paint while brick faces still look crisp; the joints may be deteriorating unseen. Be fair about the upside: if the brick underneath was badly mismatched from years of patching, paint may have been a reasonable choice, and paint with no moisture signs may serve you well — with the understanding that you will repaint on a cycle, often every seven to twelve years, and removing paint later is expensive and often impractical. Budget for that cycle the day you buy. If the seller painted right before listing, ask why — fresh paint is the oldest way to make tired joints disappear from a photograph.

## Added Rooms That Pull Away

Room additions are where Texas brick homes most often show real stress. The original house sits on a foundation settled over years. An addition sits on a newer, often shallower foundation and settles on its own schedule. Where the two meet, movement shows as a vertical crack or opening joint, often widest at the top. A small, stable, well-sealed seam can be normal. A gap you can slip a pencil into, caulk renewed and torn open again, or brick visibly leaning away is a different matter.

Sight down the wall at the junction: does the addition stay in the same plane, or drift outward as it rises? Check the roofline there too — sagging or separated flashing often travels with movement below. Inside, check the matching corner for cracked drywall, sticking doors, and floors sloping toward the addition.

Composite example: Consider a one-story ranch with a brick sunroom added across the back in the early 2000s. The seam has a stepped crack, the caulk has split three times per the seller's disclosure, and the patio door in the addition sticks every summer. Alone, each fact might be minor. Together, they describe an addition still moving seasonally with the clay soil. That does not mean walk away — it means get the right eyes on it. A mason can judge the brickwork, but whether foundation movement is active is a structural question. For

structural questions, hire a licensed structural engineer. Fifty years of hands-on field experience gives a mason a sharp eye for brick and mortar, but a mason is not a licensed engineer, and no honest tradesman pretends otherwise. Also check how the addition roof drains: additions often dump a valley's worth of water beside the original wall, and a downspout ending at the seam, with soft mortar below, means water is part of the story too.

## Patio Slabs and Sealed Weep Holes

Two quiet problems hide at the bottom of the wall. The first is a patio slab, walkway, or driveway poured directly against the brick veneer, too high — sometimes covering the bottom course, sometimes sloping back toward the house. Brick veneer is not a foundation wall. It is a cladding with a drainage space behind it, and it depends on that bottom edge draining and breathing. Bury it under concrete and you trap moisture behind the brick, give termites an unseen path to wood framing, and hide the place where you would spot early damage.

Follow the bottom of every wall. Soil or concrete should sit below the bottom of the brick, with foundation visible beneath it. If concrete meets the brick several inches up, note it. If a slab slopes toward the house — roll a marble or pour a little water and watch — note that too. A dark tide line, green algae in shade, and mortar softer in the bottom courses than at chest height are moisture signatures, and a high slab is the most likely cause. Fixes range from regrading and cutting a slab back to repouring a section at the right height and slope — far cheaper to price before closing than to find rotted framing later.

The second problem is sealed weep holes: the small open vertical gaps in the bottom course of brick, and above windows and doors, that let water behind the veneer drain out and air dry the cavity. They are not defects and should never be caulked or foamed shut — yet they often are, by well-meaning owners and rushed painters. Crouch down and check. An open weep may hold a wick or mesh, but you should see a narrow dark slot. Sealed ones show smeared caulk or mortar packed flush; on painted houses the paint itself often bridges the slot. If every weep along a wall is sealed, expect staining, musty odor near baseboards, and faster mortar decay low on the wall. Reopening them is usually straightforward, but damage from years of trapped water is the real question.

## Cover-Up Repairs Before a Sale

Finally, learn the signs of work done for the listing photograph rather than for the house: fresh caulk in every

crack, including stepped cracks caulk was never meant to bridge; bright new mortar only where it shows from the sidewalk while the sides and back show the true, worn condition; one wall freshly painted while the rest is not; recent work with no invoice and no name for who did it. None of this proves bad faith — sellers spruce up houses. But sprucing that targets cracks, joints, and water entry points — the very things you are there to evaluate — should slow you down.

