Nine Amateurs Build

Newport Secretaries

A master of period furniture teaches a diverse group the ins and outs of one of America's finest cabinets

BY ALLAN BREED

Nine men met at a prep school in our nation's capital in June 1998: a retired aerospace engineer; a software developer; an art teacher; a door installer; a Lockheed-Martin failure-analyst; a former NASA architect; a master locksmith; a retired CIA agent; and a guy who moves nuclear reactors for the Navy. They carried heavy cases of specialized tools into a deserted classroom, Their mission would take a year, maybe two, to complete, No, this was not some clandestine military construction project. These men were amateur woodworkers who had decided to build Newport secretaries and asked me to guide them through the process.

I had raised an eyebrow when this group contacted me and proposed that I should be their teacher. I live in Maine, and they said they would fly me down to D.C. one weekend a month. I raised another when I heard the piece they wanted to build. They hadn't chosen just any cabinet. This was the Big One: a Goddard-Townsend secretary. The one that could overpower a living room. A piece of sculpture twice the size of a refrigerator, In a field where there are no framed diplomas that quantify your knowledge and your competence as a cabinetmaker, completing this masterpiece, considered by some to be the greatest piece of American furniture, would constitute proof enough.

Photos, except where noted: Jonathan Binzen

The group of nine, a subset of the Washington Woodworkers Guild, had thought out their unusual proposal with great precision. We would meet in 12 weekend-long sessions, spread out over a year. My contract stipulated that "all drawings must be provided at the first class session. Partial drawings will be required at least one month prior to the first class for students to prepare for the first class." In addition, I was to provide "a detailed, comprehensive course outline and fully coordinated course schedule."

But for all their planning, had they picked the right guy to do the teaching? They had heard about me through an old article in *Home Furniture* magazine that described the commission I got to reproduce the famous Nicholas Brown Desk and Bookcase when it was sold at auction for $12.1 million in 1989. So they knew I was familiar with Newport secretaries. But had they considered that my teaching of hands-on woodworking up until that point totaled one day of dovetailed-box making? I had frequently taught classes on the connoisseurship of American furniture, but those were lectures to groups of collectors.

Somewhat intimidated by the combination of my inexperience as a teacher and their detailed contract, I drew up some documents of my own. I wrote a 124-point procedure consisting of entries like: "21 Shape base molding from bottom blade." And: "80. Turn circular pediment moldings." From these procedures grew my "fully coordinated class schedule: In first class: dovetail case; dado for writing surface, gallery base, dustboards and blades. Second class: have writing surface, gallery base, blades and base molding dovetailed and fit. Make pattern for drawer fronts, make drawer fronts."

The guys and their guru. *From left: Rich Ramos, John Davis, Norm Willis, Frank Jessup, Allan Breed (seated), Bob Fergerson,* George *Slack,* Bob *Smith. (Missing from photo: Carlos Cintron, Frank Scearce.)*

Before the first weekend was out, my schedule was scrap paper. When I saw the wide range in the levels of woodworking experience in the class and the varying amounts of time people could devote to the project each month—not to mention the amount of banter and kibitzing that filled each day of the class—I realized there was no use carefully mapping out the syllabus, no predicting when we'd do what. The target for completion of the secretaries was redefined; any time between the first class and the post-Clinton era would be acceptable.

Nine guys with tools in common

An average class would begin with me flying to D.C. Friday night. I'd stay with one of the guys, meet his wife and view the shop, the tools and the other furniture (these guys have made a lot more furniture for their homes than I have for mine). Saturday morning we'd meet the rest of the class in Georgetown at the Maret School, just uphill from the Swiss embassy and a trebuchet toss from the medieval gothic spires of the National Cathedral. (One of the students, Bob Fergerson, teaches art at the school and had arranged for us to use the art classroom as our furniture-making facility.)

An infatuation with the tools of the trade linked all of the members of this group. As we drank our coffee in the parking lot outside the shop, the day would begin with some numerically encoded tool talk.

"I got a mint 92 with a Sweetheart blade and a four-and-a-half body for five bucks on the way in."

"Really? I hit that place yesterday and got all the good stuff," came the reply, and we'd all laugh.

A passing remark was made one morning about someone wanting an old Atlas lathe. Soon after that, John Davis vanished. Several hours later he returned with just such a lathe on the bed of his pickup. He had bought one for himself some months earlier and had known where to score another. The shop emptied, and the class gathered around the truck as John stood by in triumph. A couple of the guys wanted the lathe. I ended up settling the matter by acting as auctioneer.

If I merely alluded to a tool I had, there were notes taken and

Carving and camaraderie. *After the first few classes, most of the work done in class was carving.*

orders placed. I mentioned a Starrett protractor one day, and a Starrett order for six was phoned in. I praised back-bent gouges, and two German carving-tool catalogs showed up, and orders were made. I let slip one Saturday that I found a 2-in. chisel useful for rounding beads and hollows, and the next morning Frank Jessup arrived with a box of them from Woodcraft Supply. He had stopped by the store after class and filled orders for several others at $57 a pop. If the secretaries didn't get built, it wouldn't be for lack of tools.

