

In Search of Period Furniture Makers

What they do about what the 'old guys' did

by Rick Mastelli

About a year ago we received a letter from a reader, Grover W. Floyd II of Knoxville, Tenn., telling about the cabinetmaker with whom he had been studying, whom he believed to be "among the nation's finest." The letter included a newspaper clipping about Robert G. Emmett, 77, quoting him as having promised himself, "If I ever got to touch a piece of Goddard furniture, I never would wash my hands. But now I have seen the back of a genuine Goddard piece and its drawers. And I wash my hands. My construction is better."

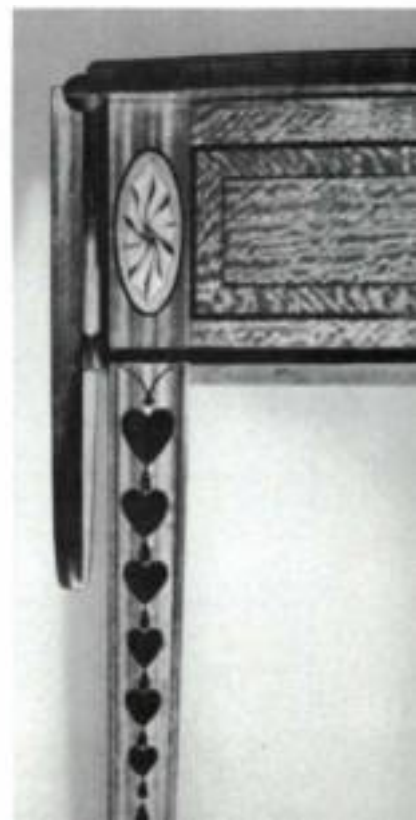
It wasn't long before I had arranged a trip to Knoxville to meet Emmett and to see his furniture. The visit turned out to be the start of an odyssey—to the back rooms of museums, to historic sites and to the shops of reproduction cabinetmakers, all to gain a perspective on what Emmett was to show me. Here he was declaring his furniture construction to be better than that of 18th-century master craftsmen, to be "second to none in the world."

I met Floyd first, a 29-year-old Scotsman who works out of a 500-sq. ft. shop, modestly equipped with the basic machines, all kept in faultless tune. When I arrived he was at the table saw, stacking and slicing arrowhead inlay banding $\frac{1}{16}$ in. thick, practicing a technique he had learned from Emmett. He showed me a number of simple blanket chests, identical in design but of different sizes—experiments in proportion. Floyd is a professional cabinetmaker who earns his living restoring and building traditional furniture. But since

he met Emmett, he's considered himself a student. He brought me to meet the teacher.

Even at 77 Emmett retains a full head of white hair, neatly parted and laid down. Along with his mustache, it frames a face styled in the 1920s, aged, but well kept. He talked of his future, for which he was "hoping to put a little something away," and of his desire to share what he'd learned, to help revive the making of American furniture. And he talked of his past: "The main thing is the construction. I've gone into that deeper than any man ever has. I've lived furniture. I've dreamed it. My poor wife: a widow all these years."

The furniture he showed me did not belie the devotion he claimed. There's a Pembroke table, among ten he made in the early 1940s in a number of different woods, most of them inlaid, some simply banded, others with shells or bleeding hearts. The construction, Emmett points out, is exceptional. The width of the tabletop is marginally oversized for the skirt, so shrinkage across the grain, between the rule joints, will not stop the leaves from dropping free. The rule joints themselves are cut over an arc slightly greater than 90° , to ensure that there is no space when the leaves are down through which to see the hinges. The knuckle joint for the leaf support stops its swing at two points instead of one. This prevents the support from acting as a lever and breaking out the pivot pin. Also the joint is cut and the pin is driven not quite plumb, but canted, so the leaf support swings slightly up. This ensures, in



Emmett's Pembroke table is solid satinwood with maple and pine secondary wood and vermilion, holly and ebony inlay. The rule joint, right, is cut over an arc greater than 90° to keep the hinges concealed when the leaf is down. The leaf rests $\frac{1}{4}$ in. away from the skirt on a wooden button, which can be shaved down as the top shrinks to ensure that the leaf will rest always perpendicular. The knuckle joint of the leaf support, center, is not rounded, as is traditional, but square-sectioned, so in swinging open, the knuckles are stopped at two points. One is at the far side of the support, against the outside of the skirt; the other is in mortises cut in the skirt. These two stops keep the leaf support from acting as a lever to break out the pivot pin.

spite of seasonal dimensional changes, that the leaf can always be supported exactly level with the center section of the tabletop.

Such careful attention to details characterizes all the work he shows me. He learned, he says, by repairing older pieces in his father's antique shop, correcting the consequences of flaws in construction. "I got so tired of repairing cracked knuckle joints and having to leave drop-leaf tables with their leaves up because they wouldn't set down straight—there ain't nothing you can do about that once the top shrinks, except rebuild the whole bottom or the whole top—that I resolved never to build anything that won't last right. I don't care if nobody built things this way before. Those old guys give me a lot in the way of design and styling, I can't beat that. But their construction, I take what they give me and go on from there." He details his experience with American antiques: the sides of highboys and lowboys, cracked because they were glued crossgrain to the leg posts; bracket feet cracked or missing because they were glued crossgrain to support blocking; drawers protruding or stuck shut because carcasses have twisted; drawers broken apart because stylishly thin dovetail pins didn't hold.

For 21 years, Emmett was the salaried cabinetmaker of a wealthy Knoxville family. His patron provided almost unlimited facilities, choice woods, and put minimal constraints on time or cost. "They would come to me with a picture of a Philadelphia highboy or a Goddard-Townsend kneehole and say, 'Robert, make me one of these.' And I'd study up on it and figure out how to make it, and sometimes a year or so later I'd have the piece done."

I left Emmett's shop with photos of his work and a list of preoccupying questions. How could 18th-century cabinetmakers have conceived such sophisticated designs and not have figured that wood moves, or not have known that if glued crossgrain it will crack? Did they know and not care? Or was Emmett wrong: were only the shoddy pieces built this way? Is it true that most 18th-century pieces have structural problems? And if so, what about craftsmen reproducing those pieces today? In pursuit of stylistic authenticity, do they imitate faulty constructions? Or do other reproduction cabinetmakers share Emmett's devotion to improving construction?

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Emmett's reproduction of the Townsend-Goddard kneehole bureau (front cover and next page) posed the most intriguing questions. Built on an independent, full-blind dovetailed bracket-foot frame, with half sliding-dovetailed dustboards, the blocking and shells carved from solid curly cherry, the reproduction begged comparison with its source. Could the original be anything like this tour-de-force? I arranged to meet with Pat Kane, curator of American decorative arts at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, Conn., where a Newport kneehole resides. Yale's Garvan collection includes some of the best American 18th-century furniture and indeed, as we walk past them, I notice many of the highboys, lowboys and secretaries have split sides and cracked feet.

