

designer's notebook



Contemporary chest with Colonial roots

BY DUNCAN GOWDY



Several years ago I was lucky enough to receive some beautiful planks of red oak from a centuries-old tree that grew on the grounds of George Washington's Mount Vernon estate. The wood came from William Jewell, who asked me to build something with it for an exhibition he was curating of furniture made from trees with a historical pedigree.

In search of inspiration for my design, I visited Mount Vernon. Having worked for a timber-frame builder in New Hampshire and spent time on my brother's nearby farm, I have an affinity for farming and wooden farm structures, and





after touring the house at Mt. Vernon I went directly to the agricultural area. I took dozens of photos of the gardens and structures there. The spark of inspiration I was seeking came from a corncrib, a small post-and-beam building that had an exposed framework of stout vertical timbers and an infill of vertical slats spaced apart for ventilation. I decided to adapt the idea for my blanket chest.

Most of my furniture incorporates carving, and when I build blanket chests I typically use a frame-and-panel structure with multiple panels on each face of the chest. This approach was inspired by Hadley chests, those heavily carved frame-and-panel pieces built between about 1680 and 1730 in the Connecticut River Valley—not far to the west of where I live in Massachusetts. On my pieces, though, rather than doing the sort of all-over carving found on Hadley chests, I limit the carving to one or more panels in the piece and leave the frame members unadorned. With this blanket chest, I decided to include just one carved panel and give the others visual interest by filling them with gapped slats.

My initial impulse was to have a large carved panel on the chest's front that would be flanked by slatted panels of the same height. I sketched out the idea and then built a full-scale mockup. I built the mockup with $\frac{3}{4}$ -in.-thick oriented-strand board (OSB) sub-flooring, which, if not beautiful, is certainly



cheap: It costs \$16 or so for a 4x8 sheet. I pinned a sketch of the carving in place and used a marker to simulate the slats and splines. Standing back from the mockup, I was not pleased; my blanket chest was looking like a 1950s console television set.

I went back to the drawing board and changed the proportions, giving the piece more height, less ground clearance, and a little less length. I also reduced the size of the carving and designed a more complex framework of rails and stiles, introducing variation in the height of the slatted panels. Then I built a second full-size mockup, which confirmed the feeling I'd had when I saw the new idea on paper that I'd found a much better design.

I built the sides of the chest as four independent frames with end stiles mitered along their length, and then glued the four sides together. The mitered stiles form legs with the look of heavy posts—but they don't require thick stock or any notching of the inside corner. To keep the grain and color of the legs cohesive, I cut mating stiles from the same board. I ripped the slats from book-matched boards and was careful to keep them in sequence from side to side and also end to end. I made the slat blanks long enough that I was able to go up the front, over the top, and down the back with one board.



The old red oak is not the only historic timber that figures in the blanket chest. The image I carved on the front panel is from a photograph that I took of a massive old poplar tree on the front lawn at Mt. Vernon. I did the carving on a piece of ash from another tree that grew on Washington's estate. After carving the ash panel, I bleached and pickle-stained it, then applied gel stain in the carved areas with a brush. More pigment stays in areas of open grain, darkening and highlighting them. To get the tone I wanted, I repeated this process five times, starting with one application of brown stain, then four applications of black stain. □



Duncan Gowdy works in his one-man shop in Holden, Mass.

Online Extra

For more on Duncan Gowdy's design process, go to FineWoodworking.com/extras.