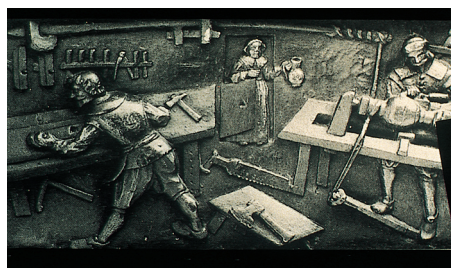


PETER FOLLANSBEE

Craftsman Scholar

BY STEPHANIE STONE



If time travel were possible, we wouldn't see Peter Follansbee around town—he'd be off working in a 17th-century shop. But Peter's stuck in the 21st century with the rest of us, so he's a joiner/turner/carver of furniture in the 17th-century style. A typical woodworker of that period spent seven years apprenticed to a master craftsman to learn his trade. Peter has taught himself the techniques by trial-and-error in his shop, and by long hours in the library, ferreting out and piecing together evidence with the exactingness of a trial lawyer. Even among woodworkers, Peter's calling is a bit rare. As he says, "I trained myself into a corner and then I got a job in it."

I visited with Peter and his wife Maureen in Kingston, Massachusetts, in their early 19th-century house. Over the centuries it has settled comfortably—spilled blueberries roll to the downhill side of the kitchen. Peter is very New England, even before he slips into the exaggerated Boston accent he jokes in. "Thomas Follansbee was a carpenter who arrived in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in the 1660s," he says. "By my grandfather's time, they'd made it 50 miles to Boston." Peter has stayed close to home, too; except for brief forays, he's always lived within 30 miles of his birthplace. "Maybe it's a Follansbee thing, but I can't get my head around Virginia [of the 17th century]. I've stuck my toe in it and said, 'Huh?'"

It's a quick trip from home to Plimoth Plantation, where Peter and Maureen work.

The Plantation is a living history museum that depicts and interprets the English and Wampanoag cultures in the early 1620s in Plymouth. ("Plimoth" was its name then; "Plymouth" is its name today.) Peter is the first full-time joiner at Plimoth. In the early 1990s, he met Joel Pontz, whose duties at Plimoth then included being the part-time joiner. Soon, Peter was working in Joel's shop after hours. With his characteristic deadpan humor, Peter says, "When I got here, I wasn't as good as I thought I was. Now I am."

Peter's shop stretches along one wall of a large room in Plimoth's Crafts Center that he shares with makers of pottery, willow baskets, and textiles. A wooden railing cordons off his workshop, but it is low and well-worn and seems to invite rather than exclude. Peter's manner is the same. He works at a steady pace, explaining what he's doing to visitors who stop by, interrupting his work to retrieve a picture or an object to illustrate a point. He listens to their questions thoughtfully; his answers reflect his experience in the craft and his grasp of history. And his sense of humor. Within earshot of the potters, he asks a group of kids, "Have you been to the village [the replica of the original Plimoth settlement]?" "Yeah." "Didn't you think the furniture was WAY cooler than the pottery?" "YEAH!"

Does he ever get tired of people asking questions? "It's generally great fun. You never know exactly which direction the questions are going...there are so many avenues to explore. It's fun to see people really get it, whatever 'it' is that day for them." Also, Peter recognizes his debt to Plimoth's visitors: "I want to involve them more and give them a better experience. They make it possible for me to do what I love. I think I make better furniture when people are there."

Boxes, chairs, stools, and chests—com-

pleted and in progress—fill Peter's shop. In the far corner is a chest exactly modeled on one made in the 1650s for Jonathan Fairbanks of Dedham, Massachusetts. The Fairbanks House (1637) is the oldest wood frame house in America; it has operated as a house museum for the past 100 years. Recently, the museum re-acquired the original chest and commissioned Peter to make the reproduction chest and a photo essay of its construction.