The kneehole bureau, dated 1755-1785, is of Honduras mahogany, dark with stain and patina. Thus the first impression it makes is quite different from Emmett's curly cherry reproduction, which seems fairly on fire with color and figure. The Newport blockfront sits dark and quiet on its pedestal, its kneehole like a cave. Its age is evident from the way it has worn and settled into itself. It has dignity. The drawer insides



Detail of Newport kneehole bureau in the Garvan collection at the Yale University Art Gallery (top) and of Emmett's reproduction (bottom). Other photos of these pieces appear on the front cover.

are a greyed, mild-grained tulip poplar, in striking contrast to Emmett's shimmering blistered poplar. But it isn't just the materials or their newness that makes Emmett's blockfront the more assertive. Comparing the original closely with the photos I have brought from Knoxville, I see that Emmett's carving is simpler, his shaping bolder, his reliefs sharper. At the periphery of the concave shell, Emmett's carved line approaches a zigzag, punctuated with V-grooves not present in the Newport shell, which curves more gently in and out. Emmett's ogee foot bulges emphatically, and his moldings are heavier. The effect is surreal. Emmett's piece seems to take the original design and say "THIS is what I am."

I ask Kane what she thinks of Emmett's work. It is masterful, she says, but overdone. She prefers the original blockfront. I ask if she knows of any 18th-century blockfronts with carved shells and elaborate molding in such a highly figured, difficult wood as curly cherry. Maybe some Connecticut piece, she says, but probably not: 18th-century craftsmen did not usually model highly figured wood, they rather displayed it in flat surfaces, as in highboy drawers.

I point out the construction of Emmett's piece. She's never seen a full-blind-dovetailed bracket foot, sometimes a splined miter, but generally the bracket pieces are simply mitered together with a glue block behind. The direction of the glue block's grain? Vertical, perpendicular to the grain of the bracket pieces. Does she encounter many cracked and broken bracket feet? Yes, it's quite common. How about drawer dividers, are they full dustboards, half-dovetailed into the carcass side? Hardly; it's usually only Philadelphia pieces (later I find out it's Williamsburg pieces too) that include full dustboards, usually dadoed into the sides. The blocking—is it applied or carved from the solid? The blocking is usually solid,

My Construction of a Newport Kneehole Bureau

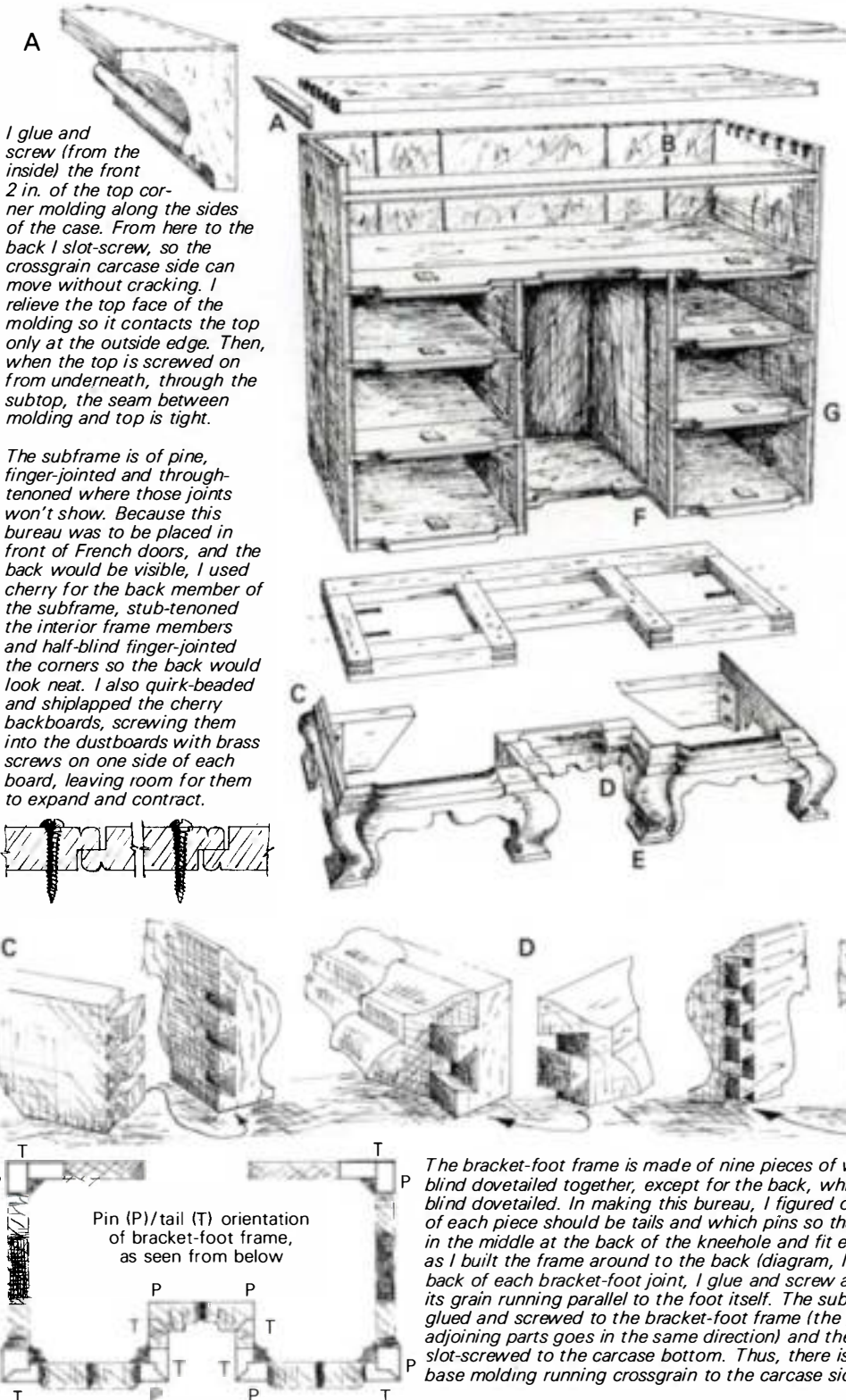
The first Goddard-Townsend kneehole bureau I saw was in *The Magazine Antiques* in May, 1922. I fell in love with this wonderful design but did not get to build it until 1963—good thing, for in the twenties I would have made a mess of it. In 1938, on a trip to the lumberyard, I came across a pile of curly cherry boards, aged and rich, 12 in. or 14 in. wide by 16 ft. long. I was so excited, I carried 100 ft. of that wood out of there myself; honestly I don't think I could have lifted it if it hadn't been curly. It was that wood I eventually used for my kneehole bureau. By

1963 I had seen a few other photos of kneeholes, but I never managed to get more than three dimensions: 34 in. high by 20 in. deep by 37 in. wide. I didn't know if that last measurement was to the edge of the top or to the edge of the carcass, and I'd never seen anything but the front of one of these pieces. I know what I built isn't exactly like the original, but I spent enough years trying to imitate the construction and workmanship of the old masters to know of their shortcomings. I hope what I've done can be seen as continuing where they left off.

—Robert Emmett

The half-blind dovetails between the pine subtop and the carcass side could as well be through dovetails, because the molding would cover the joint; except I find it easier to make a good, square case if the opposite boards are the same size. I clamp them together and run them over the jointer, end grain first, then edge grain to clean up any tear-out.

I make my dovetails and pins equal size because I got tired of repairing drawerfronts with those thin pins that break out. I cut the sides of my tails on the table saw set at 22°; then I chisel the waste and the pins. All of these drawer fronts and the kneehole door are solid curly cherry; the top drawer front is carved from 12/4 stock. Most carvers prefer to use straight-grained woods, but I love figured wood too much to avoid it just because it's difficult to work.



