

Chapter One

UNDERSTANDING SLATE ROOFS

“Beneath the moss covering the roof of the rugged Saxon Chapel, erected during the eighth century, at Bradford-on-Avon in Wiltshire, England, is a slate shingle roof in good condition after twelve centuries of exposure to the elements in one of the most severe climates in the world, a monument to the enduring qualities of slate.” H.O. Eisenberg

Slate roofs are the world’s finest roofs. They’re fireproof, waterproof, natural, will last centuries, and have a track record that goes back thousands of years and spans the entire Earth. They are beautiful, simple roofs made of rock on wood — ingenious, effective, and fabulously successful. Yet, in the United States, they have been under intense and relentless attack for decades, destroyed by the thousands, cast away and forgotten. The culprit, in a word, is ignorance. The following conversation illustrates this point:

The telephone rang. “Hello,” a lady said, “Are you the guy who buys used roof slate?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I have enough for a whole roof, and you can have them all if you want them.”

“Where are they?”

“They’re on my house!”

“They’re still on your roof?”

“Yes! And you can have them for nothing if you’ll take them off.”

I paused for a moment, then asked, “Why do you want your slate roof taken off?”

“Because it leaks. We’ve already bought fiberglass shingles to replace the roof; they’re sitting in the driveway. We just need somebody to take the old roof off.”

“Well, ma’am, the reason I buy roof slate is because I repair and restore slate roofs professionally. Maybe I should have a look at your roof before you take it off.”

There was a pause at the other end of the line. I could almost hear the thoughts racing through the lady’s head: What? I can *repair* my slate roof?

“But we already bought the shingles.”

“You can return them and get your money back *if* you don’t need them, which you may not. What kind of slates do you have on your roof?”

“What kind? I didn’t know there were different kinds.”

“Slates *generally* fall into two categories—

hard and soft. If you have hard slates, they should last the life of your house and you won’t need to replace them. If you have soft slates, then you may not have a choice — you may have to replace the roof. I can tell at a glance what kind of slate you have and whether the roof needs replaced or not.”

The next day I stopped to look at the roof. The slates were hard Vermont “sea green” slates with a general life expectancy of 150 or more years. The house was about eighty years old. There was one slate missing from the roof — *one slate!* — and the roof had a small leak at the spot where the slate had broken off. Otherwise, the roof was beautiful. So I offered to repair the roof for a small fee, explaining that the roof should never have to be replaced in her lifetime. The lady accepted, I did the hour-long repair job, she saved both her roof and several thousand dollars, and I haven’t seen her since. This is a true and typical story.

I can go on and on with these kinds of stories. One young lady who had a beautiful old Victorian house with a hard, Vermont slate roof in very good condition told me she was also considering having the slates taken off the roof. “Why?” I asked. “Well, I thought you were just *supposed* to replace slate roofs when they got old,” she replied. We were standing in her front yard when she said that. The summer sun was glistening off her stone roof. Her impeccable white house stood like a majestic tribute to a time gone by when things were built with quality in mind — built to last. The roof had been cared for by her father, a spry 85-year-old man who recognized something of value when he saw it. Now the daughter owned the house and her first thought was to rip off the slate roof, which didn’t even leak. I stared at the house, at the perfectly good, hard slate roof, wondering how many thousands of dollars it would cost her to remove her stone roof and put on a cheap, artificial roof. I tried to imagine how temporary asphalt shingles would look on that proud home.

“No, you don’t have to replace slate roofs