

# A Master Craftsman and Gentleman

## Remembering Philip C. Lowe

BY STEVE BROWN AND WILL NEPTUNE

Woodworkers like Philip C. Lowe don't come along often. In fact, humans like him are a rare commodity, combining extraordinary talent with more than average levels of kindness and generosity, and on top of that the passion and temperament to teach for decades. While he can't be summed up with a few titles, Phil was a father, husband, tradesman, sailor, teacher, scholar, writer, mentor, and, above all, a friend. His life was full. His loss is profound.

### A teenager sets out on a path

In 1967, Phil gained entrance into North Bennet Street School's Cabinet and Furniture Making program. He was just 17—under the permissible starting age—and was admitted solely on the strong recommendation of his high school shop teacher. Phil left NBSS after one year to join the Navy, where he worked on a ship doing metal and wood repairs and fabrication for four years. He said his time in the Navy taught him the value of being efficient and productive.

He returned to NBSS in 1972 to complete his second year. As a student there, Phil learned furniture making from George Fullerton, who had apprenticed in the Massachusetts shop Mellish and Byfield (which



Philip C. Lowe, 1948–2021

had been in business since 1815) and enjoyed a long woodworking career before retiring in 1951 and starting the furniture making program at NBSS. Phil learned the skills of the trade, and learned them well. He was remarkably productive.

He began teaching at NBSS in 1975, as Mr. Fullerton's first assistant, then as the head of the department. This continuity of professional training proved a tremendous asset for the students. Phil's immense knowledge, innate talent, patience, practical approach, and humor turned out to be

the perfect formula for teaching. Under his leadership the program thrived.

In 1985, after more than a decade teaching, Phil stepped down and started a full-time business in his home town of Beverly, Mass. His work included conservation, custom furniture, turning, and carving. Throughout his career, he maintained a steady stream of furniture commissions and furniture conservation jobs, but he spent the next 14 years steeped in that work.

### The culmination of a life's work

The Furniture Institute of Massachusetts, the school Phil started in 1999, was his passion—the manifestation of his life's endeavors as a woodworker and teacher. He ran the school for more than 20 years, closing the doors in early 2020 to focus on his health and his family.

For many of his students, Phil represented a link to the long history of woodworking. The school began with Phil teaching a two-year class, as well as shorter classes for serious hobbyists. He also shared his broad knowledge of furniture making at guilds across the country, and by writing articles and making videos for *Fine Woodworking* for more than 30 years. Phil was no stranger to accolades from his peers. In 2005 he received the prestigious Cartouche Award, given by the Society of American Period Furniture Makers in recognition of his skill and his career as a teacher. He also received the 2010 Artanship Award from the Institute of Classical Architecture and Classical America.

As an instructor at the North Bennet Street School and then in his own school, Phil



Will Neptune (left) graduated from NBSS in 1981 and taught there from 1985 to 2000. His work includes commissioned furniture and carving. Like Lowe, he is a Cartouche award recipient. Steve Brown (right) graduated from NBSS in 1990. Brown then worked for Phil until returning to NBSS as an instructor in 1999.



was one of the last authentic connections to the rich woodworking tradition found in the shops that began to disappear in the 20th century. It was in those shops that George Fullerton acquired the skills and knowledge that he shared with Phil, first as Phil's teacher, then as his mentor when Phil began to teach. Phil's legacy is found not only in the students who went on to work as furniture makers, but also in those who became teachers themselves, trying to pass on what they gained from him.

### The pragmatist inside the teacher

While Phil's expertly crafted, historically accurate pieces might have seemed the epitome of romance, he refused to romanticize the trade. He repeatedly impressed upon students that they were making a "product." This did not mean he didn't appreciate the rewards and satisfactions that come from doing good work and having it recognized by others. But he knew that going into the shop Monday morning meant there was work to do, whether you felt inspired by it or not. He was realistic and pragmatic without losing the ability to appreciate his accomplishments.

He always remembered to emphasize that woodworking is a trade, that the decisions and judgments made when designing and making work for clients should be based not only on the quality of the craftsmanship but also on the smart and prudent use of your time. So he expected his students, like himself, to see both proficiency and efficiency as essential. The goal of any commission was to figure out how to best produce work that met the client's expectations and needs with quality workmanship and professional efficiency. He did not feel the need to overbuild for the sake of proving his abilities.

Phil also knew you didn't have to own certain benches, fixtures, or tools to be a successful woodworker. He produced quality work on a simple bench with a basic side vise. He exemplified a North Bennet Street catch-phrase that embraced "using hand tools in concert with machinery." He did what made sense at the time given the task.

Phil found enjoyment in the process of building pieces that he knew others would live with and enjoy. This was also true with the teaching he did and the happiness that he saw in his student's efforts and successes.