At center stage in the shop is Peter's bench, complete with bench hook, holdfast, and a wooden mallet to drive them home. Behind the bench, a small array of tools hangs on the wall: planes, hatchets, saws, chisels, and gouges. The patterns that Peter uses as templates for turning hang overhead on a beam. They swing in the breeze of the fan, the only electric fixture in the shop save the lights.

Yes, it's possible to do expert woodworking with such few tools. Peter points to a picture of the Stent panel that hangs on the wall. It's an early 17th-century carving that depicts a joiner and a turner at work. Arrayed around them are the tools of their respective trades: for the turner, long gouges, chisels and compass; for the joiner, planes, chisels, hammer, bench hook and holdfast. Between the two craftsmen—both used them—lie a saw and a hewing hatchet. "The bulk of what I do at the Plantation," Peter says, "is joiner's work, using riven green oak planed at the bench."

It turns out there's a lot packed into those few simple words. "Joiner's work" refers to the way the furniture is held together. "The

Resident joiner Peter Follansbee in the Plimoth Plantation shop, working on the recreation of a traditional 17th-century chest in riven oak. At the top of this page, the 17th-century Stent panel that hangs at Plimoth Plantation.





PHOTO BY PETER FOLLANSBEE



PHOTO BY JOHN ALEXANDER



PHOTO BY PETER FOLLANSBEE

tidy though. Green wood cuts the easiest. A little drying beforehand is not a bad thing, but it's still wet inside.

"After I chop the mortises, I bore the (usually two) peg holes in the mortised section. I cut the tenon's shoulders with a backsaw and split the waste off with a chisel, then pare across the tenon's cheeks with a broad, heavy chisel, aiming to make it flat and thin. I want the tenon to slide into the mortise with very little resistance. I test fit the tenon into the mortise, insert an awl through the peg holes, and mark the location of the holes on the tenon. Then I withdraw the tenon and bore its holes a little closer to the shoulder than where I marked.

"This is the key to the joint—the holes are not bored through the assembled joint, but through each component of it. The intentional misalignment allows the tapered peg (made from the driest riven oak in the shop), when pounded through the holes, to draw the tenon shoulder closer to the mortised edge of the frame. This is the meaning of 'drawbored.' And the path the peg takes creates a slight kink in the peg, so it can't back out of the hole. It's a perfect system, better than any glue: The peg pulls the joint together, and the kink in the peg keeps it

Fairbanks chest reproduction by Peter Follansbee; red oak and white pine, 27" x 44" x 19¼".

Cross-section of a drawbored mortise-and-tenon.

Slices of riven green oak showing varying moisture content, from tree wet on left to drier on right.

heart of 17th-century joinery is the drawbored mortise-and-tenon," Peter says. "There are some dovetails, some simple rabbit joints, secured either with nails or wooden pegs and glue, but most work done by joiners in the 17th century is drawbored mortise-and-tenon, frame-and-panel work. All you need is a small handful of tools—several planes, two chisels, a marking or mortise gauge, awl, square, mallet, and a boring tool." Ever the promoter of hand-work, Peter adds, "And no machine to buy or maintain."

So how does he make a mortise-and-tenon? "I mark out the joint with a mortise gauge, awl, and square, then chop the mortise with a chisel and mallet. Maybe some work with a paring chisel afterwards to clean up the insides of the mortise a bit...not too

together.

"So why did we go away from drawboring? I'll never know. These joints stay tight; for them to fail there must be serious abuse, like leaving the furniture out in wet conditions. Most any furniture form can be done with this mortise-and-tenon, frame-and-panel technique. I've used it to make stools, chairs, tables, bedsteads, cupboards, benches, chests, and cradles. In period work it also included pews, wainscoting (wall-paneling)...I've even seen baptismal font covers done in joined work."

