

125th ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL

The Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors Association Celebrates 125 Years

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PHCC STANDS FOR Professionalism

When PHCC got its start 125 years ago, plumbing had just begun to evolve into a trade unto itself. During the 1880s, the transition from outhouses to indoor plumbing was moving at a rapid pace, starting with better homes and commercial buildings. The burgeoning market for indoor plumbing spurred some gasfitters and other metal workers to specialize in this work. The men who installed gaslights to illuminate the urban night might land a job the next day installing a plumbing system.

Nineteenth-century plumbing was laborious work. Plumbers had to fabricate much of their own pipe and fittings. The ready-made materials that were available had no common specifications or standards. One manufacturer's product typically would not connect with another's. Plumbers had to be ingenious mechanics to figure out ways to put a workable system together from disparate materials.

The Essence Of The Plumber's Craft

Plumbing is not just a matter of conveying water in and out of a building. Most mechanically adept handymen can figure out how to do that. The tricky part is providing a system that will do so without sewage



Convention of the National Association of Master Plumbers at Detroit, June 22-24, 1909.

mingling with the drinking water and noxious odors permeating the building. This is the essence of the plumber's craft. It takes considerable training and practice to earn the designation of a "professional plumber."

By the 1880s, it was common knowledge that there was a relationship between filth and disease, which led to better sanitation practices. Major urban centers such as New York, Boston and Philadelphia enacted codes to govern the sanitary arrangements of buildings and began to register plumbers. However, those early regulations were poorly devised. Virtually anyone could pass himself off as a plumber. Moreover, the vast majority of American communities still had no plumbing regulations at all.

As a result, many inferior plumbing systems were installed during the late 19th century by middling mechanics that knew just enough to be dangerous. Then, as now, the public generally did not distinguish between knowledgeable plumbers and

those masquerading as such. The plumbing trade in general was blamed for the sewage backups and stinky buildings that were all too prevalent.

The true craftsmen sought ways to distinguish those who knew what they were doing from those who didn't. In 1882, a group of them in New York City banded together to form the Master Plumbers Association of New York. Shortly afterward, a like-minded group joined forces in Brooklyn. They would spearhead the formation the following year of the National Association of Master Plumbers (NAMP), the forerunner of what's now the Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors—National Association (PHCC).

The Leap Toward Trade Professionalism

The forefathers of this organization rallied around the issue of "trade protection." They sought to restrict the sale of plumbing products by manufacturers and dealers to certified tradesmen. From today's perspective, that may seem like nothing more than economic protectionism. Back then, antitrust laws were just being formulated to combat the common practice in various industries of companies banding together for trade protection.



Illustration courtesy of American Standard.

Along with their interests in trade protection, NAMP's founders were motivated to promote sanitation that was very much in the public's interest. NAMP stood for trade education. From its earliest days, and ever since, this organization has worked to foster honest and sound business practices, along with plumbing codes and product standards that protect the health of the general public.

Familiar plumbing products such as water closets, bathtubs and faucets are nothing but useless hunks of material unless connected to a properly configured piping and drainage system. Proper configurations are the skill of the plumbing trade, and are crucial to the protection of the public's health, safety and sanitation. It's what separates the professional plumber from the tinkerers and jacks-of-all-trades ("jacklegs" in traditional industry jargon).

Here's how it was stated by one of the early pioneers of the industry in an essay delivered at the 1884 NAMP convention:

"No plumber can keep abreast of his trade if he educates his hand alone. The skilled hand is a good thing in its place, but without the educated eye, it will not permit the plumber to keep pace with the age. A knowledge of joint-wiping and trap and pipe-fixing is good so far as it goes, but it is not of much avail apart from a knowledge of sanitation in plumbing. The principles of hygiene, the subject of hydraulics, and so forth are of the first importance if you would be a sanitary plumber."

From the earliest days of this proud trade association, a distinction could be made between plumbing professionals and those who did hack work. The professionals not only knew how to connect plumbing components, they understood the why behind the how. They knew that drainage pipes need to be pitched, venting placed at proper intervals, and trap seals are required to keep sewer gases out of dwelling spaces.