Your response is calm and simple: ask for invoices, ask who did the work and when, and ask what the wall looked like before. Then bring in your own mason, and a licensed structural engineer if the cracks suggest structural movement. A good house has nothing to fear from a careful look. The next chapter shows you how to organize that look: who to hire, in what order, and what to ask.

## Chapter 11: The Professional Inspection Walk

Most Texas home purchases include a general home inspection, worth every penny — for the systems it is designed to cover. Brick veneer is where buyers most often overestimate what that inspection includes, and that gap is how people end up surprised by a large masonry bill after closing. This chapter draws the line clearly: what your inspector does and does not do on brick, when to add a mason, when to call a licensed structural engineer instead, and how to walk the property with a camera and short list of questions so nothing gets lost.

Think of it as three layers: your own walk first, so you know what to point out; the general inspector second, covering the whole house; specialist evaluations third, focused on what the first two layers turned up. Buyers who stop at layer two miss the brick story.

### What a General Inspector Does — and Does Not Do — on Brick

A licensed general home inspector in Texas works to a standard of practice set by the Texas Real Estate Commission. On the exterior, that includes looking at wall coverings, brick included, and reporting visible deficiencies: cracking, deterioration, missing mortar, conditions that allow water entry, and signs suggesting possible structural movement. A good inspector will photograph brick cracks, note location and pattern, check that weep holes appear present, look for rust or sagging at the lintels above windows, and recommend further evaluation when something exceeds their scope. That

recommendation — often written as "recommend evaluation by a qualified contractor" — is not boilerplate. On brick, it is frequently the most important sentence in the report.

Here is what the general inspector does not do. They do not determine a crack's cause with certainty; they can describe a stepped crack as consistent with foundation movement, but diagnosing foundation performance is outside the standard. They do not provide firm repair bids — any figure offered informally is a courtesy, not a price. They do not dig beside the foundation, remove brick, look inside the wall cavity, test mortar, or certify that an addition was permitted. They are also typically on site two to four hours covering roof, attic, plumbing, electrical, heating and cooling, and structure — so the brick walls may get fifteen attentive minutes, not an afternoon.

That is not a criticism; it is a job description. Make those minutes count by handing the inspector your notes on arrival: "Stepped crack over the northeast corner, caulked twice. Weep holes on the west wall are sealed. Patio slab covers the bottom course on the back wall." An inspector with that list looks harder at the right places, and their written report — which carries weight with sellers in a way your impressions do not — documents those items for negotiation.

## When to Bring a Mason, and When to Bring an Engineer

Bring a qualified brick mason when the question is about the brickwork itself: mortar condition and repointing needs; cracked or bowing brick; lintels — the steel angles carrying brick over windows and doors — and whether they are rusting or deflecting; weep holes and flashing; the quality of past repairs; and whether a wall section needs rebuilding. A mason with long field experience can tell you in practical terms what is cosmetic, what is maintenance, and what is failing. That is exactly what fifty years of hands-on field experience produces — the right tool for brick and mortar questions.

Bring a licensed structural engineer when the question is about structure and movement: foundation performance and whether movement is active; an addition separating from the house; leaning walls, sloping floors, cracks through the foundation itself, or interior cracks suggesting the frame or foundation is shifting; and any decision about piers or stabilization. Only a licensed engineer can provide structural determinations you can rely on for major work, in an evaluation lenders, insurers, and future buyers will accept. Plainly put: the author of this book is not a licensed engineer, and neither is your mason. For structural questions, hire a licensed structural engineer — money spent once to avoid

guessing on the most expensive system in the house.

Sometimes you need both, in the right order. If the engineer finds the foundation stable and movement historical, the mason can scope the brick repair on solid ground. If the mason finds a bowing wall, the engineer should weigh in before anyone rebuilds it — rebuilding on a moving foundation wastes money. When in doubt: engineer first for movement, mason second for masonry. And beware anyone who offers to be both in one visit and sell you the cure on the spot. A foundation company's free evaluation is a sales call; an independent engineer's paid evaluation is advice.