## BORN TO TEACH

From his mid-teens it was clear that Phil Lowe was walking a path, and every step he took over decades led him to where he was meant to be: woodworking and teaching in his hometown, in his own school, in his own way. He has influenced generations of woodworkers.

I first met Phil in 2004 when I took a weeklong hand-tool class with him at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in Maine. I was a bit nervous. After all, I was about to take a class with a legend. Turns out this masterful woodworker was simply Phil—no pretenses, no airs, just an approachable, knowledgeable, and engaging instructor. He was a tough teacher, though. I recall the sharpening section of the class, when we were flattening the back of a plane blade. Phil would not let a student move on to the next sharpening grit until he was satisfied that all the scratches from the previous grit were gone. That was a sweaty workday for us students, but by sunset we all realized the satisfaction of a job well done.

More than the woodworking lessons, however, I will remember the conversations. His life was full of stories, and he could always pull a tale from his Navy days. He was passionate about furniture making, but he also had a love of sailing, of being on the water at sunset and experiencing the fullness of East Coast shoreline living. Phil was a dedicated family man, who spoke lovingly and proudly of his wife Sandra and their family. Conversations never completely revolved around

him, however.

Phil wanted to hear about you, wanted to know your inspirations and aspirations, your successes and your failures. The world has lost a master woodworker, but woodworkers have lost a friend.

—Tom McKenna

Phil wanted students to figure things out for themselves, but when you told him you needed help he would drop everything and give you his undivided attention. Sometimes you got more than you bargained for. We often called it "going down the rabbit hole" because he would start on one subject and be off on another, and another, and ... you get the picture. He also had subtle ways of making a point. Once, he noticed I was not paying sufficient attention to grain direction. So he walked past my bench with the world famous "box of straws," slammed it on down, and kept going into the office. Point made.

Phil knew what he had in terms of talent and he appreciated recognition, but he was a most humble man. He would be the first to point out to students that the only difference between the student and himself was 40 years of practice. I witnessed many, many mistakes on his part when he was working on something and he never once tried to hide them. Instead he would call everyone over to his bench and show us how to get out of the jam he had just put

**The student becomes a teacher.** Phil Lowe in two phases of his life at NBSS: as a student (top) and as an instructor with George Fullerton in the late 1970s (left).





*He beamed with deep satisfaction from just sailing along. He was in a sanctuary that gave him great peace. I'll never forget the smile on his face.*

about life. It has been a profound honor to know and work with Phil, and his legacy will live on in my heart and hands.

—Asa Christiana

himself in. His answer to every student who thought the mistake they had just made was the end of the world was always the same: “How does it feel to be human?”

—Arthur W. Keenan

Phil's knowledge of American period furniture was encyclopedic. His eye for detail and carving ability was amazing. I stood in awe of his creations, each and every one. He was such a fine teacher, willing to share and guide. And a wonderful human being.

—C. H. Becksvoort

Phil once took me to see the Seymour & Sons exhibit at the Peabody Essex Museum. The museum guard followed us around so he could hear what Phil was saying about the work. I don't know how many times we set off the alarms while on our hands and knees as Phil pointed out some unique feature or bit of veneer work. There are few folks born with a chisel in their hands. Phil was one of those.

—Gary Rogowski

Phil's passing leaves an irreparable hole in our community. He was a peerless craftsman, superb instructor, and as fine a person as you could hope to meet. Over the past 20 years, Phil kindly took time away from his own superb school to teach at the Center for Furniture Craftmanship on several occasions. At Monday night slide shows, we were humbled and uplifted by the breadth and depth of his work. The last

time I saw Phil, he was beaming, in his own generous and understated way, to see one of his students take Best of Show at the 2019 Fresh Wood competition at the AWFS Fair in Las Vegas. Walking his own path through life, Phil left a remarkable legacy in the hearts of those of us whom he touched as a teacher, mentor, and friend.

—Peter Korn

Knowing and working with Phil has been a special honor. He had a way of making me feel genuinely valued. I never had the slightest sense that my many questions were a nuisance or that he didn't have the time for me. In 2019 I had the privilege of teaching a weeklong carving class at his school. Just spending time at his school, getting to know Phil, and seeing him freely and naturally share golden nuggets of knowledge with the students was special.

—Mary May

I can safely say I learned more from Phil than any other craftsman I worked with, and I worked with all the greats.

I learned that when you know something deeply, you don't have to bang the drum loudly. Phil would never say a bad word about other woodworkers, no matter how dubious their methods. He would just say, “I do it this way, and it seems to work well.”

I'll miss his humility, generosity, and kindness. He never looked down his nose at my dumb questions. After every shoot, we had a steak and a beer and just talked

Like many folks, my earliest acquaintance with Phil was in print. I was building my first Queen Anne piece and turned to his article from issue #42, “Cabriole Legs: Hand-shaped, without a lathe,” an article I have given my students many times since.