This was all foreign to me. I like tools well enough, and I like a bargain, but I've always tended to make do with what I had, buying another tool only when there was no way around it. With this group I nearly went hoarse repeating my new mantra, "Don't buy a tool until you need it!" It was useless. The tool contagion was all-powerful, Then one day I bought a No. 6 fore plane from Frank Jessup. I didn't really need it; I just figured maybe I should have one. So I had joined them.

Teaching techies to trust their eyes

Once tool time in the parking lot was over, we would pack into the 25-ft. by 30-ft. shop and stake out bench space. Tool rolls were untied and unrolled, lamps were set up to get the raking light I insisted on for carving. I circulated from student to student. Some demanded more time than others, and all had different problems and questions. But there was a real thread through the class. This was a group rich with advanced degrees in engineering, computers, technology. My approach to woodwork is very intuitive, seat-of-the-pants, whatever-works-is-the-right-way. This was more of a calipers-and-templates bunch.

Here is a typical exchange between one of the techies and me about the size of the fillet that runs between the lobes of a shell:

"Al, how does this look, depthwise?"

"Well, that's pretty good. You only really need enough depth to create a shadow."

Flame on. *George Slack carves a flame finial, using the lathe as a vise.*

Not satisfied, he persisted, "You don't specify it in the print; would it be ⅛ in.?"

"That's a good start; you can always go deeper later if you need to."

"How deep do you make yours, do you think?"

"Well, probably about like that. Maybe a little deeper, just enough so you can get a good, rounded convex shape beside it."

"Would you use an 8-14 gouge for that?"

"I don't know. Show me an 8-14. Just use the biggest one you can manage for the particular cut. If the result looks good, use it. Your eye is the final judge."

An exchange of this type could go on indefinitely, because teaching carving is more subjective than scientific. A good carving is a collection of nuanced forms that only the eye can judge. The members of this digitally calibrated group dreaded a phrase I often repeated: "You decide when it looks right."

On to the next student, carving end grain. I said, "Wet it with a sponge, and it'll carve like flat grain." Amazement at the simplicity. That was easy.

Another student was struggling painfully with a shell carving in a highly figured block of dense mahogany.

"Use a file or a scraper or go straight across the grain like this," I said. I used a gouge to cut perpendicular to the grain, then I sat down and carved a while to demonstrate how it could be done and to show him some options. When I

looked up, everyone was standing and watching. Questions were asked, and in my answers I tried to emphasize that there are various methods available and that none is the "right" one.

Hands-on instruction. *The author demonstrates carving the lobe of a shell for Rich Ramos.*

The class becomes a club

On Sundays we'd meet back at the shop, with the cathedral bells pealing in the background. I spent one Saturday night in the far suburbs at John Davis' house. On the way into town the next morning, John and I hit the Georgetown flea market. He snagged a copy of the Downs book on the furniture in the Winterthur collection, paying $5 for a $130 book. I found nothing.

Rich Ramos, who drove down from New Jersey each weekend and spent Saturday nights in a cheap hotel, was coffeed up and ready to go. Frank Jessup mentioned that he had recently bought 70 sheets of plywood. They were irresistibly cheap, and he figured they'd come in handy sometime. He asked if anyone needed a couple dozen sheets.

Carlos Cintron, the locksmith, had to pick the lock on Frank's Volvo so that Frank could retrieve the keys. Afterward, Carlos set up his video camera, and I turned and carved a finial for the camera. John, less experienced in turning than casework, convinced me to turn six finial urns for him. He was making two secretaries, one for each of his two daughters. As I was turning them, my gouge slipped, destroying one of the finials. This was good; it lent some credence to my claim that I frequently make mistakes.

Carlos videotaped every class, and told locksmithing stories. His best story? That would be the one about a $5,000 bribe he was offered years ago. He was rekeying locks in a large hotel and office complex, and two guys offered to pay him for the master key. The date? August 1972. The place? The Watergate Hotel. For once, woodworking talk subsided as we imagined how history might have been changed if Carlos had pocketed the money and handed over the key.

As class progressed, some of the guys jumped ahead of the others. This turned out to be advantageous, allowing those who worked more slowly to ask questions and look at the work of the faster ones. The students were continually helping each other, with generosity and plenty of needling.

A wonderful group dynamic developed among these disparate students. Perhaps it was because they were amateurs in the root sense of the word—they loved this thing I was teaching them. And so did I. We spent the mornings working side by side as cabinetmakers. On the ride to lunch we talked about cabinetmaking. We stood in line talking about cabinetmaking and discussed it over our sandwiches. And then we returned to the shop, and everyone got back to it with a vengeance. I kept wondering whether we'd run out of cabinetmaking conversation, but it never happened.

The long road home

I saw enthusiasm wax and wane as the year went by, but progress continued. In the early classes, the room was littered with large planks as carcase dovetails were cut and blocked drawer fronts were shaped. When the cases were glued up and became unwieldy, they went home to stay, and smaller parts were brought to classes.