I glue and screw (from the inside) the front 2 in. of the top corner molding along the sides of the case. From here to the back I slot-screw, so the crossgrain carcass side can move without cracking. I relieve the top face of the molding so it contacts the top only at the outside edge. Then, when the top is screwed on from underneath, through the subtop, the seam between molding and top is tight.

The subframe is of pine, finger-jointed and through-tenoned where those joints won't show. Because this bureau was to be placed in front of French doors, and the back would be visible, I used cherry for the back member of the subframe, stub-tenoned the interior frame members and half-blind finger-jointed the corners so the back would look neat. I also quirk-beaded and shiplapped the cherry backboards, screwing them into the dustboards with brass screws on one side of each board, leaving room for them to expand and contract.

I use full, thin dustboards, half-dovetailed to the sides all the way to the back of the case to help hold it together. I make this joint shallower than the full dovetails of the drawer dividers so the amount of wood taken out of the sides does not weaken them.

The bracket-foot frame is made of nine pieces of wood, all full-blind dovetailed together, except for the back, which is half-blind dovetailed. In making this bureau, I figured out which end of each piece should be tails and which pins so that I could start in the middle at the back of the kneehole and fit each joint tight as I built the frame around to the back (diagram, left). In the back of each bracket-foot joint, I glue and screw a glue block, its grain running parallel to the foot itself. The subframe gets glued and screwed to the bracket-foot frame (the grain of the adjoining parts goes in the same direction) and the subframe is slot-screwed to the carcass bottom. Thus, there is no applied base molding running crossgrain to the carcass sides.



but the convex shells are applied. Kane says yes, these particular shells have held up well; she has seen some cracked.

Visiting a museum with the curator at your side is a wonderful opportunity. It's my first chance to see the inside, back and bottom of a famous piece of furniture, and, naively, I am taken with how mundane it is. The boards are roughsawn, unfinished; the numbered drawers and the word "upper" scrawled on the upper drawer divider attest to the piece's real-shop origin. Galleries today display contemporary furniture, whose undersides are finished with the same preciousness as their faces. (Emmett's, in that sense, is contemporary furniture.) It's good to know a great piece of furniture can have its back nailed on. But it's not so good to know that beneath the finely worked face are some unquestionably troublesome constructions. Not only are the glue blocks running crossgrain to the bracket-foot members, but the bracket feet themselves aren't even attached to the carcass. They're attached to the moldings, outside the line of gravity of the carcass. And the molding is merely nailed (on the side, crossgrain) to the carcass. I can't understand how the thing is standing there, until I realize it's resting on its glue blocks. No wonder the feet are so vulnerable, they're only molding.

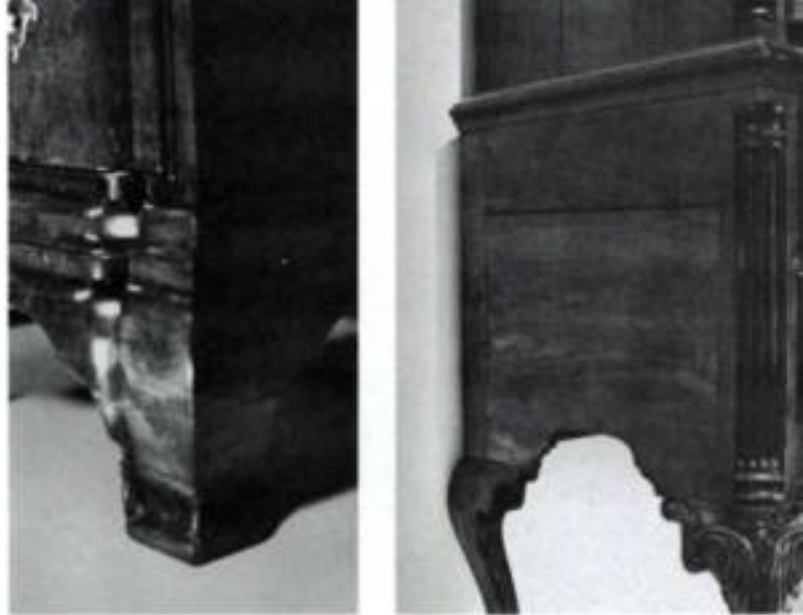
I leave Yale understanding better why Emmett got absorbed in redesigning traditional construction, and I sense too how the inner strength of his pieces came to be reflected in their faces. Nonetheless, I need to know about 18th-century furniture makers: What did these inconsistencies in construction mean to them? I arrange to meet with Robert Trent, research associate, and Robert Walker, furniture restorer, both at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

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The kneehole bureau at the Museum of Fine Arts is by Edmund Townsend (1736-1811), a grandson of Solomon, the progenitor of 13 Townsend cabinetmakers. With the seven Goddard cabinetmakers, related to the Townsends by marriage, they produced the remarkably consistent, well-developed Newport style. This kneehole is mahogany, like the one at Yale, though the grain is more rowed. The curves, however, are less pronounced, and there is almost as much difference in composure between this blockfront and the one at Yale as there is between the Yale blockfront and Emmett's. These convex shells are almost perfect domes, with only the barest undulation at the periphery. The beading is softer. The ogee foot is straighter. The brasses are more sedate. The construction is virtually the same as in the Yale blockfront.

When I show my photographs and drawings of Emmett's blockfront to Trent and Walker, they hear me out. Finally, Trent says, "Well that's fine, but it looks like he's building a suspension bridge. . . . There's no question that it's possible to improve upon the designs, but what people appreciate about the old stuff is the fact that it was produced under pressure and with a commitment to making a profit. It's the deftness of it—getting an effect with a reasonable input of time and money. I know there were wealthy people supporting the Townsend-Goddard shops, but it was still a business."

What about the structural weaknesses in the design, I ask. "I don't think those are structural problems," says Walker, "I think those are atmospheric problems. People say to me, 'I've got this foot that keeps dropping off my chair. What can I do about it?' They're asking the wrong question. They should be asking, 'What should I do about the environment that my chair is in? What do I do to control it?'"



Bracket feet and highboy side cracked because of crossgrain construction. Courtesy Yale University Art Gallery, Garvan collection.

I was to hear this argument again from other curators and furniture restorers. Wallace Gusler (p. 50) at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia told me most problems with 18th-century furniture are 20th-century problems. Insulated homes with central heating have created a significantly drier winter environment for furniture than was so for the first 150 years of its existence. Cabinetmakers 200 years ago did not have to deal with today's extremes of wood movement. But this only points the question: If you were reproducing an 18th-century piece today, would it make any sense to duplicate constructions that have become inadequate? "Not at all," answered Trent, "but Emmett isn't simply eliminating weaknesses here, he's souping this thing up; it's become a showpiece, a jewel. It's modern furniture, and I don't see how it's economically realistic."

Are structural shortcomings compromises, then, with economic reality? Trent continues, "People talk as if 18th-century cabinetmakers were building pieces of architecture that were going to last forever, and that's not what they were trying to do. I don't think they had any interest beyond the gen-



Newport kneehole bureau, circa 1770, by Edmund Townsend. Photograph © 1980 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Karolik collection.



