

North Bennet Street Industrial School

Learning cabinetry the traditional way

by John Lively

"A round 1795 John and Thomas Seymour used to have their cabinet shop here," said George Fullerton, pointing down a narrow alleyway off Union St. in Boston's North End as we strolled back from lunch. "There were a lot of cabinetmakers in Boston in those days, and even right up into the 1920s, but few survived the Depression and World War II." As the senior instructor at North Bennet Street Industrial School's cabinet and furniture-making program, Fullerton, 78, has spent the last 30 years of his life trying to rescue that waning tradition of hand craftsmanship. With his associates, Phil Lowe and Lance Patterson, he trains students to design and build furniture in several 18th-century English and American styles—Queen Anne, Chippendale, Sheraton, Hepplewhite, Seymour and Phyfe—and their important regional variations.

Founded in 1881, North Bennet Street is the nation's first industrial arts academy. Students choose to study here for a number of reasons. Some feel that traditional pieces are more commercially successful than contemporary ones, and they want to make careers of reproducing and restoring antiques. Others don't necessarily plan to become period-furniture specialists, but think the most effective way to learn cabinetmaking and design is to gain an intimate knowledge of established forms and techniques before striking off in their own directions. Yet others are moved simply by the strong conviction that classical examples are the best to follow, believing that good designs, like good lumber, should be well seasoned.

On the fourth floor of an old brick building (the school hasn't moved since its founding), with a view of the Old North Church, the woodshop occupies six rooms—two bench rooms, a drafting room, a machine room, a finishing room and a faculty office. The large bench room has its own hollow-chisel mortiser, grinder, drill press, jigsaw and table saw for trimming pieces to final fit. All other machine tools are confined to a single room, which is equipped with a thickness planer, a jointer, a bandsaw, a table saw, a mortising machine, a drill press and three lathes. Given the maximum enrollment of 30 students, whose ages range from 18 to 55 or older, the space and equipment are more than adequate.

There are no formal class sessions at the North Bennet Street School, and no universal grading periods. Whenever there's a vacancy, the next student in line on the waiting list (about 12 months long) enters the program. Structured more like an intensive apprenticeship than an academic curriculum, the 18-month course begins with the student learning to square a block of wood with a hand plane. By the end of the program, each student will have completed several challenging projects and will have become proficient at building chairs, tables and casegoods. "The native skill many of these students have really amazes me," Fullerton said. "I often walk over to a beginner's bench where he might be carving the crest rail for a Chippendale chair, and he's doing such a



At North Bennet Street School, students learn traditional design and technique. Above, Hank Ouellette carefully pares the rear leg flush with the side rail on his cherry Queen Anne side chair, assembled dry.

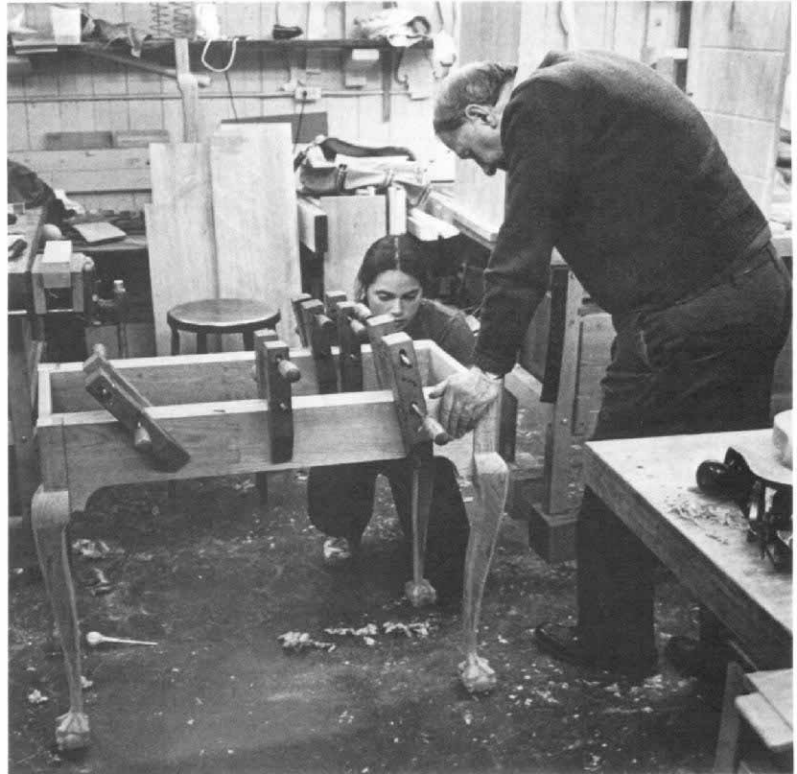
good job of it that I'd swear he's been a carver somewhere before. But, of course, he hasn't. I'm very fortunate in having such good students."

