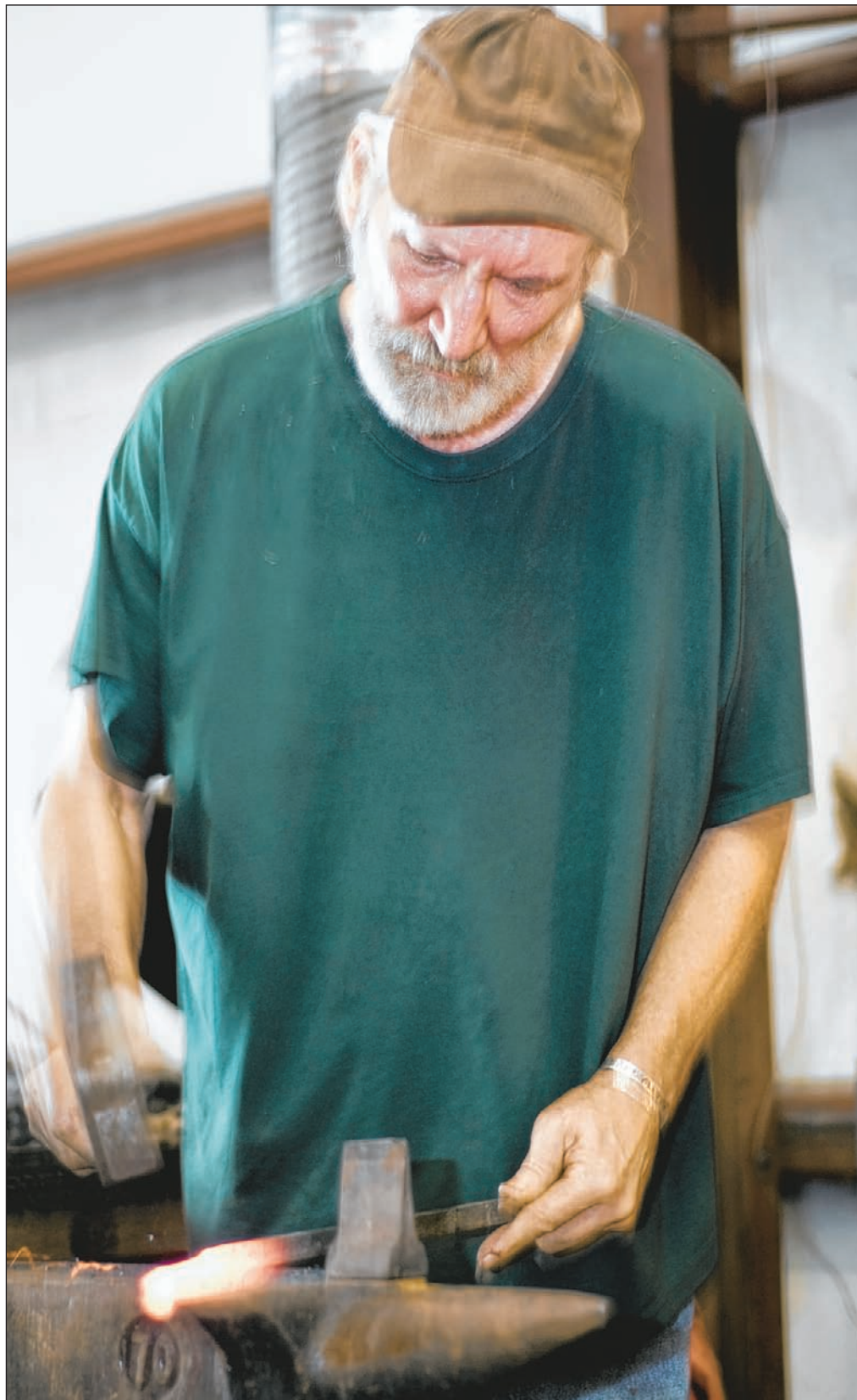


LOWCOUNTRY LIVES

Richard Giles Guthrie — Forging Ahead



Richard Guthrie is pictured in his environment, at the forge and with hammer and anvil at the ironworks school of the American College of the Building Arts.

**Born:** Miami, Florida  
**Hobbies:** Drawing and studying Southern historical buildings and the culture of Eastern woodland Indians  
**Best Lowcountry Memory:** Enjoying Charleston's historic architecture

BY PEG EASTMAN

The American College of the Building Arts (ACBA) is the only institution of higher learning of its kind in the nation. As such, it has brought many people with unique skills to the Lowcountry. One of them is Richard Guthrie, who recently relocated from tidewater Virginia to teach iron work at the college's forge on James Island. Richard's vision is to educate another generation to craft historical American hardware,

and in many ways Richard's career closely parallels the college's mission to train artisans in the building arts. As far back as he can remember, Richard has been interested in American history. His parents taught their offspring about ancestors who emigrated from Ulster, Ireland, to the Pennsylvania frontier about 1764. One of his great-grandfathers fought in the Revolution and was a rifle company commander in the 1792 in the Federal Indian Wars. Succeeding generations of Guthries have passed the weapon down, although, unfortunately for Richard, it is now the proud possession of one of his cousins. Richard's mother was a prolific reader who used to read stories of long ago

and her growing family. This helped create a love of history in her young son and daughter. His father worked at home as an industrial designer at Carnegie Tech. Watching him apply his skills gave the growing youth an appreciation of hand tools. After high school, Richard studied fine arts at Auburn and eventually left to work about twenty miles north of Indianapolis at Conner Prairie Settlement in Noblesville, Indiana. It is a living history museum village originally founded in the 1930s by pharmaceutical magnate Eli Lilly, who was at that time president of the Indiana Historical Society. Lilly restored the William Conner house, a Federal style building believed to be one of the first brick buildings built in central