## Your Photo Checklist

Your own documentation ties the process together. Sellers respond to photographs, professionals quote faster from them, and your future self — wondering eighteen months from now whether a crack has grown — will thank you for a dated baseline. Walk in a consistent order — front, right side, back, left side — and shoot the following.

First, one wide shot of each wall, straight on. Second, every crack, twice: once from about six feet back for location and pattern, once close up with a coin or key in the frame for scale. Third, every patch of mismatched brick or mortar from Chapter 10. Fourth, the bottom course along each wall, low and close, showing weep holes, slab height, and soil height. Fifth, every lintel over windows and garage doors, especially any with rust stains or a visible sag. Sixth, downspouts and where their water lands, plus staining below roof valleys. Seventh, the seams where additions, porches, or the garage meet the main house. Eighth, inside, any matching interior cracks, sticking doors, or sloping floors. Ninth, the attic if you can do so safely, below roof valleys that stain the outside. Tenth, any dated stickers or posted permits near the panel, garage, or utility area — dates there sometimes confirm when addition work was done.

Store the photos in a folder named by address and date, back it up, and share it with every professional you hire. Consistency beats artistry — shooting the same spots the same way is what makes change visible later.

## Questions for the Seller, and Reading the Disclosure

In Texas, most sellers complete a Seller's Disclosure Notice. Read it slowly, pen in hand, through the sections on foundations, walls, drainage, flooding, additions, and known defects. Note anything marked "unknown" on a house the seller has owned for a decade — unknown is an answer too, telling you where your own diligence must do the work.

Compare the disclosure against the walls. If it says no foundation work has ever been done but you photographed pier caps along the foundation line, ask about it directly and without accusation. Memory fails people; paper and photographs sort it out.

Ask these questions in writing, through your agent. Has the foundation ever been repaired? If so, by whom, when, and is there a transferable warranty — and will you provide the paperwork? Has any brick been rebuilt, repointed, or replaced, and who did the work? Has water ever entered through the walls, and what was done about it? If the brick was painted, when, and with what product? Have any cracks been repaired more than once? Are there permits and final inspections for the addition, patio, and any structural work? Does water stand against the house after heavy rain?

Hypothetical example: A seller discloses "minor foundation settling, repaired 2018" and provides the repair invoice with a transferable warranty, plus an engineer's letter from the same year describing the movement as stabilized. That is what good paper looks like — it turns a worrying sentence into a manageable fact. Contrast that with a disclosure checking "no known defects" on a house with a freshly caulked stepped crack and a slab buried against the veneer. The contrast itself is information. You do not need to prove intent; you need to price the risk or walk away from it, and unanswered questions are risk. Get answers before your option period expires, while you still have leverage.

## Ballpark Costs: Planning Numbers, Not Promises

Buyers always ask what brick repairs cost, and they deserve a straight answer with an honest frame: the figures below are general ballparks for common brick repairs in the Dallas-Fort Worth area at the time of writing, for planning and negotiation only. They are not bids. Access, height, brick matching, mortar type, and the condition behind the wall move real prices up or down, sometimes a lot. Only a mason who has stood in front of your wall can price your wall.

Repointing — grinding out failed mortar and installing new mortar properly — commonly runs several dollars per square foot for straightforward single-story work, with small jobs often priced at a minimum service charge. Reopening sealed weep holes is usually modest work within a service visit, unless water damage is found behind the brick. Replacing a rusted lintel over a standard window, including removing and relaying the brick above it, commonly falls in the high hundreds to low thousands per opening, with wide garage lintels costing more. Rebuilding a damaged section of veneer

is typically priced by the square foot plus brick matching, often in the low-to-mid thousands for a localized section. Proper crack repair — addressing the joints themselves rather than smearing caulk on the surface — usually runs from a few hundred to a couple of thousand dollars depending on length and access. In certain sagging-lintel situations, a field-developed lintel support system may be an option; a qualified mason can explain, after seeing the wall, whether your situation fits. Foundation stabilization, when an engineer determines it is needed, is the outlier: pier work commonly runs into five figures — precisely why the engineer's evaluation comes first on any moving house.

