The Challenge of Finding Craftsmen Equal to the Challenge of my Sagging Hardwood Floor

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Editor's Note:
Read below for the first in our occasional series about real cases. of Garden District residents finding solutions to real challenges in maintaining our beautiful homes. You are receiving this email because you are a member of the Garden District Preservation Association. Please let us know if information like this is useful to you.

When we first saw our Garden District home, we were enamored of the hundred-year-old hardwood floors. These were hardwood floors built the old way, from the bottom up, and fitted together tongue and groove, one board at a time.

So it was particularly disconcerting several years later when we discovered that a center portion of our living room floor would sag under our weight as we walked over it. We tried to ignore the problem, but it was far too central a location. In time, we could ignore it no longer.

I first turned to my Go-To Carpenter. He entered the crawl space under the living room and came back with a diagnosis of a rotting subfloor. There was no apparent damage to the hardwood itself, but the subfloor needed to be reinforced or replaced. He proposed to reinforce the subfloor from below, tearing out rotting portions of the subfloor and doing as best he could to fill in the empty spots.

He tried this on several occasions, but it simply did not work. There was no good way to hold the replacement pieces in place, so there was little change to the sag in the floor above.

Admitting defeat, we called several hardware flooring specialists for their advice. Without even so much as looking into the crawl space, they concluded that I would need to tear out the existing hardwood floor and rebuild it in its entirety. They recommended tearing out the hardwood floor from above, replace the subflooring and then install a brand-new hardwood floor on top of the new subflooring.

Asked if they could replace just a portion of the hardwood floor, the response from these “specialists” was uniformly disappointing – they insisted that they could make no promises to be able to pull out only a small portion of the floor and then replace just that portion at the end of the project. They suggested that

we would not be pleased with the result, which would show the obvious difference between new and old floors.

Literally, years passed and we walked around the sag in our living room floor. Fortunately, I continued to talk about our problem with other GD homeowners, and one recommended that we speak with their contractor, who not only had a good structural understanding of how homes were built, but also had on his team the very specialized craftsman skills needed for work on old homes like ours.

On that referral, I was now talking to a new potential contractor (talking face-to-face with contractors is sometimes an accomplishment all its own!) and invited him to offer his diagnosis and proposed solution. Wiggling through the crawl space and taking pictures as he went, he came back with the most comprehensive proposal that I had heard so far:

· Rot of the subflooring is the direct cause of the floor sag, but…..
· Some adjoining floor joists showed signs of deterioration as well, and should be replaced at the same time.
· In order to replace the damaged subflooring, it would be necessary to pull up the hardwood floor from above.
· In pulling the hardwood floor apart from above, care would be taken to be able to reuse as many boards as possible, but the first ones pulled out would likely be beyond repair. The contractor would make an effort to replace these with wood and stain that matched the original hardwood, but no promises were made.

The project was much bigger and more complex than anyone else had suggested, though admittedly others did not demonstrate similar confidence in the expected outcome. The proposed price seemed acceptable, but I still acutely felt the risks of placing our home in this contractor's hands. After several more reference checks and the assessment that I did not know where I would get an alternative proposal, we formalized a work order and schedule.

In comparison with the years of anxiety living with a "known unknown" – my sagging living room floor with no resolution in sight – the work itself went so smoothly it was almost an emotional letdown. The work area in the living room was isolated and became unbearably dusty for several days, but the work proceeded apace. Portions of the hardwood floor were torn out from above. A support structure was constructed below. The exposed subflooring was replaced. Long new floor joists were hoisted through side vents into the crawl

space to provide additional support to the subflooring, and joist support columns were added for good measure.

I got an unexpected bonus when the contractor came to show me several lengths of old hardwood floor lumber that had been salvaged from another project around town. It would be used to replace several irreparably damaged lengths of hardwood flooring. Since it was the same wood and of the same age as the original hardwood floor, once stained to match the color of our living room floor, the floor would once again be “good as old.”

The Work Process:

Here are some photos and a movie that show the work as it progressed.

Look at all the rotten subflooring here.

The subflooring in this rectangle was replaced.

A support structure was built below to support the subflooring.

The last Pre-Completion Photo:

This photo shows the end result prior to staining the two pieces of hardwood (on the right) that had to be replaced with new ones. All pieces between the two were original pieces that were put back in place at the end of the process. Once complete, you had to look carefully to see the difference.

Lessons Learned!

Our Garden District homes are beautiful and many demonstrate a quality of original craftsmanship and material that would be difficult to find in a new home today. But like all good things, even well-built structures will deteriorate over time.

When we take ownership of our GD homes, we will preserve their value and their charm (and the value of our neighborhood overall) by committing ourselves to smart care and maintenance on a timely basis. We need to learn things that many of us did not know when we first came upon this opportunity of stewardship.

As with this “Case of the Sagging Floor,” I wish I had done a better job anticipating and preparing for the responsibilities of GD Home Stewardship. In this case, I can point to the following Lessons Learned:

- The best source of information on good contractors is undoubtedly your neighbors, who have probably encountered a similar challenge in the past. I wish I had done a better job turning to my neighbors for their advice on good contractors.

- Learn more about how your house has been built! I had never previously thought much about how a hardwood floor was built and supported. In the end, my confidence in the contractor was enhanced by his ability to explain to me the problem in terms that I could understand.
- At first, we tried some easy short-term repairs to the problem. When these did not work, I kept asking questions but was not able to get a good answer. I wish I had known more people to turn to who may have encountered similar challenges in the past.

In an odd way, my appreciation for how well my home was built originally has been enhanced by the challenge of keeping it maintained. There is indeed some intrinsic value in the process of stewarding historic homes like ours.