Because we taught workshops at many of the same schools, our paths crossed. He was one of our most popular presenters for The Society of American Period Furniture Makers and it was not uncommon for attendees to skip other demonstrations just to watch Phil twice.

Phil was a generous man who liked to laugh and engage in lively conversations. One day, I had the privilege of seeing Phil totally out of the shop environment, when he took me out sailing. I have only a vague memory of the boat and where we sailed, but I have a vivid recollection of the pilot. He beamed with deep satisfaction from just sailing along. He was in a sanctuary that gave him great peace. I'll never forget the smile on his face. I feel blessed to have known him and 35-plus years later, I still want to grow up and be like Phil.

—Steve Latta

Phil knew how to make people comfortable, how to inspire great work, how to convey difficult concepts. He knew how to lead a student to the brink of discovery, then step back and see the light go on. He knew that teaching in this field has to include doing; and enough of that doing leads to the deep understanding that comes wrapped in the satisfaction of making great furniture.

I taught at his school for almost 10 years, mostly night and weekend courses. Phil was always there to greet my students, check on their work, show us something a full-time student (or he himself) was working on, and just generally share his overall enthusiasm for the craft and work done well. Often, he'd stay for most of a three-hour night class after teaching and working all day—just because he loved what he did.

Most of all, Phil had a knack for bringing people together, making them feel welcome and a part of the special places he created. What a gift!

—John Cameron

Phil has been an icon to me from the start of my woodworking career. I knew of him before I went to NBSS. I remember making my family watch the VHS tape of him "Carving the Ball and Claw Foot." I started teaching workshops after graduating and soon after, Phil asked if I would come and teach at his Furniture Institute. I was honored. He was a kind and patient teacher able to reach out to all who had an interest in learning what he knew. Working with Phil made me a better teacher.

—Janet Collins

Phil and George Fullerton were the instructors at NBSS in 1977 when I started as a student. It wasn't very far into the course when Phil gathered me and two other students for machine maintenance for the jointer.

I was a bit shocked when Phil directed us to completely disassemble the jointer (less the electric motor), clean all the parts, and re-assemble it with proper lubrication and alignment. This was his regular maintenance for most of the machines in the shop. With this task Phil showed us that "doing it" is a major tenet in understanding and that it improves our skills and gives us confidence in our own abilities.

Shortly after I graduated in 1979, Phil asked me to become a part-time instructor. It was an opportunity for me to continue learning from Phil.

—Lance Patterson



My last semester at the Furniture Institute, I had reached a place where I was not able to pay the tuition, despite working full time. I faced an impossible decision: pack up and return home without graduating, or become homeless and use my rent money to pay for the school. I approached Phil, hoping we could come up with a payment plan. He made me an offer for which I will always be grateful. Phil asked me to work for him, generously putting 50% of every job toward my balance for the semester. Phil was a master of his craft, an outstanding teacher, and above all, a truly generous man.

—Freddy Roman

Phil was a furniture maker's furniture maker. He knew the classic styles of the 18th century and accumulated a vast kit of the tricks and techniques and the hows and whys of traditional design. Need to reproduce a unique Seymour banding or Goddard carved shell? Ever humble, Phil would show you how.

—Garrett Hack

I met Phil 20 years ago and invited him to teach at my school. During his first class, every student came up to me and said, "Make sure you get this guy back here again!" So Phil became a regular

*The museum guard followed us around so he could hear what Phil was saying about the work. I don't know how many times we set off the alarms while on our hands and knees as Phil pointed out some unique feature or bit of veneer work.*

instructor at Connecticut Valley School of Woodworking. His knowledge and skill were phenomenal, but what really impressed me was Phil's natural ability to teach.

He never got flustered. We were doing a Queen Anne tea table class, and while he was mortising the inside of an apron, the depth stop let go and the bit came right through the face. He did not even blink! Instead he just said, "So here is what you do when that happens" and proceeded to run a dado the whole length of the apron—right over the hole. Then he found a scrap that matched the apron and fitted it into the dado, glued it in, planed it flush, and it was gone. One of the biggest lessons I learned from Phil: Anything can be fixed; and don't make a big deal of it—especially in front of the class!

—Bob Van Dyke

Phil's school was one of few where you could learn to tackle the "high styles" of period furniture with the same techniques and build quality used by the old masters. For all that, you might imagine his shop to be a vast woodworker's paradise—the kind you'd design if you were given a blank slate and an open checkbook. Well, it wasn't. In fact, Phil's shop, at first glance, is startlingly spare. All he needed was a small room to house a handful of basic workhorse machines, a drafting room, and a small workbench in front of a wall of hand tools. That was the first lesson: It's not about the stuff you have.

—Roger Benton