The work of new students is supervised closely, both in its planning and construction phases. More advanced students carry on with considerable independence, relying on one another, as well as on staff members, for advice, guidance and assistance. One student told me: "You know, some of the other students here, especially those about to graduate, are the harshest critics of all. They don't let you get away with anything." In the absence of the conventional classroom, with its hypothetical answers to equally hypothetical questions, information at North Bennet Street is conveyed at the time the student needs it, in an actual, practical context. Lessons learned this way are not easily forgotten; they become part of the nervous system, because they are communicated in practice, rather than in the abstract.

After learning to use hand planes and chisels, the new student makes an oilstone box, then turns a mallet, practices cutting dovetails and, to complete his novitiate, makes a tool chest to prescribed dimensions that will nestle neatly beneath



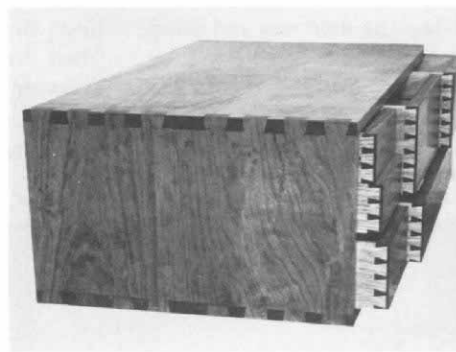
Carl Mesrobian carves the crest rail for a Chippendale arm chair. Using notched clamping blocks in conjunction with vise dog and handscrew gives him free access to the entire length of the rail.



To signal the end of their novitiates, students construct tool chests like the one at left, little tours de force of dovetailed casework. Made to prescribed dimensions, the chests fit neatly out of the way beneath workbenches. Above, senior instructor George Fullerton eyes the joinery and checks the progress of a more advanced project, Catherine McGarty's butternut drop-leaf table. Boards leaning against bench in rear will be glued up to make the oval top.



In the drafting room, instructor Phil Lowe shows two beginning students how to render plan and elevation views of joinery details. For their first drawing assignment, students usually begin with a simple piece such as the end table shown here.



the bench he'll work at for the next 15 or 16 months. After that he chooses his own projects, in advancing degrees of difficulty, beginning each one in the drafting room, where he prepares full-scale measured drawings. It was in this room, by the way, that E. F. Schmitz learned to do the kind of drawing that accompanies his article on blockfront furniture in the July '80 issue (#23) of this magazine. "Drawings are the language of the trade," Fullerton tells his students. "You've got to have a clear vision of things, have them settled in your mind and then proceed with speed to the end result. You can't afford to make design decisions at the bench or work out the mechanics of a joint. That's all done on paper well in advance of the actual work." The furniture designs themselves are taken from actual pieces, from those on display in the Karolik collection at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and from those illustrated in well-documented books. Sometimes students work with both sources for a single project.

Himself a native Boston cabinetmaker, Fullerton knows well the cold facts of making a living as a craftsman. He was apprenticed in the first decade of this century to the cabinet-making firm of Mellish and Byfield in Charleston, Mass. When

his apprenticeship was over, he was advised to fill out his knowledge of the trade by traveling about, hiring on at cabinet shops up and down the East Coast for journeyman's wages. During the 1930s he worked in the custom shop at Paine's Furniture Co. in Boston, and before taking up teaching in 1952, he served for many years in a union post, and had the good fortune to meet most of the cabinetmakers in the New England and New York areas. With a mind almost encyclopedic in its hoard of furniture-making lore, Fullerton insists upon precision and fidelity in both work and language. "How long does it take a student to learn how to carve this sort of gadrooning?" I asked, fingering the apron of a Chippendale game table. "Actually, that's nulling, not gadrooning," he replied, "and a good student can pick it up pretty quickly." With such a teacher, it's no wonder. □

EDITOR'S NOTE: In addition to the cabinet and furniture-making program, North Bennet Street offers diploma-granting courses in camera repair, carpentry, jewelry making and repair, locksmithing, offset printing, piano technology and watch repair. For information, write Admissions, North Bennet Street Industrial School, 39 North Bennet Street, Boston, Mass. 02113.