Left, Gerald Curry's reproduction of a Queen Anne highboy in walnut. Right, Douglas Campbell at his tenoner made from a Sears table saw. The extension table is hinged at the far end of the main table and is raised and lowered by a threaded rod. On this swinging table is mounted a 1-HP motor belted to a saw arbor. Both this arbor and the saw's regular one are fitted with plywood blades (to cut the tenon shoulders) and a Sears molding head with straight knives (to waste the wood and produce the cheeks). With a miter gauge and an angle block, Campbell's tenoner can quickly make the double-angled tenons on traditional chair stretchers.

eration it was owned in, and, of course, most of the pieces didn't last more than a couple of generations."

I leave Boston beginning to realize the variety of attitudes possible toward making period furniture. But if Emmett's work is unrealistic, what, according to cabinetmakers who earn their livings building reproductions, is realistic?

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For four years, Gerald Curry has run a one-man reproduction shop in Auburn, Maine. He's built a stable business in part by paying attention to promotion. He advertises, and answers inquiries with a 20-page catalog of Queen Anne and Chippendale furniture. In it Curry writes about the authenticity of working mainly with hand tools, and about the concentration and harmony afforded by working alone on one piece at a time. It is an attractive and—to people contemplating parting with \$3,000 for a reproduction—a reassuring presentation.

I am a little surprised, then, when I drive up to his shop, which has neither sign nor showroom. It is a barn with gate doors and a noisy gas heater. The machines are few and simple: a 6-in. jointer, a Sears shaper, no thickness planer. Curry began woodworking as a finish carpenter in Boston; then he did commercial and domestic installations. Wanting to do "something nicer" than kitchen cabinets, he haunted the Museum of Fine Arts to learn about proportion and what makes a good piece good. "At first," he says, "I went to furniture stores. That's where a lot of people go wrong. They look at pieces two or three times removed from the originals. Many reproductions are composites. Proportions, detailing, construction don't have much to do with what they originally were. When I do a reproduction I try to make it as authentic and exact as possible, but I know 1980 slips in."

We look at a Queen Anne highboy in walnut (above), almost finished. The molding, upon close inspection, retains the uniformity of the router and shaper. The flat surfaces, though hand-planed, are sanded fine and sealed with a contemporary oil/varnish mix. How does this compare with his usual work? "Usually I talk to people for quite a while before beginning a piece. Different people want different things. The guy I'm making this highboy for is used to 20th-century perfection—smooth, machined surfaces, no rough edges. I'm talk-

ing with another fellow about a similar piece and he's very concerned that the drawer bottoms and inside be left rough-planed. He likes the idea of its being obviously handmade." I ask why people buy reproductions. "I get people sending me photographs of museum pieces or advertisements from antique dealers. This Queen Anne highboy, for instance: The original is priced at \$30,000. I'm doing this reproduction for \$3,500. And it's a more usable piece. The one in the advertisement has problems. The side is cracked, it's missing a brass, it needs restoration work that may cost as much as this piece new. And how can you feel comfortable using a piece of furniture that costs \$30,000? I know I wouldn't."

I show Curry my talisman, the pictures and construction drawings of Emmett's curly cherry kneehole bureau. Curry nods; he is well aware that many of the pieces he copies have construction problems. Emmett's improvements make sense, but Curry can't expect his customers to pay for full-blind dovetailed bracket feet.

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In search of reproduction cabinetmakers the name Douglas Campbell kept coming up. Campbell recently moved to Newport, R.I., having turned to cabinetmaking 20 years ago at age 30, when, for health, he had to quit salvage diving. Three years ago he was in Denmark, Maine, employing eight men, drying wood in his own kiln and turning out a dozen pieces a week. ("I've got nothing against Grand Rapids," he told me. "If it weren't for Grand Rapids, you and I wouldn't have anything to sit on.") His business was doing well, except that Maine is far away from most potential customers. An accessible shop and showroom were in order.

Campbell found that Newport, with a history of 18th-century prosperity and turn-of-this-century affluence, still attracts people with money. Now he makes \$1,000 worth of furniture a week, working by himself. With a year's work on order, he's looking to open a larger shop, and wishing business might ease up a little in the meantime.

Campbell is the sort of fellow who can grin at you and say, "I don't fool around." He's learned to work fast, he tells me, out of desperation. "It's making things work that buys the groceries. No matter how cute some people want to be, it

doesn't mean anything until you sell the piece. That's how you get the opportunity to make another. . . . When I started out I knew nothing about woodworking. I bought a hundred dollars worth of old hand tools, and it was ridiculous. I worked so hard—hand-planing sugar maple boards four sides—it was pathetic. I still don't have a decent hand plane. But that's all right. I don't use them anymore."

Campbell's work, though built fast, is not unsound. His joints are mortise and tenon ("I have dowels I bought 20 years ago; I don't use dowels"). He stabs out his mortises with a hollow-chisel mortiser ("I hope I never have to cut them any other way"), and he cuts tenons on a tenoner home built from a Sears table saw. I ask Campbell how he feels about working in fabled Newport, just three blocks from where the building that housed John Townsend's shop still stands and eight blocks from John Goddard's. "I don't mind a bit," he says. "Oh, I read up on them some, but it was a business. Most of what you learn isn't anything to dream on. I was reading how John Goddard was finishing a piece—it was on order—and someone walked in off the street *with cash*, and he sold it to him, right there. Now that makes sense to me; I'd do that if I needed the money."

I debate whether there is any point in showing Campbell my pictures of Emmett's work. There is a reproduction of a Newport blockfront in his showroom. Its construction follows the original, though the joinery and detailing are coarser. The top drawer is that of a butler's desk: the front unlatches and hinges down, revealing a writing surface and pigeonhole gallery—a lucrative idea, Campbell points out. "You could do well converting chests of drawers to butler's desks. All you'd have to do is have your customer send you the top drawer of

his chest, and you could copy the materials, dimensions and finish." I ask if he's built any knee-hole bureaus. He has. Does he like them? "Actually," he says, "I hate the looks of the damn things." I decide not to show him the photos of Emmett's work.

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Harold Ionson ushered me into his shop in Westwood, Mass., settled back against a bench and nodded the brim of his blue baseball cap at the surroundings. "This," he said, "is where I play." Do you make a living here too, I ask? "Oh no," he says, "there isn't any money in this business, never has been. That's why all the fine custom shops died. Even when I got out of trade school in 1938, they were dying then. You can't count on people's taste. All my life I made things for other people, 90% of whom didn't appreciate what kind of work it was. I arrived at a point in my life, at age 55, when I decided I was going to play the rest of my life and build a few things for myself. I wanted a couple of banjo clocks. It's too much setting up for just one. So I built 24. If people want to buy the ones I don't want, fine, but that isn't why I built them."

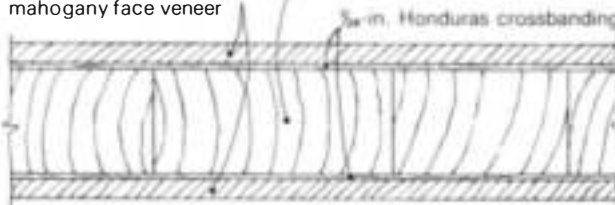
A museum curator in Boston had recommended Ionson to me as one who makes careful reproductions of the furniture of John and Thomas Seymour. The Seymours came from England in 1785 and excelled here in making double-tambour desks of mahogany and satinwood, inlaid with rosewood, ebony and ivory. They worked not in the familiar Queen Anne or Chippendale style, but in those of the Federal period. Their adaptations of Hepplewhite and Sheraton were distinctly American. They alternated tambours of curly and bird's-eye maple, for instance, with mahogany, and painted case interiors an American robin's-egg blue. They are rich



Harold Ionson, above, and one of his 11 Seymour-style, double-tambour desks, right. This one is in San Domingo mahogany and maple burl with satinwood and ebony inlay. The keyholes are bordered in ivory; enamel pulls have yet to be mounted on the bottom drawers. Ionson deals with the problem of wood movement in his cabinet sides by making his own thick-veneered plywood. Face-gluing the core (as shown in the drawing) orients the grain so that maximum expansion and contraction take place in the thickness rather than in the width of the plywood.



