

## PROFESSIONAL ALLIANCE SPOTLIGHT

# Francis J. Atkinson & Sons Steeplejack

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2026 Murray Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19115-3907  
Office: (215) 677-2747  
Fax: (215) 673-4668  
www.atkinsonsteeplejack.com

Lining the walls of Francis J. Atkinson & Sons Steeplejack in Philadelphia, PA, are photographs of 95 years of family history. While other families take sedate pictures of holidays and vacations, the Atkinsons proudly display photographs of a son's first ascent to the top of a steeple and a grandfather's work on a soaring, gold-leafed dome. For four generations, the Atkinson family has helped congregations preserve the steeples, towers, and domes of sacred places that serve as landmarks in their communities. With projects from Washington, D.C., to Pittsburgh, PA, Atkinson & Sons has a strong commitment to thoughtful preservation, on-site problem solving, and long-term relationships with congregations. Francis Atkinson, III, is convinced that the company's longevity stems from their family-oriented philosophy. "Our success comes from our good people," he explains.

From matching the color on a batch of mortar to repairing a damaged lightning rod, Atkinson relishes the daily puzzles that emerge from being a steeplejack. Materials in a steeple project can range from gold leaf, wood, and terracotta to masonry, porcelain, and sheet metal, and employees at Atkinson & Sons go through apprenticeships to master an array of traditional building techniques that provide the foundation for their work. "I don't find a steeplejack - I make them," Atkinson says. In addition to restoration projects in the workshop, the steeplejacks climb towers with equipment that protects historic materials while allowing them to perform maintenance and repairs.

Although the company also works on industrial sites and skyscrapers, Atkinson gets the most enjoyment from his many projects involving congregations. He remarks that sacred places offer "a little more coziness. People are

more concerned about their house of worship" than typical construction projects. Steeples are landmarks in their communities, with bells and clocks that people set their days by. From ensuring the safety of employees, to working with congregations to financing restorations, Atkinson recognizes that community involvement is key to the success of a steeple project. Atkinson's photographs of hard-to-access areas of steeples provide congregations with new views of their sacred places and frequently become the foundation for fundraising efforts for the preservation of these historic structures. By providing congregations with detailed explanations of their options and priorities for fundraising, Atkinson & Sons becomes long-term partners with congregations.

A project in the tower of Memorial Presbyterian Church of Fox Chase (a recent *New Dollars/New Partners* participant) in Philadelphia, PA, allowed Atkinson & Sons to help a congregation with more than just building rehabilitation. The steeplejacks had to remove a two-thousand-pound bell resting on a rotting wooden floor and a shaky weathervane on the church's tower for the congregation's safety. The weathervane returned to Atkinson & Sons' workshop for repair, but storage of the bell posed a problem. Rather than hiding the bell away as the congregation raised funds for the tower's restoration, Atkinson suggested that they simply leave the bell with its supports on the church's front lawn. The very visible presence of the bell sparked community interest in the tower restoration and allowed the congregation to tap into the generosity of their neighbors. As a result, the project is moving ahead with the replacement of the flooring and access ladders in the historic tower. Soon, the bell and weathervane will be returned to their places as community landmarks.

With any steeple project, Atkinson encourages congregations to think about the long-term health of their buildings. Annual checkups prevent disasters from overwhelming congregations and allow them to set attainable goals for the protection of their steeple. Atkinson explains, "Not everything is an emergency, but usually [congregations] call when something's going on. People don't realize that general building maintenance is the most important part of preservation." Regular inspections check for water infiltration and storm damage, and should be performed by a professional in hard-to-access steeples. If a congregation has not conducted an inspection for some time, the initial assessment will provide a baseline of conditions to monitor any changes in the steeple. Atkinson also urges congregations to prioritize their needs and to think beyond the cosmetic aspects of the project. "Paint is the icing [on the cake]. There's a lot that needs to be done to make [the steeple] safe, sound, watertight."

Dedication to community landmarks drives the work at Francis J. Atkinson & Sons Steeplejack. As Francis Atkinson surveys the company's workshop with his son, he remarks, "When the community believes, that's the best thing for the project."



Three generations of the Atkinson family, surrounded by photos of some of the many steeples they've worked on. Photo by Marissa Moshier.