So much for the first part of Peter's job description. Now for the next part, "riven green oak." "Riven" means that the rough stock is split, not sawn, out of the log. Since wood splits best in the radial plane, the first split opens the log in half, the next in quar-

ters, and so on. The width of the board is a radial face of the log, stemming from the center of the log toward the bark. This radial surface is the most stable in a log, equivalent to quartersawn stock. (In fact, quartersawn stock mimics riven stock, not vice-versa.) The shrinkage across the radial face of a riven piece of oak is minimal, so it stays flat and doesn't change much in width as it dries.

"The wood has to be straight-grained to rive easily and economically. You can rive twisted stock, but you have to rive it oversized in cross-section, then spend extra time to reduce it to a reasonable shape and size. And you run the risk that it will distort when it loses moisture. When you use straight-grained stock, you can rive it close to the desired thickness, leaving less work with the hatchet and plane. And it's more stable as it dries."

Peter says that the best tenons are made from clear, straight, riven, quartered stock. "You can make tenons in sawn stock, but splitting off the waste is much more risky than in riven stock because the split may wander. I've seen plenty of sawn joined work in England, but the riven stuff is best—most predictable, reliable, and effective."

So a big difference between Peter's work and a lot of modern woodworking is his use of riven, not sawn, stock. Another big difference is the moisture content of the wood. This is the "green" in "riven green oak."

Peter works the wood as soon as it's taken from the log, as they did in the 17th century. "The benefit of working green wood is that it works easier than drier wood, with less wear on tools and your body. Visitors every day wonder if the wood will warp, crack, or twist, but when you choose the orientation of each board you make in the log, you know its quality before it becomes a board. If there are knots or twists in the log, the piece becomes firewood.

"I try to split out only as much wood as I can plane up in a few days. Leaving the wood large in cross-section keeps it wet so it's workable. Just the opposite of a modern woodworker, I want my wood supply kept as wet as can be until I get it into the shop."

Then, Peter says, he lets the wood settle down. "It's not 'seasoned' because it's still wet below the surface. The greenest wood will plane up quite easily, but with a little fuzzy surface; likewise, you shouldn't carve it when it's too green...or too dry. It's just right when it's still green enough to be eas-

ily worked, but dry enough to cut smoothly and cleanly.” Depending on weather and shop conditions, the wood is usually ready to work in a couple of weeks.

AND WHY DOES HE SPECIFY OAK?

“Daniel O’Hagan used to say, ‘White oak is king.’ I’ll re-phrase that: ‘Straight, riven oak is king.’ When people ask me if I like red oak or white oak, I say I prefer straight first of all. If it’s white, all the better, but if it’s straight and red, that’s fine too. In 17th-century joined work, the riven stock is mostly oak. Maple, which rives poorly, was used in some Plymouth Colony work and Connecticut River Valley pieces. Who knows why they chose different woods? Maybe it was because of declining oak supplies, but that’s hard to prove. I’ve used ash before, and I’ve seen it in original pieces too. It works very well and carves nicely. At least it’s ring porous like oak and therefore rives well, not like the maple.”

The last part of Peter’s job description (“joiner’s work, using riven green oak, planed at the bench”) is shorthand for how he makes rough riven stock into useable boards. As Peter explains, it’s clear that the wood has an active role in the process. “I don’t know how most woodworkers approach their work, but I bust the log, and, although I have an intended product in mind, what I get out of the log dictates what I make...or maybe the size and format of what I make. Depending on the width of the stock, I might end up making a chest with three wide panels across the front, or four or five narrower ones.

“When I make a chest, I split out the stuff for the panels first. These have to be wide, clear, and flat, so they are hardest to come by. If I aim for 9”-10” wide, sometimes I get that, but sometimes a piece will be narrower, say 6”-8” wide. That piece is no good for a chest panel, but if it’s long enough, 24” or so, it can be a box front. I often build several pieces of furniture at once, so I sort through

At the pole lathe, turning the baluster of a stool leg.

Turning the collar on the baluster.

Polishing the baluster with dried shavings.
This is the only abrasive used.

A joined stool, turned and carved from riven white oak, 22” x 13¼” x 12½”.



the wood pile and discover that this board is best for this use, that board for another... either chest panels, box fronts, joined stool seats...whatever.

