Louisiana’s Bolton Brothers Believe in Thincoat Plastering
—and Diversification—And Their Company Stays Flexible and Profitable

The Brockon plastering business is alive and well in Baton Rouge, La.

That’s where a pair of transplanted Philadelphia brothers, James G. and John S. Bolton, operate their diversified wall and ceiling firm, The Bolton Company, with a unique mixture of Irish charm and mean-minded management.

Headquartered in a three-acre site in the middle of Baton Rouge, the Bolton brothers run their $6,000,000-a-year business from an attractive one-story exposed aggregate stucco building which also features regular stucco and metal panels.

Behind the 8,000 square foot headquarters building is another 10,000 square feet of enclosed and semi-enclosed warehousing served by a private railroad spur line.

It’s a long way from Philadelphia and a long time since 1899 when their grandfather launched the company, John Bolton & Sons, with his three sons, James, John and Sloan at 15th and Chestnut streets.

When the Great Depression overwhelmed the business, two of the sons went to Miami, then later to Baton Rouge where they re-activated the company. The third brother, James, remained in Philadelphia. At the third start-up—after a hiatus during World War II—James moved to Baton Rouge with his son, John, and went to work in the plastering trade. That was 1945.

As for James’ two young sons, John and James, the youngest, John, who moved with his father to Baton Rouge, went into an electrical apprentice program. James, who served as a Sergeant in the U.S. Army armoured

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and paratrooper divisions, followed a year later when he enrolled at Louisiana State University as a mechanical engineering student.

By the end of his senior year, Jim was a junior partner. Brother John, who three years earlier had made the mistake of riding past his father on a motorcycle and yelling, “Yey, Pop, you gotta job for me?” was just finishing up his plastering apprenticeship (he’d done three years as an apprentice electrician—and still holds an OP journeyman’s card.)

Today, Jim runs the inside administration and John is the outside construction and coordinating specialist. Augmenting their own talents, they have first rate personnel in J. Gordon Knipe, the company’s general manager, and Tony Roppolo, the general supervisor.

In the more than two decades they’ve been in control, both men have been active in industry affairs. An AWCI member since 1957, The Bolton Company had also been members of GDCI and CISCA.

John—one of the first in the nation to promote diversification for plastering contractors—has served on AWCI’s Board of Directors, as Southeast Regional chairman, chairman of the Manufacturers Liaison Committee, and last year was chairman of AWCI’s prestigious Continuing Study Council and a member of the AWCI’s executive committee.

True to their own beliefs, the Bolton brothers approach construction with a package concept. Their principle thrust is veneer plaster, but in the Bolton inventory, you’ll find drywall, acoustical tile, fire proofing, structural and light gage steel, and roof decks.

DIMENSIONS: Today, the wall and ceiling industry is comprised of multi-service firms . . . diversified companies. How does it feel to see your own concepts realized? You actually led the fight, didn’t you, John:

JOHN: Well, Jim and I were both staunch supporters of diversification from the beginning. It was, in our opinion, the only way to go, the only way to survive.

I was on the first committee with John McKeown, Joe Davies . . . you know, when they turned us down flat the first time at the Westward Ho Hotel in Phoenix. That was way back in 1964.

JIM: Much of the early antagonism was based on a false premise. The old-line plastering firms felt that if we took on drywall—and that’s what diversification was all about back then—then the industry would plunge fulltime into drywall and plastering would die.

JOHN: That was nonsense, of course.

JIM: Certainly it was—and is. If you can go after a job and offer both plastering and drywall you’re in a stronger position. You had to do it to survive in a growing competitive market. Customers want and need this additional versatility.

We went straight into drywall—and we were among the first—as soon as USG developed the first screw-on steel stud.

DIMENSIONS: You say this about diversification, yet the Bolton Company is among the nation’s leaders in application of veneer plastering.

JOHN: That’s because one, we believe in thincoat, and two, because the Baton Rouge area is an excellent market for it.

DIMENSIONS: But a veneer market didn’t just develop by itself did it? JIM: Of course not. We helped it along. But remember that this area was always a concrete block market. When we set out to demonstrate the value of veneer plaster, we were opposing the block interests—not drywall.