Most importantly — they cared about such things. This is why PHCC's forerunners took the lead, starting in the late 19th century, to pioneer codes, examinations, licensing and inspection laws throughout the land. The national association always stood ready to lend assistance, but the real impetus for these laws could only come from the grassroots level where different jurisdictions applied. Locally and nationally, what united these efforts was the common purpose of promoting public health and trade professionalism.

Professionalism Is Labor And Management Working Together

The distinction between labor and management always has been blurred in the plumbing field. That's because the vast majority of plumbing firm owners come from the ranks of trade workers who go into business for themselves. Small shop owners often continue working with the tools alongside hired help. As a result, master plumbers (owners) and plumbers (employees) have never been prone to the class warfare that has plagued so many other industries.



In the office of one of the oldest continuous members of the PHCC: Kansas City Plumbing & Heating, Kansas City, Mo. The Calendar reads "October 1914." Owner Ervin F Spaeth is seated second from left. The company now operates as Spaeth Inc. in Oklahoma City, Okla.

Labor began to get organized in the plumbing industry during the 1890s with the formation of what's now the United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry of the United States and Canada - typically referred to as the United Association or UA for short. Throughout the last 125 years, many PHCC members have been signatory to labor agreements with the UA.

Labor relations between PHCC and UA affiliates have been generally superb. Normal differences of opinion get hammered out as part of the collective bargaining process. Conflict has been more the exception than the rule.

The two organizations have worked hand-in-hand through the years via Joint Apprenticeship Committees to develop the best trade training and craftsmanship in the world. The UA and PHCC also have banded together to promote strong code, licensing and inspection standards that help protect the health of the public.

Professionalism Is Just As Relevant Today

The plumbing trade has come a long way in the last century and a quarter. Manufacturing standards, along with plumbing codes and licensing, have made American plumbing systems some of the most advanced in the world.

At the same time, there are many who believe that in some ways the industry has regressed in recent decades. Unprecedented growth in building construction has coincided with a shortage of skilled plumbers. In the rush to accommodate business interests, regulations have been weakened or winked at. A growing tendency is to use apprentices or semi-skilled workers to do many of the tasks that used to be performed by fully trained journeymen plumbers.

Concurrently, a do-it-yourself (DIY) craze has arisen among homeowners, for economic reasons or simply self-satisfaction. This trend has given birth to some of the world's largest retail stores that specialize in selling construction materials to non-trade customers.

This has not been good for the plumbing craft and its allied businesses in the trade channel of distribution. One also could argue that it has not been good for society as a whole. Evidence of shoddy plumbing abounds.

These trends make professionalism in the plumbing trade as important today as it was in the 1800s. As with its NAMP forerunner a century and a quarter ago, PHCC stands at the forefront of efforts to maintain and strengthen professionalism in plumbing and allied trades.

Professionalism Translates To Heating & Cooling Expertise

Early plumbers adapted naturally to the allied craft of providing central heat to buildings using steam and hot water — known collectively as “hydronics.” Both plumbing and hydronic heating involved tapping a water source and conveying it through an intricate system of closed piping. Many early master plumbers found heating a natural business extension of their tradecraft.

With the rise of warm air heating and air-conditioning (HVAC) in the post World War II era, many PHCC members expanded their expertise into this area as well. Although considerably different technologically, HVAC bears many similarities to plumbing from a business standpoint. In particular, they serve a common customer base.

With several intermediate name changes over the last 125 years, NAMP morphed into today’s PHCC. While the name has changed, the foundation of professionalism remains.

Professionalism In Education

What separates the professional plumbing contractor from the “fly-by-night” operators who are in it only for the money?

Usually it boils down to education. Most contractors come from the ranks of trade workers who decide to go into business for themselves. These former plumbers and HVAC mechanics tend to be top-notch performers with the tools of the trade. Unfortunately, few have had any formal training about how to run a business.

The transition from trade worker to contractor can be a daunting one. Most don’t have time to acquire a degree in business administration. PHCC steps in to offer them the tools they need to succeed in the highly competitive plumbing field. PHCC offers business education that spans:

- Accounting & bookkeeping
- Marketing & salesmanship
- Project management
- Service dispatching
- Computerization
- Recruiting & hiring
- Virtually everything else needed to run a plumbing business

From the earliest days of the association to the present, no programs have received higher priority from PHCC than education. This organization always has been a leader in both trade apprenticeship training and business management education for its members.