"The long rails are also critical. For a chest, you need four of them, about 3'-4' long and 4" wide, though the exact measurements vary with different chests. Muntins (the intermediate vertical members of a frame) are easiest to come by. They are typically narrow, about 3"-5", and short, about 15", so they're pretty common.

"Then I plane the stuff flat on one face, square (enough) on its edges, then just work the second face to a smooth surface, trying to make a board of a thickness answerable to the board's intended use—panels are thinner than rails, rails are thinner than stiles (the corner posts), and stiles are the thickest of all.

"So I begin by working up a bunch of stock, then begin to pull something together. Once I have the four long rails, I mark out any carving on them, carve them, then lay out and cut the joinery. Presumably, the period joiners planed all their stock first, did their carving, then cut the joinery, and test-fitted. As a consideration to the museum's visitors, I usually work the front of a chest first, even before I plane the stock for the sides and rear, so it looks like something instead of a pile of timbers."

When he needs decorative turnings or legs for chairs and tables, he uses the pole lathe at the far end of the shop. An 11' maple sapling (the pole) powers the lathe: a cord is tied to the tapered end of the sapling, wraps around the work, and connects to a treadle under the lathe. The pole is lashed to a ceiling beam 2' from its butt. This fulcrum allows the angle of the pole to change relative to the work, useful for turning long pieces like the back posts of some of the chairs he makes. As Peter begins to turn a new piece, there is no whine of an electric motor. Instead, the pole thunks against the beam as he steps on the treadle, punctuated by the skippy click of the gouge hitting the edges of the square stock, and the complaint of the cord as it stretches to turn the work. The stock is worked only half the time—as it turns toward him—but there is a rhythm and continuity to pole lathe turning that no machine can equal.

As he turns a leg for a stool, Peter is thinking about the wood. "Good cutting—slow growth, lots of pores. I'm trying to decide

Hand Tools, Green Wood

by Peter Follansbee

MANY VISITORS TO Plimoth Plantation, both woodworkers and non-woodworkers, are astounded at the level of complexity possible with only hand tools. When I describe that the stock is riven, or split, from the log, and worked from green wood, they are further surprised. I wish this were not the case. While these methods are perhaps not as applicable to someone making their living selling their wares, I am dismayed that there aren't more people working this way. Other than chairmakers and bowltuners, I know of few woodworkers today who use green wood. Most folks are worried it will warp, crack and/or split; but I've had few problems of that sort. For the hobbyist, it would be a great introduction to the craft, as well as a very pleasant way to pursue the creativity of woodworking.

I recently saw a photograph of someone sanding a woodworking project, and he looked outfitted for a lunar mission: dust mask, face shield, ear protection, and gloves, all necessary precautions against the health hazards involved. I read of workers who use machines to avoid the "drudgery" of stock preparation. I say, give me that "drudgery" over standing behind a machine, engulfed by its sounds, breathing its dust, feeling its vibrations...and not really being part of working the boards.

Bill Coperthwaite's book *A Handmade Life* includes a poem that compares his canoe to a boat with an outboard motor. Coperthwaite discusses what he would have to give up in return for using a motor on his boat; he dubs the time saved with a motor as "Dead Time."

This parallels how I feel about using hand tools. Yes, one can plane a lot more board feet with a thickness planer than I can plane with my fore plane, smooth plane and jointer...but at my bench on a nice day with the windows open, I can hear the songbirds outside between the strokes of the plane or blows of the hatchet. Better yet, I can take the hatchet work outside.

Breaking open the log is the heaviest work in the process (1). But there is something special about opening the stock and seeing which use each piece is best suited for. I typically work several pieces of furniture at once—usually a chest or two, some boxes and stools, perhaps a chair. When I'm riving the stock, I aim for one size of material that I need, and usually get some splits that, while not what I need at the time, are still of the best quality and good for something else.