$\frac{1}{8}$ -in. sawn San Domingo mahogany face veneer $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. face-glued basswood core



and colorful pieces, little known to most people simply because they are now out of fashion.

What attracted Ionson to Seymour? "The beauty. You put a bunch of pieces in a room and the Seymour piece will stand out, even from 50 feet away—that's a Seymour piece. And the workmanship is good, even inside. Most of the old pieces, you probably know, are rather rough inside: glue blocks, wedges, they really hacked them together. Before the Federal period, furniture depended on carving for its beauty. I'm not much of a carver. They were massive pieces, too. Not badly proportioned, just large. In the Federal period, furniture became delicate and feminine. It got its beauty from figured veneers, inlays and exotic woods. Now a lot of people say, 'Oh, this is a veneered piece, it's cheap.' And they have good reason to think that way. Furniture manufacturers brought that on, veneering everything, burlap bags almost, which gave veneered furniture a bad name. But originally, only the finest pieces were veneered—because it's ten times more work."

Ionson is working on one of a run of eleven folding-leaf, double-tambour desks. They are like Seymour's desks, though not copies of any particular one. Ionson's construction is more sophisticated. He makes his lumber-core plywood from 1/8-in. sawn San Domingo mahogany, laminated over Honduras mahogany crossbanding and a basswood core. The core is face-joined rather than edge-joined (pp. 37 and 78) so that maximum expansion and contraction takes place in the thickness of the stock rather than across its width. In spite of the dimensional stability this provides, Ionson does not glue these panels solidly to the legs. For added insurance against cracks that have occurred even in veneered panels, he mortises the legs, fixing the panel at the top and allowing it to float in oversize mortises at the bottom. All the tenons are pinned, the ones toward the bottom through elongated holes. Veneer conceals the pins. The drawer faces are veneered, too, and rabbeted out to receive satinwood and ebony banding, then cockbeaded. Even the end-grain edges of the drawer fronts are veneered so that when the dovetail pins are cut, they contrast well with the pine drawer sides. In short, practically the whole piece is veneered and inlaid, yet because the veneer is thick, the surface is remarkably substantial. It doesn't look ready to delaminate, it doesn't even look like veneer. "I couldn't work this way before I retired," he remarks. "I had a living to make."



David Salisbury explaining 18th-century woodworking at the reconstructed Anthony Hay shop at Colonial Williamsburg.

I am anxious to get Ionson's reaction to Emmett's work: The technical attention each has given the original designs seems something they have in common. Right away Ionson is taken with the full-blind dovetailed bracket feet. "Now that's not bad, that's good, that's nice." So is the rest of the piece, he decides. The dovetails on the drawers look too uniform for his taste, "but I won't disagree with him. I've seen those thin pins fail." Ionson wants to know how much time Emmett spent. I tell him 1,200 hours. Says Ionson, "That's 30 weeks. There wasn't any grass growing under his feet while he was doing this." I play devil's advocate and point out how economically unrealistic the work is. Ionson replies, "Oh, that's all right. Nothing's too good for me."

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Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia is the premier restoration site of 18th-century life in America. At least 17 cabinet-makers worked at Williamsburg between 1720 and 1776, and the furniture they made is known for its refined construction and restrained styling (p. 50). At the Anthony Hay shop, rebuilt on its original foundation, I met David Salisbury, who came to Williamsburg to learn 18th-century woodworking. He was reproducing four bookcases for an 18th-century interior. Not only were their style and construction authentic, but he was using only authentic tools and techniques. This shop does not sustain itself by the pieces it produces. Its main purpose is to be a living museum, and much of the craftsmen's workday is spent explaining to visitors how Anthony



Mack Headley, Jr., left, removes the clamps from one of a set of twelve side chairs he is reproducing for Colonial Williamsburg. Below, the work of three Headley generations: Grandfather Boyd, Sr.'s, lowboy (right), his son Mack Headley, Sr.'s, Chippendale slipper chair (left) and Mack Jr.'s, Philadelphia Chippendale armchair (center).



Hay and his contemporaries made furniture.

Mack Headley, Jr., was master cabinetmaker here for three years; Salisbury had been his apprentice. When I went to see Headley at his shop in Winchester, Va., I learned why he had left. At Williamsburg he'd been able to study many fine original pieces of furniture, and had come to understand them. Now it was time to apply what he had learned.

Headley, 29, is a third-generation cabinetmaker. The family shop produces several hundred pieces of period furniture a year, including custom work and restorations. At its largest, when run by grandfather Boyd Headley, Sr., the shop employed 14 people. Now it's seven people, producing sound furniture in factory volumes and at factory prices—in the shop outside the house. "We used to build everything," says Boyd's son, Mack, Sr. "We're a little more specialized now than my father was. I draw the line at Victorian stuff, he didn't draw the line anywhere." Mack, Sr., tells of the transformation of Empire chests: "We used to take Empire chests—my father would get a truckload for \$10 apiece—and we'd cut off the bonnet drawer and get rid of the panel sides and replace those turned feet with bracket feet and carve in a couple of quarter-columns and we'd have a Chippendale chest. 'Add a hundred years to the piece and a hundred dollars to the price,' my father used to say. Once a man got the hang of it, he could do one in 24 hours."

Mack, Jr., did not return to the family business upon leaving Williamsburg. "Dad and I just have different ideas about furniture," Mack says. "It takes me ten days to make a chair;

it takes him two. We're both happier in separate shops." Mack, like his father, was brought up using machines to make furniture. It wasn't until he went to Williamsburg that he did much handwork. "In joinery and in carving especially, when you make an exact reproduction, you commit yourself to learning how the maker used his tools. The better you understand that, the better the reproduction you can make. A lot of people getting started are anxious to declare their independence, not willing to put themselves aside for awhile to study how early craftsmen worked. If you try to be too creative when you do a reproduction, you're going to miss a lot of what it has to teach you; it's very much a learning experience."

Headley's reproductions are each true to an individual style (see box, below). Variety is a matter for customer relations: "What do you enjoy in your furniture?" he asks. "If a customer hasn't come to me with a particular piece in mind, or with a photograph, I ask if it's high-style or country that appeals to him, if he wants the piece to depend on its sculptural qualities or on its carving. You have to decide when you start a piece what you intend to be its graces. Period furniture forms are well established. Variations within them, therefore, allow for subtle effects. One chair will stand out because of a slightly more forward cant to its legs, and this calls attention to the splat, which can be shaped to direct the eye to a particularly delicate crest rail. You don't appreciate a lot of these things until you put two chairs next to one another. Then the overall similarities make the differences more pronounced."