Use the numbers the right way. Failed mortar joints and a rusted lintel mean manageable maintenance — negotiate or budget accordingly. Active movement means your next dollar goes to an engineer, not a repair crew. Either way, you are deciding with your eyes open. The next chapter assumes you bought the right house. Now let us plan your first year in it.

## Chapter 12: After Closing — Your First-Year Care Plan

Closing day feels like the finish line, and in one sense it is. You did the walks, read the scars, hired the right help, and decided with clear eyes. But brick rewards owners who keep paying a little attention, and quietly punishes the set-it-and-forget-it approach — in mortar that wears early, water that finds a path it should never have found, and small repairs that grow because they were left alone one season too long. The good news is that brick asks very little: a few hours twice a year, a habit of looking while you are already outside, and a small, steady budget will keep a sound brick home sound. This chapter lays out that first year so the habits set themselves while the house is still new to you.

### The First 90 Days: Learn Your House

Your first three months are for learning, not projects — unless your inspection identified something urgent, in which case that item goes first, on the schedule your inspector, mason, or engineer recommended. Assuming nothing urgent, use the ninety days to build your baseline.

In the first two weeks, recreate your inspection photo set: same walls, same cracks, same spots, now as the owner, with the date on every shot. Add measurements. For any crack your professionals noted, place a small dated pencil mark at the end of the crack on the mortar — not on the brick face — and photograph it. If the crack later grows past your mark, you will know, and you will have evidence instead of an argument with your own memory.

In the first month, confirm the water basics. Watch the property during or just after a good rain, from porches and windows where lightning is a concern. Where does roof water land? Do downspouts discharge well away from the foundation, and does the ground carry water away rather than ponding it against the brick? Where does water still stand a day later? Standing water is the most fixable threat to brick and foundation in Texas, because clay soils swell when soaked and shrink when dry, and that uneven cycle drives much of the movement covered in this book. List the drainage fixes in order. Extending a downspout is cheap; regrading costs more. Both are cheaper than piers.

Also in the first month, handle the small unsealing: if your inspection found caulked or painted-over weep holes and your mason agreed they should be opened, get that done now. Pull soil and mulch back so the base of the wall stays visible and dry, and adjust any sprinkler head that sprays the brick directly — daily irrigation water ages mortar faster than rain ever will.

By day ninety, assemble your records file and put your two annual walk-arounds on the calendar. That is the whole first quarter: observe, measure, manage water, write it down. Resist the urge to seal, paint, or caulk anything on the brick in these months. Most cracks you bought knowingly are monitored, not smeared — caulk hides your best movement indicator and traps moisture. Leave your evidence visible.

## Twice a Year: The Walk-Around That Protects the House

Choose two seasons and keep them. In Texas, late spring after the heavy rains and late fall before the first real freeze work well. The walk takes about an hour. Bring your phone, a notepad, a flashlight, and a key for the mortar scratch check. Walk in the same order every time — front, right, back, left, then inside — and shoot the same photo spots as your baseline set. Consistency is what turns looking into monitoring.

On each wall, work through the same short list. Mortar: scan for joints that have become recessed, cracked, or powdery, and scratch-test one or two joints per wall in discreet spots. Brick: look for new cracks, flaking faces, white salt staining, and any area that stays dark and damp long after the rest of the wall has dried — a persistent damp patch points to a water source worth finding. Lintels: glance at every window and door head for fresh rust or new sag. Weep holes: crouch at the base of each wall and confirm they are open; they clog with mulch, soil, and insect nests surprisingly often. Seams: check where additions and porches meet the house, and note

whether sealant is intact or has split again — a seam that repeatedly tears reports ongoing seasonal movement worth sharing with a professional. Grade and drainage: confirm soil still slopes away and downspout extensions survived mowing season and storms.

