

Stellar Training in

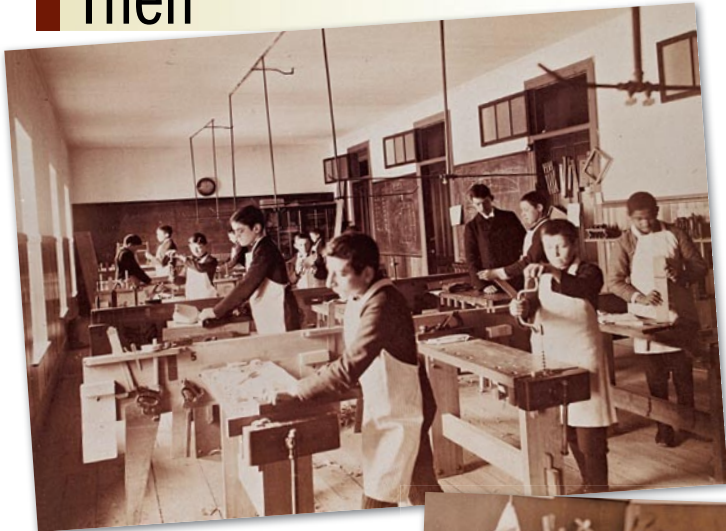
Boston's North Bennet Street School turns 125

BY JONATHAN BINZEN



One if by hand. At 125 years old, Boston's North Bennet Street School (foreground) is roughly half the age of its famous neighbor, the Old North Church (background).

Then



Shop class began in Boston. Beginning in 1889, North Bennet Street added classes in woodworking sloyd, a Swedish system of training schoolchildren in hand skills. The school also trained many sloyd teachers, helping to staff industrial arts classes across the country.

Women's work. From the start, girls were included in the woodworking sloyd classes taught at North Bennet Street. In today's full-time furniture program, about 10% of the students are women.



Online Extra

Hear more from NBSS teachers and alumni and see photos of their work at FineWoodworking.com/extras.

Steve Brown entered North Bennet Street School's Cabinet and Furniture Making program in 1988 with one year's experience in a shop that cranked out thousands of grouting trowels and street-hockey sticks. The furniture program was, he says, "a very intimidating place to come into." Everywhere he looked were students reproducing some of the most challenging pieces of period furniture ever designed. "The scope of the work and the level of quality were just overwhelming," he says. "You can't imagine that you'll ever be doing what other people are doing. But eventually you find out they were just like you."

These days, Brown is the lead instructor in the program, which runs for two years and has four teachers and some 40 students. After 10 years, Brown says, "I'm still blown away by what gets produced here." Sometimes in the early mornings, he walks around the empty shop and marvels at the work that's under way. "It's still incredible to me to see how somebody with very little experience can so quickly pick up the skill and the thinking required to produce work that matches pieces you'd find in a museum."

The school turns 125 this year, and for all that time it has occupied the same quirky building—a former church stitched together with three adjacent townhouses—in Boston's higgledy-piggledy North End. The school was founded to serve the teeming population of recent immigrants then living in the North End. Originally, it provided a range of social services: kindergartens, English classes, vocational training, recreational programs.

One program that had a profound national impact started in 1889 when Pauline Agassiz Shaw, the visionary founder—and funder—of the school, brought two Swedish teachers of woodworking sloyd to NBSS. Sloyd (craft, in Swedish) was an innovative method of teaching hand skills as an integral component of a broader education. Hundreds of grammar-school students attended sloyd classes at NBSS. The teaching of sloyd may have faded, but today's NBSS students, before they learn to use and maintain machines, do projects predominantly with hand tools. And certainly many students in the full-time furniture program—more than half of whom arrive with college degrees—as well as many of the 500 to 600 people who sign up each year for shorter workshops would concur with Shaw that "it is not enough to train the intellect alone ... the eye and the hand are together the most trustworthy leaders of the brain."

Although NBSS is not explicitly a period furniture making school, its instruction is based almost exclusively on American and European pieces from the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Craftsmanship. Period.

Miguel Gómez-Ibáñez, president of NBSS, says, “We didn’t set out to be a period furniture making program. We set out to teach a certain set of skills. And the furniture built from 1750 to 1820 represents the most difficult shaping, the most complex joinery. If you can build that stuff, you can do anything.”

This curriculum largely removes the issue of original design. “Our focus,” Brown says, “is on craftsmanship. Construction, materials, tools, methods, techniques. Not that we’re not conscious of design or don’t care about it, it’s just not our primary focus.”

Cabinet and Furniture Making is just one of eight trade programs at NBSS. There are others in violin making and repair, carpentry, preservation carpentry, locksmithing, piano technology, jewelry making and repair, and bookbinding. NBSS is accredited as a trade school, which means students can apply for government aid, and the full-time programs are geared toward training for employment. This is a bit of a sticking point with many furniture graduates, who find it challenging to make a living. Phil Lowe, a former NBSS student and teacher who now runs his own school, says students “have to realize that building a business is like building

a piece of furniture—it takes a long time. And they need to be as flexible as possible. It isn’t always building masterpieces ... There were times we glued together old kitchen chairs to make money.”

Whether or not graduates make a vocation of their skill, they share an unusual mastery. For graduate Jock Gifford, “the simple truth about the school is that it empowered me to believe that I can build any piece of furniture I can dream up. And make it very well. That’s quite a wonderful feeling.” □

Jonathan Binzen is a consulting editor.



The period precedent. The curriculum at North Bennet Street unravels the complex shaping and joinery of classic period pieces. John McCormack built this mahogany and crotch mahogany bombé chest of drawers as his last project before graduating in 1988. He got the solid mahogany from a single 12¼ board, 23 in. wide by 13 ft. long, resawing it by hand with a two-handed bucksaw.



Cross-pollination. NBSS admits students twice a year to its two-year program, so there are always students at four different points in the curriculum. Many graduates point to the knowledge gained by watching other students as one of the most powerful elements of their experience.



Handing down the legacy. From left, lead instructor Steve Brown, school president Miguel Gómez-Ibáñez, and teachers Dan Faia and Lance Patterson are all graduates of the furniture-making program.

Now