I show Emmett's work to Headley. He has seen full-blind

Two reproductions

The sidechair (right) that I reproduced from a piece by Peter Scott (1694-1775) shows how strongly he was influenced by early Georgian design, even after he'd lived thirty years in this country. The emphasis is sculptural; the carving flat and subordinated to gently rounded, reflective surfaces. The cabriole leg satisfies a restrained and sober taste, ending in a flattened ball and claw that suggests weight.

The armchair (left) is my interpretation of a pattern popular with high-style Philadelphia chairmakers in the early 1770s. The curves are freer and defined by elaborate carving that plays a larger role in

the design. The leg is curvier and stands higher and lighter on its ball. The claw itself is tense with sinews and bones, yet because the transition to the ankle is more gradual and the final shape closer to the original blank, this foot is easier to carve than a Scott foot.

In construction, the Scott chair has the rail running behind the kneeblock rather than above it, which allows an extra $\frac{3}{4}$ in. for the mortise-and-tenon joint between the leg and rail. The Scott kneeblock is also supported by glueblocks absent from the later Philadelphia-style piece.

—Mack Headley, Jr.



John W. ...



Eugene Landon, left, among some of his 500 molding planes and other 18th-century tools. The underside of one of his reproductions, a Chippendale armchair, above, reveals how closely he copies the original textures.

dovetailed bracket feet among the more demanding constructions at Williamsburg. He does not disagree with Emmett's technology, but raises the issue of context: "For extra work and extra time, you have to have a patron who is willing to pay. Here in Virginia there was an old moneyed aristocracy, very conscious of what was currently fashionable in England and expecting the more elaborate English constructions. So that's what cabinetmakers here were paid to produce. In New England, they had to use less time-consuming constructions because the newly moneyed merchants there wouldn't pay otherwise. There are records of English cabinetmakers who tried to establish themselves in Boston and just couldn't do it. The important thing is to understand that there were reasons for pieces to have been produced the way they were."

Later that day Mack's father put it this way: "A lot of people would dearly love to be artists for a living. But I haven't found enough people who'll pay for pure art."

* * *

Almost a year after receiving the letter from Grover Floyd I drove up to Eugene Landon's place in Montoursville, Pa. It was raining. The driveway was mud, and piled in the mud, uncovered to the rain, were fitches of walnut and cherry. A few of the walnut pieces were crotches with curly sections more than 15 in. wide. The cherry boards were 12 ft. long. All were dripping with rain, thoroughly wet. Most of the sapwood had deteriorated and was crumbling off. One cherry flitch had a check 3 ft. long, right up the middle.

I'd first seen Landon's work in photos of the Appalachian Craft Center show (back cover, *FWW* #21, March '80). His Queen Anne side chair looked intriguingly old. The surface texture, the joint lines, its presence seemed not typical of a reproduction, certainly not a recent one. Yet it was.

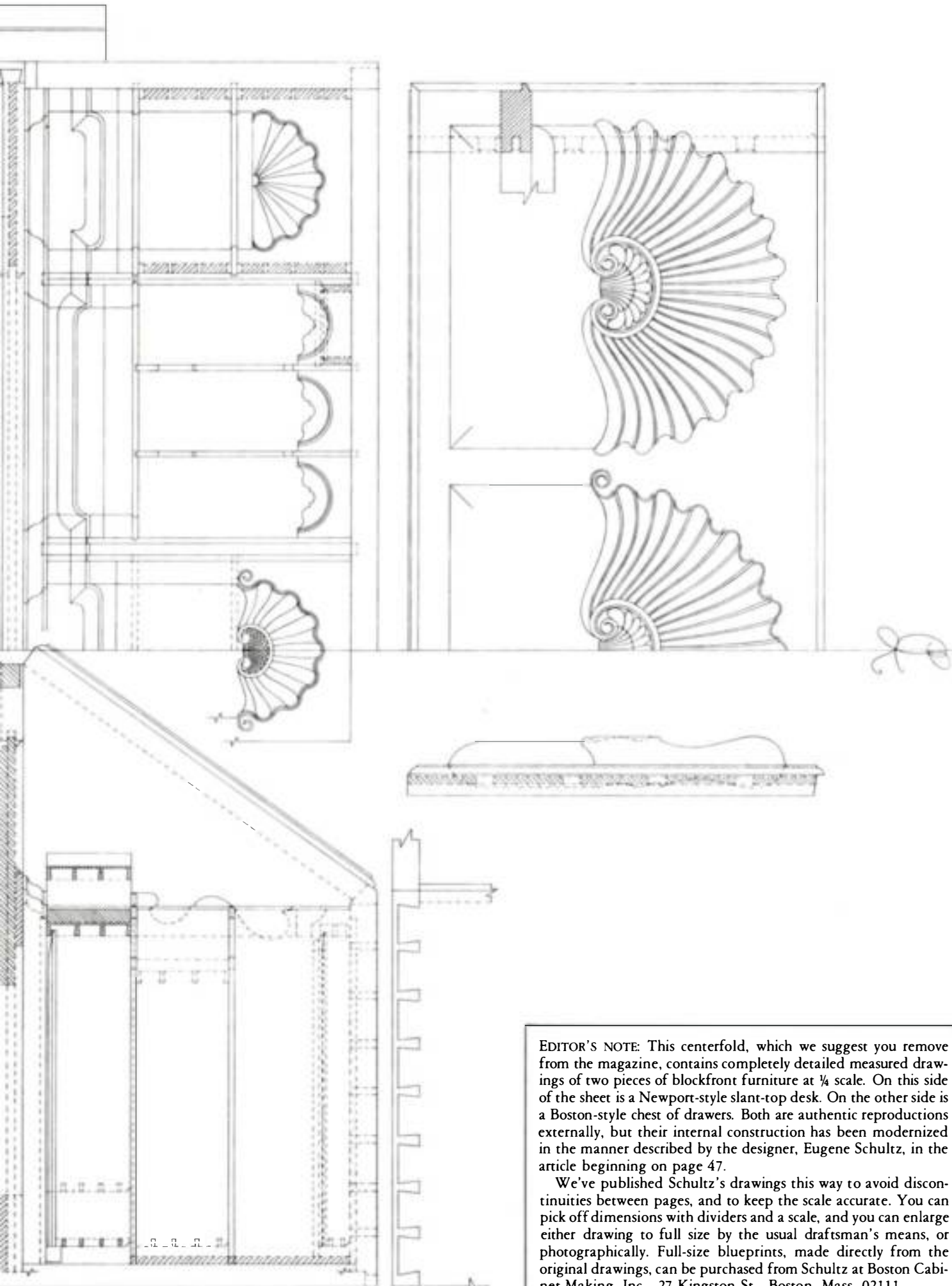
After I wipe the mud off my feet, I learn that Landon had been for 20 years a paint and varnish chemist, though he'd built and restored furniture as a hobby and part-time business since he was in high school. Six years ago he left his job to do it full time. Now, never having advertised, relying solely on referrals for business, he does 40 to 50 pieces a year, about half of which are restorations. "People from all over bring me their basket cases," he says. "But I've been very fortunate to work on some of the greatest pieces of furniture in this country. That's how I've learned. Old pieces have a soul—they'll talk to you, if you listen. It's amazing how consistent the old guys were once they found the right way to do something. I find it creative to figure out how a piece was

done, retracing the steps the maker must have gone through." He points out scribe marks on an old chair. They show how invariably the marking-gauge fence was placed on the outside surfaces to ensure visual balance despite stock that was not uniform in size. "I used to work from photographs," he says, "but no photograph is going to show you the little things, the mark of the hand that gives a piece its character. So the pieces I get in for restoration, they're what I copy and learn from, though if I copied all I wanted to, I wouldn't have time to do the work they're in here for. Actually I'd like to cut back on my restorations, so I can build more. But I can't, they're my source of learning."