JOHN: It was a matter of competitive durability, the ability to take the hits and knocks of what schools and hospitals were subjected to. We wanted to prove we could put up board and get a hard plaster coat on it cheaper than the other technique—and still come up with a job that would last for an equally long time.

DIMENSIONS: How did you reach the design community—and the buyers—with this attitude?

JIM: We put on—about 12 to 15 years ago—a big demonstration in a hotel right here in Baton Rouge.

We got USG to come in and help us out . . . and we invited, I recall, some 60 architects and designers for lunch. In one and one-half hours, we gave them all a drink, lunch, built a completely finished wall, painted it, and bid them goodbye.

JOHN: It’s been a veneer town ever since.

JIM: That’s true. While they were eating we put on a running commentary—and built a wall. We started with steel studs, screwed on Imperial board, and then had our best plasterer apply the coat and come back over it almost immediately.
We told them you can paint such a wall within 24 hours . . . and then we painted it right there. That original wall is out back; the painted finish still looks good.

**JOHN:** It would be an understatement to say that we made believers out of them.

**DIMENSIONS:** Why, then, aren’t other contractors doing this? Veneer plaster is not exactly shaking up the world of construction?

**JOHN:** Attitude . . . determination . . .

**JIM:** It goes right back to diversification. If you handle more than just one service, you can offer more—and there’s the opportunity. You’re in a stronger position to protect yourself in both drywall and plastering. Each protects the other.

**DIMENSIONS:** How about the exterior insulating market? That seems to be developing rapidly. Is this fertile ground for diversification?

**JIM:** Yes and no. So far as I’m concerned, the jury is still out—at least so far as valid testing—in these new systems.

**DIMENSIONS:** Why so? They seem to have caught the public fancy?

**JIM:** They have. I agree. Energy conservation has been a great boom to this market.

But John and I aren’t too enthusiastic about using a system that we are not all certain about. After all, the installation still comes back to the contractor. He’s the one who’s ultimately responsible.

We have our own system and, frankly, we think it’s equal or better. You take steel stud, gypsum sheathing, galvanized lath with one-inch of stucco or Marblecrete for the outside, with fiberglass batt insulation which goes into the cavity area with gypsum board on the interior. Then you have our system, a system you can trust.

**JOHN:** We’ve had some pretty interesting failures in this industry . . . all, from a lack of testing. We haven’t put up any failures.

**DIMENSIONS:** There is no evidence of current systems failing, is there? And what about cost comparisons? Your comments sound vaguely familiar to things I’ve heard said about drywall?

**JIM:** Not at all. Our heads aren’t in the sand. It’s just that we are reluctant to promote it in the stage it’s in.
We look to the future—and to some valid testing.

The system of ours that I just described has stood up in 150 m.p.h. hurricanes. That’s some test.

As for costs, we’re competitive—and we claim better values.

**DIMENSIONS:** What if a particular system went out for bids?

**JIM:** We’re not going to refuse to bid. I never suggested these systems were no good . . . I’d just like to see some good test results. That’s one of the reasons I’m glad to see this new association of exterior insulating manufacturers form. The testing that will be done will be good for this end of the industry—and that’s to everyone’s benefit.

**DIMENSIONS:** Let’s turn to everyone’s favorite topic: inflation. How do you handle it—and your bidding?

**JIM:** We do what everyone else does; we guess at the percentage hike. If you don’t have an add-on factor in your bid these days you won’t be around tomorrow.

**JOHN:** More than ever before, you have to walk your jobs . . . to find out where you’re at.

Either Tony, Gordon or I visit every job we do every day—without fail. We get the weekly summaries and we have meetings on Thursdays . . . but the key to job control is controlling the job. You visit it, spend time there, keep informed.

**DIMENSIONS:** Where will this industry be going in the next 15 years? Your opinion two decades ago were accurate?

**JIM:** I don’t see any big changes coming up. Well, maybe in one area—pre-fabrication. We’re already getting deeper into that.

**JOHN:** There’ll always be changes. But it really doesn’t look like anything major is in the offering.

Anyway, it’ll be like always. You pick ‘em up and you lay ‘em down.