

Marchant has withstood the test of time

How old is the E. H. Marchant Company? Its president, Michael Petrilli, likes to relate a story about the quaint mode of transportation that its plumbers used to get to jobs back in the days when founder Edward Marchant was still running the business. The men would gather each morning at the shop on 32 LaGrange Street in downtown Boston with their tool bags in hand and hop aboard a horse-driven buggy that would deliver them to work sites. This was back in the 1930s—and the E. H. Marchant Company had already been in business for over three decades at that time.

Established in 1903, it recently celebrated its 100th anniversary, a rare and admirable feat. The shop is one of Boston's oldest operating plumbing contractors and one of the area's oldest businesses of any type. Much has stayed the same over the long course of E. H. Marchant's history. It has been a union shop from day one, for example. It is also still highly regarded for its service work. But, like most successful businesses, much has changed as well. Under Petrilli's guidance, particularly over the past five years, the shop has expanded significantly and now focuses primarily on new construction, remodeling, and other contract work.

The Marchant family tree

Edward Marchant had a long run with his company, owning and operating it until 1954. At that time, Peter Donahue took over the reins. Lawrence Petrilli Jr., Michael's dad, graduated from Quincy Trade School at the top of his class in 1955. Right out of high school he went to work for Donahue at E. H. Marchant. Larry Jr. also served in the Navy Seabees Reserves from 1954 to 1967 and held

their "Can Do" motto as a foundation for how he approached his work and responsibilities. A second-generation plumber, his father Lawrence Petrilli Sr., worked at the Quincy Shipyard. His brother Richard and uncle Tony were also Local No. 12 plumbers.

According to Michael, his dad was very knowledgeable and resourceful. "He was a hands-on kind of guy," Michael says. "The ultimate jobbing and service plumber. He was expert at solving customers' problems and was always generous with his attention and time." In the late 1950s, Lawrence Jr. represented the state at the national UA apprentice competitions held at Purdue University. He was well liked and respected in the industry and went on to serve as president of both the PHCC of Greater Boston and the Massachusetts PHCC organizations.

In 1968, Lawrence Jr. purchased the E. H. Marchant Company after the unexpected death of Peter Donahue. In 1988, after graduating 2nd in his engineering class at Mass. Maritime Academy and a brief stint at Exxon Shipping Company as a marine engineer, Michael joined his father at Marchant. He enrolled in the apprenticeship program at Local No. 12 and came up through the union. When Lawrence Jr. retired in 1999, Michael took over as president. He has since taught various classes for the Apprenticeship Program including the Rigging class and the Plumbing Foreman class. Lawrence Jr. passed away in 2000.

Local No. 12 is essential

Michael has continued to pursue work in specialty areas for which E. H. Marchant has long been well known, including hospitals, restaurants, and retail stores. Whereas the shop used to focus on service and repair in these niche areas, however, it now also does fit-outs, build-

outs, and other contract projects, including a number of Starbuck's Coffee locations, Lahey Clinic in Burlington, Faulkner Hospital in Jamaica Plain, Chateau Restaurant in Andover, and The Radisson Hotel in

Boston. "We take pride in our reputation as a company of high-quality mechanics that can quickly and efficiently solve problems. But there's a lot of other work out there," Michael says. "We used to go in after the big guys built the buildings, and we'd be there for the next twenty years keeping the place running. Now we can build it and maintain it from the start."

In order to handle the increased volume of work, E. H. Marchant has tripled the number of plumbers on the job over the last six years. Michael says that Local No. 12 has been a key part of the shop's growth. "We've been able to bring on highly-trained and -skilled plumbers," he says. "We can get the job done quickly and correctly—and that allows us to be competitive." He adds that Marchant has been able to offer a new range of specialized services to his customers, such as medical gas piping, because of the availability of union-trained workers.

Michael still holds his union card and, like his father, straddles the line between management and labor. Having gone through the apprenticeship program, he notes that he's got a good handle on the people he'd like to have working for him. As trustee of the Educational Fund and by keeping active on Local No. 12's Apprenticeship and Journeyman Training Committees, Michael is able to maintain



E. H. Marchant President Michael Petrilli (L) with his father, Lawrence Petrilli Sr.

a direct connection with the plumbers coming on board.

Michael is quick to credit his operations team and says that there are some key contributors who have helped the company grow and maintain its high caliber of work, including (among others) his Outside Super, John Fitzgerald, Foremen Bill Tripp, Peter Harrington, and Joe Floyd, and Chief Estimator Michael Dionne.

With approximately 70% of Marchant's work coming from repeat clients, Michael hopes to expand the business by continuing to capitalize on the shop's great reputation and positive word-of-mouth. "We want to be the preferred contractor," he says, "not necessarily the low-price contractor."

In the news

A special industry dinner last November honored Gordon MacEwan, the New England Regional Manager for the International Association of Plumbing and Mechanical Officials (IAPMO), for his work in supporting the industry.

Also honored was Joe Risi, now retired, of Quincy. A former Executive Secretary of the State Plumbing Board in the 1960s, Risi was instrumental in creating the state's plumbing code.