Indiana. Later an 1836 village, similar to Sturbridge, Connecticut, was built on the property. It has a blacksmith shop, a pottery shop, an inn, a doctor's office, a schoolhouse and several residences. Visitors can hear about how early settlers cooked, spun and dyed thread, wove cloth and cared for their animals and crops. A nearby Lenape (Delaware Indians) camp reinforced Richard's lifelong interest in the eastern woodland Indians who trapped and traded with the white man.

Richard's job involved dismantling nineteenth-century log and frame houses and reassembling them at Conner Prairie museum. From there Richard went to Utah as a lock maker and started forging historic iron work, especially architectural hardware. Because of the abundance of old houses needing restoration, he later migrated to eastern North Carolina.

By 1980 Richard had made his way to Colonial Williamsburg as an apprentice blacksmith. He honed his skills at making eighteenth century tools and hardware and studied the archeological digs and existing colonial buildings. Williamsburg was the perfect venue for, as the capitol of colonial Virginia throughout most of the 18th century, it had many historic structures.

In time Richard left the Williamsburg forge and worked for wealthy private owners who wanted authentic 18th- and 19th-century restorations. Being on his own taught him an appreciation of what it takes to go into business without institutional or governmental backing.

Richard was ready to pass on what he had learned about the time he heard of an opening at ACBA. He applied for the position and relocated to Charleston in August, just before the start of the new fall semester. Richard welcomes the opportunity to teach subtle regional differences and the characteristics of each architectural period. As only a few pockets of craftsmen still forge historical reproductions, Richard wants his students to acquire the skills to earn a living while pursuing building traditions that were established in Europe long before the New World was settled.

With the advent of power tools and fabricated building materials, master builders have been a disappearing act at an alarming rate. After Hurricane Hugo hit Charleston in 1989 and severely damaged many historic buildings, Charlestonians were forced to import craftsmen to repair the historic structures. Concerned preservationists circulated the idea of creating an institution to address the national lack of master craftsmen. Senator and Mrs. Fritz Hollings, U.S. Representative Jim Clyburn, State Senator Herbert Fielding and Charleston Mayor Joseph Riley gave it political support. Other original founders include Dana Beach, Jane Hanahan, Carter Hudgins, Wade Lawrence, Pierre Manigault, George McDaniel, Margaret and Tim Rose, Wayne Whelan, and the late preservationists Nancy Hawk and Henry de Costa, Jr.



A student of Richard Guthrie's creates at the ACBA ironworks school.

It took years for the idea to come to fruition. A Board of Trustees was formed and money was gradually raised. After receiving a start-up grant of \$2,750,000 from the U.S. Department of Labor, the college was able to hire faculty and develop a four-year liberal arts curriculum with degrees in six building arts: stone, iron, masonry, timber framing, carpentry and plaster. In July 2004 the South Carolina Commission of Higher Education licensed the school to award the Associate Degree of Applied Science in Building Arts and the Bachelor Degree of Applied Science in Building Arts. The first students matriculated that same year, and the only college of its kind in the nation opened its doors to the future.

Lieutenant General Colby Broadwater was chief of staff of U.S. European Command in 2006. When he came home on vacation, he was invited to see the fledgling college. Having already restored two Charleston houses, he understood preservation pitfalls. He was impressed with the school's curriculum and passion of both the faculty and the students. After retiring, he agreed to join the Board of Trustees and became the college's president on April 15, 2008.

At that time the college rented classroom and shop space at the former Navy Base and owned McLeod Plantation on James Island and the Old Charleston District Jail in downtown. The jail and the plantation were vacant and not being used.

General Broadwater immediately slashed the operating budget and divested ACBA of some of

its liabilities. McLeod Plantation was resold to the Historic Charleston Foundation. The jail had been unoccupied for 61 years when the college acquired it from the local Housing Authority. It had suffered in the 1886 earthquake, and 19th-century restorations created numerous structural problems. The building needed immediate stabilization. This was a major undertaking. The Board used a \$500,000 Save America's Treasures matching grant and other contributions for renovations. Once the rehabilitation was finished, ACBA relocated most of its classes and administrative offices to 21 Magazine Street.

The college is currently completing the accreditation process and looks forward to having its pre-accreditation approved. Students continue to produce exceptional work on projects such as the recreation of an 18th-century ceiling from a drawing at Drayton Hall, forged iron work for the Old Charleston District Jail and a masonry building on Marion Square. The first class of students graduated in May of 2009; the second class graduated this year.

Both the school and Richard Guthrie look forward to watching the fledgling institution grow into its full potential.

For more information about this unique liberal arts college, please contact info@buildingartscollege.us.

*Peg Eastman recently published "Hidden History of Old Charleston" with Edward F. Good and has written several other books about the Charleston scene.*

MORE OUT & ABOUT



Jane Britt joins Becky and Cash Smith on Saturday October 9 at GDC as they wait to have their copy of NYC designer Rachel Ashwell's coffee table book, *Shabby Chic*, signed.

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