Then go inside for five minutes. Check the interior faces of any walls you flagged. New drywall cracks, baseboard gaps, or doors that have started or stopped sticking are data. Write it down in plain, dated sentences: "May 12 — mortar soft at hose bib on west wall, about two feet of joint. Stepped crack at northeast corner unchanged, still ends at pencil mark." Notes like that are gold when you later talk to a mason or, if movement becomes a structural question, to a licensed structural engineer you hire for that purpose. Professionals can work with a timeline; they cannot work with "it has looked bad for a while."

Composite example: An owner does her fall walk and finds mortar at the base of the south wall noticeably softer than in spring, plus a damp patch lingering two days after rain. Her spring notes show the same wall dry and firm. Comparing photos, she realizes the change began after a summer sprinkler adjustment — one head now waters the wall daily. She redirects the head, lets the wall dry, and has a mason repoint the two damaged feet of joint the following spring for a modest charge. Unnoticed through five years of daily soaking, the same wall could have needed a section rebuilt. That is the economics of the walk-around: attention is cheap, and brick gives you plenty of warning if you are there to receive it.

## Mortar Watch and Water Habits

Between the formal walks, two habits do most of the protective work, and both quickly become automatic.

The first is mortar watch — noticing mortar the way you notice anything you live with. When you are grilling, gardening, or taking out the trash, your eye will catch the wall at close range; let it. Watch for joints opening up, for sandy grit washed out at the base of a wall after storms (little piles of dust mean the joints above are losing material), and for vegetation taking hold. A tiny seedling rooted in a joint is not charming; its roots widen the joint and hold moisture. Pull it early and note the joint for your next walk. Vines are a judgment call — go in clear-eyed that they hold moisture, hide mortar from inspection, and can work into soft joints. If you keep them, keep them trimmed back from lintels and rooflines.

The second habit is water discipline, and in Texas it matters most. Keep gutters clear so they do not overflow down the

brick face. Keep downspout extensions attached and pointed away, and replace them promptly when a mower or storm knocks one loose. In dry summers, water your foundation evenly as experienced Texas owners do — light, consistent moisture around the perimeter to limit clay shrinkage — without soaking the brick or ponding water against the wall. Aim sprinklers at the lawn, not the house. And after any plumbing, fence, or landscaping work near the house, walk the affected wall with fresh eyes. More brick problems are accidentally created by other trades — a slab poured too high, a bed built against the veneer, a weep hole buried — than by weather. You learned to read those scars in Chapter 10. Your job now is to make sure your own projects do not write new ones.

## Your Records File and Your Annual Brick Fund

Every house deserves a file, and a brick house more than most, because brick work is infrequent enough that details fade between projects. Keep it simple: one folder, paper or digital, holding your closing documents and disclosure, inspection report and any engineer or mason evaluations, dated photos, invoices for every exterior repair with the contractor's name and exact materials used — especially mortar type and brick source, because matching either years later is far easier with a name on paper — and your walk-around notes. When you sell, that file is a genuine asset. The difficult seller in Chapter 10 was the one with no paper. Be the seller with paper.

Finally, fund the wall the way you fund the roof: a little at a time, on purpose. Set aside a small annual brick fund — for most single-story Texas brick homes, a few hundred dollars a year is a sensible planning figure — earmarked for masonry. In most years it will simply accumulate. Then, when repointing is due or a lintel needs replacing, the money is there and the job gets done on time instead of deferred. Deferred masonry is what turns a few hundred dollars of repointing into a few thousand dollars of rebuilding.

That is the whole plan, and it is deliberately unremarkable: learn the house in ninety days, walk it twice a year, watch the mortar, mind the water, keep the file, fund the fund. Do those six things and a well-built Texas brick home will do what brick has always done at its best — stand quiet, shed the weather, and ask almost nothing of you in return, year after year, while you get on with living in it. Welcome home.