The desk interior was a project in itself and bogged down some people. The tolerances are very close, and the tiny partitions had to be handplaned, beaded and mitered. By month six, many of the guys were still a long way from completing the 185-piece puzzle of the desk section. By the ninth month, four upper cases were underway. The doors were straightforward to build but tricky to hang, and setting the locks and catches for them was finicky, too.

On the secretaries overall, the carving was the hardest part, and it seemed the progression of shells, feet and pediment rosettes being carved in class would never end. I carved shell petals and difficult wavy parting-tool borders. Along the way we discussed sharpening, animal glue, fluting and reeding, turned moldings and the versatility and simplicity of the scratch stock.

By the last couple of classes, George Slack had finished his piece and was working on a lowboy. Four or five of the other secretaries

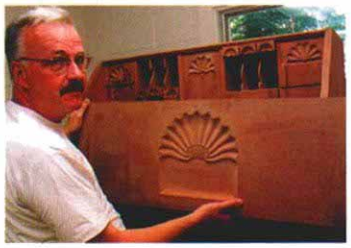
Shaving the shell. *Bob Smith works on the center shell on the lid of his secretary.*

Photo, this page (bottom): Robert Smith

Where the work really happened

BY JONATHAN BINZEN

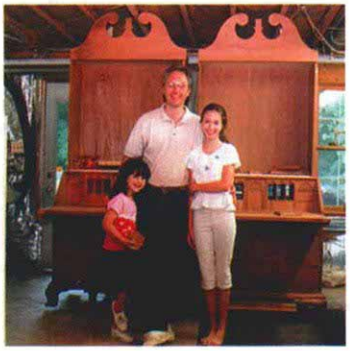
Although the monthly doses of education and entertainment they received from their classes with Allan Breed sustained the class members as they built their secretaries, the grunt work occurred at home alone. After the first two or three classes, once the dovetailed cases they built were too big to cart back and forth, class members typically brought carving to class. That worked well, because the carved



Bob Fergerson

parts were both the most portable and the most vexing.

As they worked out carving details in class, back home the secretaries—and the space, time and equipment required to make them—grew more imposing. In the course of the project, Norm Willis doubled the size of his basement shop. And at one stage he wound up storing the upper case of his secretary in the basement bath-



John Davis

Frank Scearce

room. His collection of carving tools also grew, rising from 2 to 49 before his piece was finished.

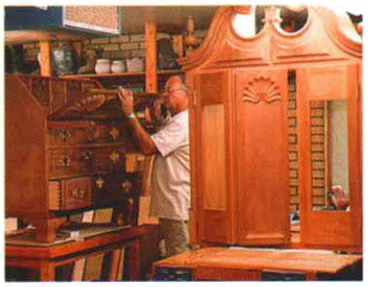
Bob Fergerson, who hosted the class at Georgetown's Maret School, where he teaches art, discovered that one central challenge of building a secretary is the sheer volume of parts to be made and fitted. The project, he said, "would never go away. No matter how many full-page lists I would write and finish off, I'd always come up with another full-page list." Fergerson managed to keep track of all those parts

Bob Smith

while building his piece in a 10-ft-square storage room at the school.

John Davis, meanwhile, worked in his relatively commodious L-shaped basement shop but pushed its limits by choosing to make a pair of secretaries—one for each of his two daughters.

The class contracted Irion Lumber Co. of Wellsboro, Pa., to provide matched sets of mahogany for the secretaries. Irion put together a set of boards for each secretary, with the boards carefully selected and marked for every part of the cabinet. The class was very happy with the wood, although the stacks of rough lumber posed logistical challenges in the smaller shops.



George Slack

Slowly but surely the stacks shrank, and the lumber turned into furniture. And just as surely, class members developed as cabinetmakers. Fergerson, whose secretary is beautifully carved, said, "You change a lot in two years. You look at a part of the secretary and think, 'I carved that a year and a half ago. Does it hold

Frank Jessup

up?' You've learned so much in the meantime that you end up going back and redoing it." □

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were mostly complete; escutcheons were being bent with the aid of Bob Fergerson, who has a deft touch with a torch.

Some of the guys had yet to complete the upper cases, but I felt they'd learned enough to do it alone with some help from their peers and maybe a few phone calls to me.

Near the end of the last class, John Davis, who had asked me to carve for him at a few tricky spots along the way, asked for a last V-cut around the convex shell for the lid. I turned him down. I tried to convince him that he could do it. This was a scary bit of carving, because the shell is dead center in the piece—the bull's eye—and the cut is very difficult. You must carve a constant serpentine, and there is little room for error.

"You can do it!" I cried. I reminded him how to use his hand as a guide and told him to take a deep breath and just go for it. This was a test for both of us. I was sure he could do it if he relaxed. By this time a few guys were watching. Someone brought out a camera. John picked up the parting tool, took a breath and then made the cut without a twitch. It was perfect. □

Allan Breed lives in Maine and builds period furniture in Rollinsford, N.H.

Photo, this page (top, middle column): Frank Scearce