The quartered stock that results from riving ring-porous woods is hard to appreciate unless you feel it; it is even better than quartersawn wood from a mill. The riving process with wedges, froe and maul (2) dictates that a true radial face results; the resulting surface is quite beautiful, but more importantly, also quite stable. This work requires very straight-grained stock free of knots, but for much furniture you only need short lengths. I am often able to pick out sections here and there, usually 36" or less, sometimes even found in the firewood pile. I've also been able to get free logs from the sawmill because of embedded iron in them. The mill won't saw them, but often I can split them in a way that will isolate the metal in one section, leaving the rest fine.

A good log will open predictably and yield stock of expected dimension. But even logs with some twist in them can be used; they just require more effort. This is where the hatchet comes in. The tool goes by many names: it can be called a broad, side, or hewing hatchet. It is described in Joseph Moxon's *Mechanick Exercises* (1683): "its use is to Hew the Irregularities off such pieces of Stuff which maybe sooner Hewn than Sawn. When the Edge is downwards, and the Handle towards you, the right side of its Edge must be Ground to a Bevil...."

The hatchet is not really a tool encountered much in furniture trades these days, but again, it is surprising to people what a practiced hand can achieve with one. I usually hew and plane one face of the stock flat and smooth (3), then mark with a chalk line the thickness intended. I then hew off the bulk of the second face, and quickly finish with the planes. Depending on what I am making, the second face only needs to be generally smooth and flat; in most cases, the stock is fine with an irregular cross-section.

The rhythm of the hand plane—each stroke

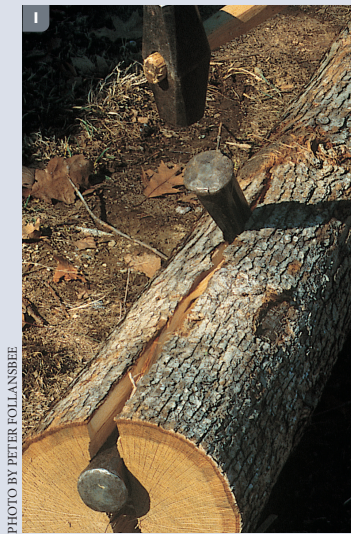


PHOTO BY PETER FOLLANSBEE



PHOTO BY RANDY O'ROURKE, COURTESY OF HINMOTH PLANTATION



PHOTO BY PETER FOLLANSBEE



PHOTO BY PETER FOLLANSBEE



slicing off a wide shaving, exposing new surface, then the return of the plane, followed by periodically checking the stock with straightedge and winding sticks—creates a flow of effort and rest that is far from drudgery. This part of the process is one of my favorite woodworking tasks. The shavings present no health hazard. The effort is good exercise, and what you learn about wood no machine can teach you so readily.

I typically use 3 or 4 different planes in the course of one piece of furniture: a fore plane or scrub (4), sometimes followed by a jack plane (5), and a jointer (6); and a plow plane for frame-and-panel work. Sometimes I'll use a skew-bladed rabbet plane here and there, often for tongue-and-groove work. My two favorite everyday planes were made in the 1870s. I prob-

ably paid less than \$50 for each of them. They've been working for many, many years now, leaving countless boards smooth and flat. One of these planes in particular is as simple as an object can be—a body, handle, single iron, and wedge. Another jack plane I have shows the wear marks on its side from workmen's thumbprints. I often think of how many passes of a plane it takes to impress a thumbprint in beechwood like that.

The green wood planes very nicely, but does have some tearout in the surface, so I often come back after a week or so and take one more swipe at a surface for an even smoother finish. I usually sticker the boards after the initial planing, but try not to leave stacks around too long.

Because my workshop is part of the museum's public display, I organize my work in a man-

ner different from most woodworkers, past or present. One benefit of my approach is that I usually don't have any problems with repetitive motion injuries; I mix up the heavy work of riving, hewing and planing with the less physically demanding work of joinery and carving. Thus, I usually start each day with some of the heavy work as a warm-up. Later in the afternoon, I do some finer detail work which requires less effort. All in all, it's a nice way to do woodworking for a living.