---

## Conclusion: Buy the Wall, Not Just

## the House

A brick house rewards a buyer who reads it before signing for it. By now you know that the wall is a veneer rain screen with a drainage plan built into it, that mortar is the sacrificial layer whose condition dates the care the house has had, that cracks are a language with cosmetic, concerning, and structural dialects, and that the steel above the openings, the flashing where roofs meet brick, and the ground sloping around the foundation decide more of a home's future than any finish inside it.

None of that knowledge is meant to make you fearful. Brick remains one of the soundest choices a Texas buyer can make — durable, fire-resistant, quiet, and handsome for generations when water is managed and joints are renewed on time. The purpose of reading a house carefully is not to find a perfect house; no used house is perfect. The purpose is to buy with your eyes open: to price the repointing the wall is asking for, to budget the lintel that is quietly rusting, to negotiate the drainage fix before it becomes a foundation question, and to walk away, calmly and without regret, from the rare house whose brick is telling a story the price does not reflect.

If you take only three habits from this book, take these. First, walk the outside slowly and photograph everything, in every season you can — a wall in August and a wall after a hard rain are two different witnesses. Second, never let a deadline talk you out of the right professional: a mason for the wall, a roofer for the junctions, and a licensed structural engineer whenever movement or structure is the question. Third, after closing, keep the small promises — the twice-a-year walk-around, the clear weep holes, the soil kept below the brick, the records file — because a brick home kept that way rarely surprises its owner, and almost never all at once.

Houses talk. Brick houses talk in mortar, rust, stains, and straight or sagging lines. You now speak enough of that language to listen before you buy — and to keep listening, profitably, for as long as you own the home. Welcome to the ranks of buyers who bought the wall, not just the house.

---

## Resources & Next Steps

**Travis Nech** has spent 50 years in brick, masonry, and foundation work across Texas. He owns and operates Champion Brick Repair, Metro Foundation Repair, LintelLOCK, MortarMagic, and WhiteStone Construction.

- **Champion Brick Repair** — brick & masonry repair, Dallas-Fort Worth — [championbrickrepair.com](http://championbrickrepair.com) — (817)

900-6324

- **Metro Foundation Repair** — pressed concrete pile foundation repair — metrofoundationrepair.com — (817) 523-1540
- **LintelLOCK** — the field-developed lintel replacement system — lintlerepair.com — (469) 730-0650
- **MortarMagic** — mortar color matching & the Mortar Bucket — mortarmagic.netlify.app
- **WhiteStone Construction** — stone, ranch & property work, Hamilton TX country — (254) 723-5040

If you are looking at a brick home in the Dallas-Fort Worth area or in Hamilton County country and want a practiced eye on the wall before you offer — or honest repairs after you close — start with the team above that fits your question. For structural questions about any specific home, hire a licensed structural engineer licensed in Texas.

---

## About the Author

**Travis Nech** has spent 50 years in brick, masonry, and foundation work across Texas. He owns and operates Champion Brick Repair, Metro Foundation Repair, LintelLOCK, MortarMagic, and WhiteStone Construction.

- **Champion Brick Repair** — brick & masonry repair, Dallas-Fort Worth — championbrickrepair.com — (817) 900-6324
- **Metro Foundation Repair** — pressed concrete pile foundation repair — metrofoundationrepair.com — (817) 523-1540
- **LintelLOCK** — the field-developed lintel replacement system — lintlerepair.com — (469) 730-0650
- **MortarMagic** — mortar color matching & the Mortar Bucket — mortarmagic.netlify.app
- **WhiteStone Construction** — stone, ranch & property work, Hamilton TX country — (254) 723-5040

Travis writes from the field, not the classroom: five decades of reading Texas brick, mortar, lintels, and clay soil, and of doing the repairs this book teaches you to recognize, price, and hire well. He is not a licensed engineer, and his books will always tell you plainly when a question belongs to one.