PHCC’s educational thrust took a giant leap forward with the formation of the PHCC Educational Foundation in 1986. Prior to that, education programs had to contend for funds with various other activities. With association revenues somewhat tied to the ups and downs of the construction economy, this method made it hard to sustain education on an even keel over time.

The Foundation is responsible for both apprenticeship and management education. A sizable endowment now assures that education is a staple of PHCC offerings year after year.

Codes & Licensing Help Define Professionalism

The integrity of plumbing systems relies on the experience and know-how of professional plumbers. Their know-how has been incorporated into the National Standard Plumbing Code administered by PHCC. It is one of three model plumbing

codes used by local communities throughout the United States as a basis for codes suitable to their local environment.

Scores of code committees exist in jurisdictions around the country. Examine them closely, and you'll almost always find PHCC members serving on the committees, or at least giving input at hearings.

Code committees usually are comprised of representatives from various sectors of the plumbing industry. PHCC always has believed the professional plumbing contractor to be first among equals as a driver of codes that promote the health and safety of the American public. That's because PHCC professional plumbers, more than anyone else, combine knowledge of plumbing theory with practical experience. Moreover, they do so without special interests to protect.

Codes are only as good as their implementation and enforcement. Licensing standards assure a minimal level of technical skill and code knowledge by persons who purport to call themselves plumbers.

Thanks to tireless efforts by PHCC members past and present, only a handful of states in the United States lack professional licensing for plumbing contractors. PHCC professionals are in the forefront of efforts throughout the nation to assure that the term "master plumber" has meaning.

Professionalism Means Sturdy Products & Installations

Our modern era abounds with the need to cut costs in every business and on every construction project. Plumbing-heating-cooling products have proliferated to accommodate every budget.

Too often, the "good-better-best" options offered to the public have deteriorated into a fourth category of cheaply made goods developed solely on the basis of price. PHCC members take pride in their ability to sell and recommend only those products they would not hesitate to install in their own homes or workplaces.



Taylor Plumbing's 1951 Ford truck, Arlington Heights, Ill.

PHCC has entered into formal alliances with a number of "Partners for Professionalism" that assure access to quality products that PHCC contractors can install with confidence. These products are available exclusively in professional distribution outlets. Frequently, they entail enhanced features, warranties and benefits.

The experience and education of PHCC members convey stature to everything they use on the job. Numerous surveys have shown that American consumers trust trade professionals to recommend the best plumbing, heating and cooling products. PHCC members are experts in determining which products work best and which will stand the test of time.

PHCC professionals work hand-in-hand with manufacturers, suppliers, engineers and everyone else in the supply chain to advance product technology.

Professionalism Means Fair Treatment Of Employees & Customers

Trade professionals are skilled workers who deserve to be compensated accordingly. PHCC does not determine wage scales and benefits paid by its members. Nonetheless, by enhancing their business professionalism, PHCC gives its members a leg up in competing in the marketplace with something to offer other than the lowest price in town.

Companies able to charge fair prices for their work have an opportunity to pay fair

wages and benefits to their employees. This is another aspect of professionalism growing out of PHCC membership.

Customers, too, benefit from the value offered by PHCC professionals. The cheapest price offered for installation or service work seldom is the best value. Installations that fail shortly after the work is done or deliver inferior performance entail enormous costs and inconvenience for customers.

PHCC professionals deliver valuable products and services at a fair price, and they stand behind their work. Consumer confidence comes with patronizing firms with the PHCC logo.

Professionalism Means Industry Leadership

PHCC is one of a handful of organizations with full partnership status in the most important exposition of PHC products aimed at trade clientele. ISH North America is held every other year at a major city somewhere in the United States and Canada. Exhibitors flock from all over the world to display the newest wares in PHC products, tools, equipment and business management systems.

PHCC staff and membership can be found in positions of leadership throughout the industry. They participate in:

- Code and licensing boards
- Product development committees
- Supplier and vendor advisory boards
- Convention and trade show committees
- Chambers of Commerce
- Better Business Bureaus

PHCC Professionalism Means ...

- Better trade workers
- Better business practices
- Better job safety
- Better products and installations
- Better wages and benefits for employees
- Better treatment of customers
- Better visibility and perception for the entire industry

No organization can last for 125 years without delivering on its promises. PHCC intends to commit itself to the same goals and standards for the next 125 years and beyond.