



Utopian Benches

For Francis Cape, an Englishman now settled in Narrowsburg, N.Y., building simple benches was an avenue to understanding his adopted country. Fascinated by the communal societies founded here—the most famous being the Shakers—he traveled to a range of them to measure and build the benches he found. He picked societies with a craft tradition, and chose benches because as shared seating, they expressed the idea at the core of these communities where personal goods, gain, and space were sacrificed for the common benefit. Cape built 20 benches from 10 utopian societies and wrote a book about the process. He made all the benches from poplar to give them a feeling of unity when displayed together. The earliest community he visited, the Ephrata Cloister in Pennsylvania, was founded in 1732 and lasted 64 years; one of the most recent, the Twin Oaks commune, founded in Virginia in 1967, is still bustling.

—Jonathan Binzen

Photo: Aaron Igler

How They Did It Turn to p. 89 to see drawings and descriptions of four of the benches featured in Cape's book.

Slide Show To see more of these utopian benches, go to FineWoodworking.com/extras

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