So I am talking to yet another student of 18th-century design and construction whose textbook is the doing of it. Emmett, unable to directly contact the furniture he was reproducing, idealized its construction. Ionson's improvements are more modest, though no less technically modern or sophisticated. Mack Headley Jr.'s craftsman-scholarship is most sensitive to the historic and aesthetic identity of the pieces he copies. Landon's attentions take him close to anachronism. He doesn't use sandpaper. He owns and uses more than 500 wooden planes, having sold his shaper long ago because "you don't get the little tear-out or imperfections the old guys did." His other power tools he expects similarly to get rid of; he uses them rarely and always obliterates their markings with traditional hand tools. If the glue blocks in an original were split or hewn out with an ax, Landon gets out his 18th-century hatchet. The result is a piece that, as Ionson might say, is rather rough inside. I ask Landon about the constructional shortcomings that initiated my search. Does he glue panels crossgrain to leg posts as they originally were? Of course. Does he not expect them to crack? "It delights me when they crack," he says. "It makes them more authentic."

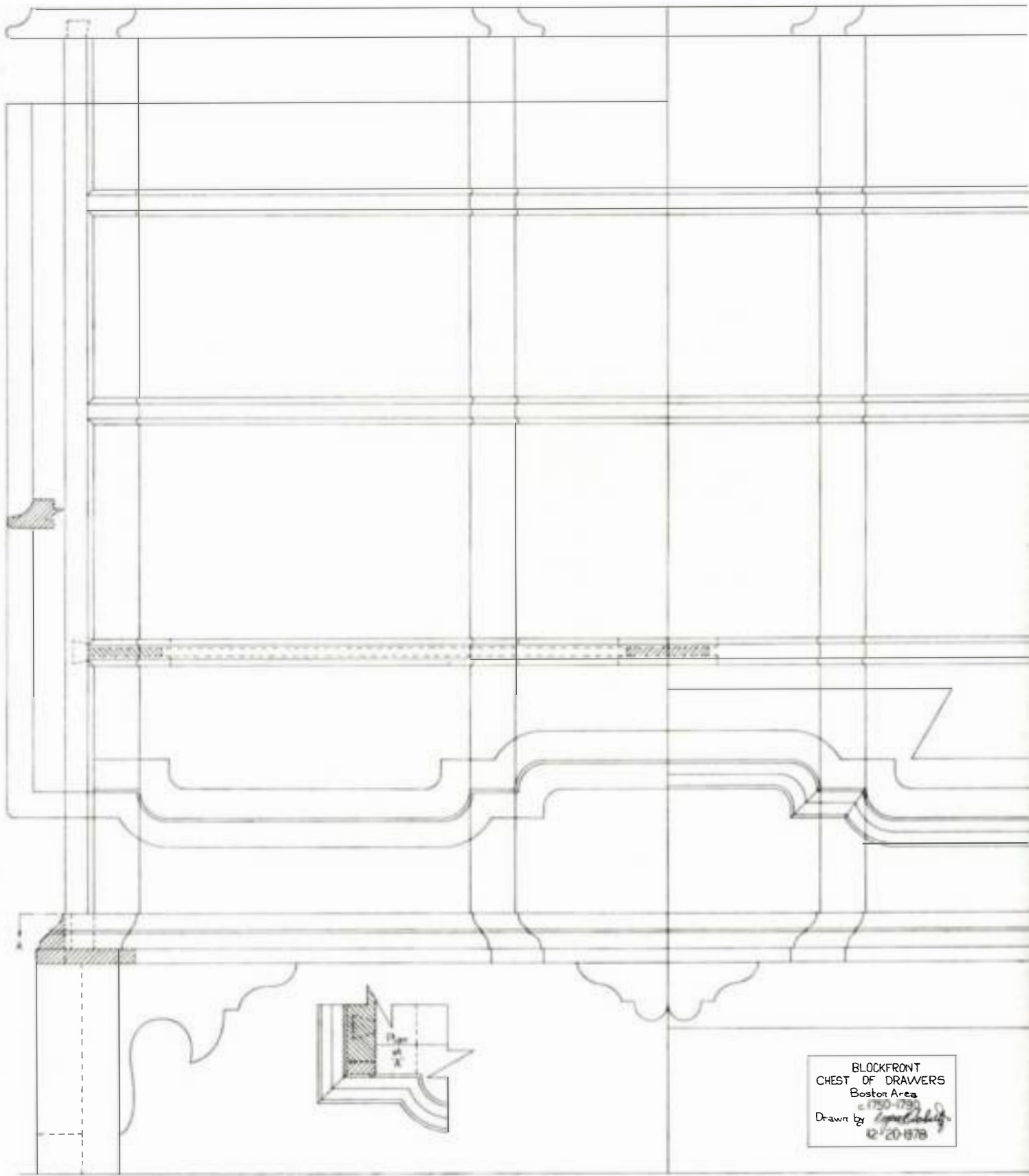
I realize I have come full circle since I met Emmett. As we look out the window of Landon's shop at the dripping fitches, I ask if that's where he dries his wood. "Well," he says, "I've got to move that down to the cellar. I've got 10,000 feet of wood down there and a half-dozen walnut logs in the backyard. I saw all my own wood. What I do is throw it in a pile and leave it there for four or five years. The outside rots and you can just kick the sapwood off with your foot. It gives the walnut that good brown color. They used to bury wood in the barnyard, you know. That's how the old guys did it." □

Rick Mastelli is associate editor of Fine Woodworking.

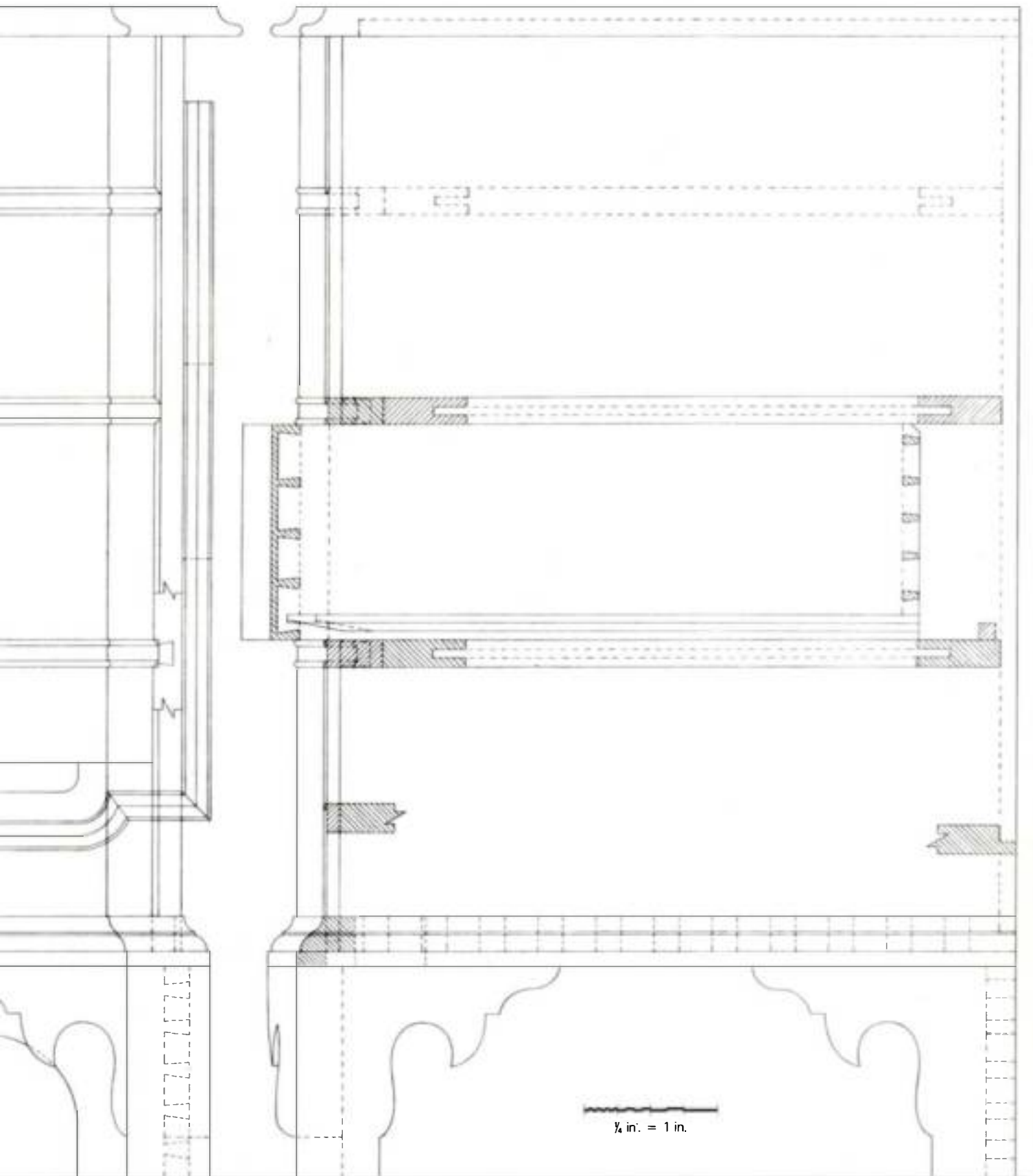


EDITOR'S NOTE: This centerfold, which we suggest you remove from the magazine, contains completely detailed measured drawings of two pieces of blockfront furniture at $\frac{1}{4}$ scale. On this side of the sheet is a Newport-style slant-top desk. On the other side is a Boston-style chest of drawers. Both are authentic reproductions externally, but their internal construction has been modernized in the manner described by the designer, Eugene Schultz, in the article beginning on page 47.

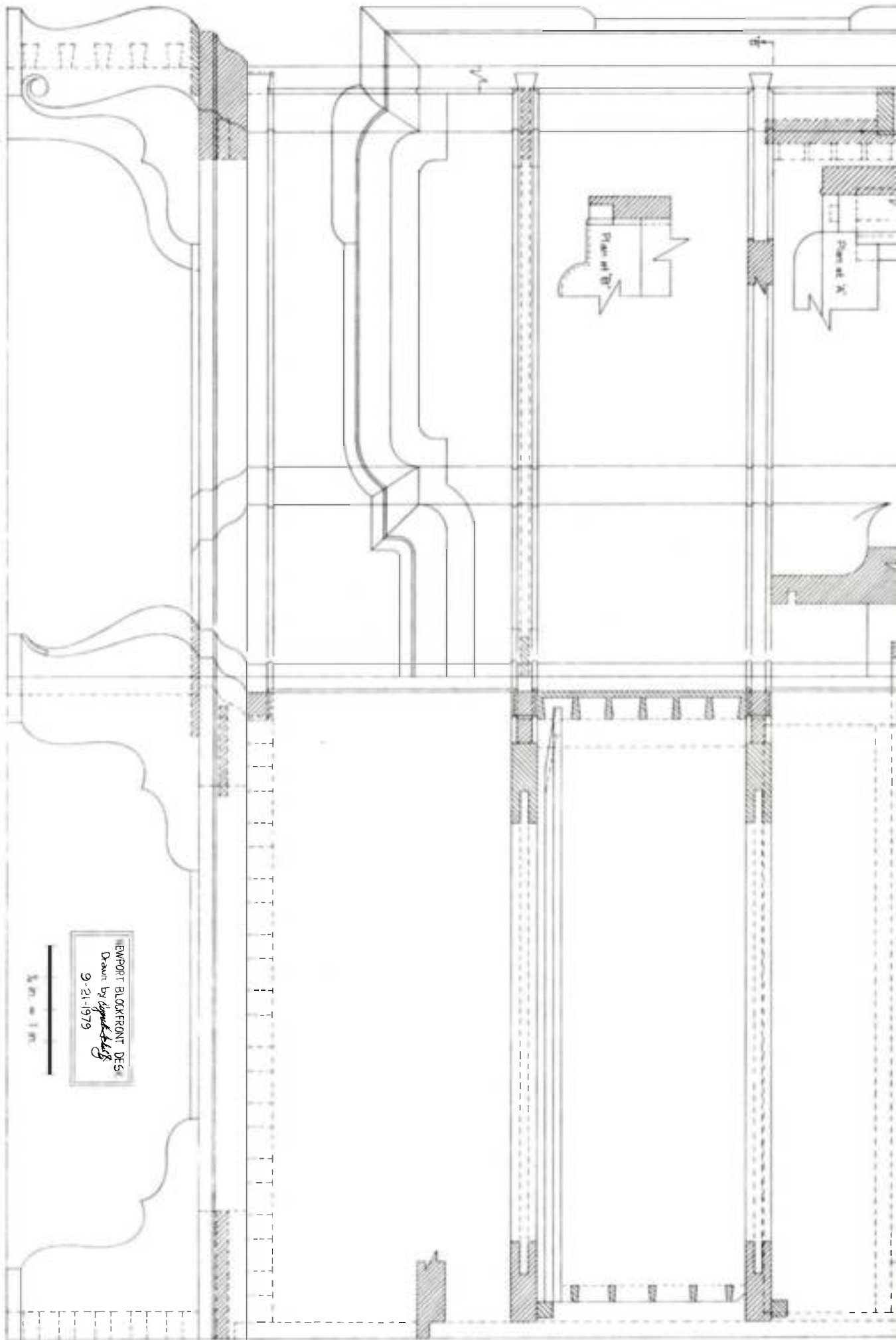
We've published Schultz's drawings this way to avoid discontinuities between pages, and to keep the scale accurate. You can pick off dimensions with dividers and a scale, and you can enlarge either drawing to full size by the usual draftsman's means, or photographically. Full-size blueprints, made directly from the original drawings, can be purchased from Schultz at Boston Cabinet-Making, Inc., 27 Kingston St., Boston, Mass. 02111.



BLOCKFRONT
CHEST OF DRAWERS
Boston Area
© 1950-1990
Drawn by *Lynne L. Kelly*
12-20-87B



1/4 in. = 1 in.



NEWPORT BOOKFRONT DES.
Drawn by *Sydney Kelly*
9-21-1979