Oak is perfectly suited for this work. It has great strength and it rives nicely. It planes nicely and carves well too. Its quartered surface is unsurpassed; using it has spoiled me for the rest of my career. The main thing I dislike about other hardwoods is that they aren't oak. My friend Daniel O'Hagan once

told me that anything you need you can make from oak or pine. I second that notion.

Writing about this work falls short, mostly because I am so accustomed to showing people what it's all about. Better still, to truly understand how effective and simple it is to rive and plane high-quality, quartered green oak, you should just go ahead and do it. Until you feel it, the ease of working the green wood is not to be believed. It is not my intention to launch a debate regarding the different approaches of hand tools and machine work. I know nothing of machine woodworking. It's just that for me, hand tools and green wood are the way to go. These methods worked centuries ago to produce first-rate furniture, and can still be applicable today.

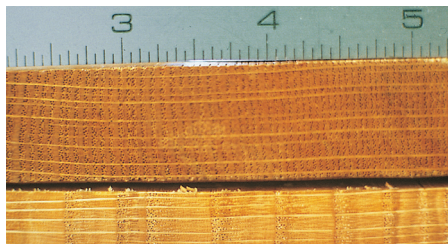


PHOTO BY PETER FOLLANSBEE



Oak with narrow and wide annular rings.
The former is more suitable for carving.

The vee carving tool lays out the work. Both sides of the tool remain above the surface, lifting even triangular sections of waste.

Completed carving, with “nervous birds.”



which tool I like. I think the narrow chisel—the big one’s too rowdy.” As he burnishes the finished piece with shavings, he adds, “Close enough for a stool. I always figured they (17th-century turners) cleaned ’em up as best they could and moved on. Going over a piece twice invites ruining it.”

When Peter carves, he’s still talking about the wood: the kind, its growth environment, its properties. He sorts through his stock and picks up a piece with wide growth rings. “I’d never carve that again,” he says. “The fast growth is too dense, the wood’s too tough, too coarse.” The piece he ultimately chooses has much narrower growth rings. “Also, the more quartered the stock is, the better. Quartered stock that’s riven gives you a true radial face—that’s the most consistent surface to work with, whether you’re planing or carving.”

Once he decides on a pattern, Peter

scribes the layout with an awl and a square. He notes that for a piece like a chest rail that has multiple repeating elements, it’s easier to carve it assembly-line style, making all the comparable cuts at the same time, rather than completing an entire element before proceeding to the next. When he goes to work with the vee tool, it looks deceptively simple. The design appears quickly from under his steady blows.

“With carving, steering is the problem,” he remarks. “If you’re too shallow, you wander; too deep and you’re cooked.” Most of the cuts follow the scribed layout lines, lines that can still be seen clearly on 17th-century pieces. Other cuts Peter carves freehand within the confines of the scribed lines. He decorates uncarved surfaces with a punch. Then he makes some parallel chip cuts with the medium gouge to fancy up the design with what he calls “nervous birds.” “It’s

just a couple of cheap tricks,” he sums up, “once you’ve spent ten years practicing.”

Carvers create different effects by varying the depths and angles of their cuts. This means that small differences in carving make the same pattern look different, and that the same carving looks different in different light. Seventeenth-century pieces were generally seen in low light and many are ornately carved. “People look at the work and are amazed at its decoration, but in an English house of the period, you would hardly notice it, it would be so busy. Here we just have bits of it. Before I went to England, Victor Chinnery kept telling me, ‘You have to see the furniture in context, instead of in a museum setting,’ and he was right.”

Was Peter the first to reverse-engineer 17th-century furniture? In lieu of an answer, he produces a copy of a chapter from *The Hadley Chest*, written in 1935 by Clair Franklin Luther, minister of the Second Congregational Church of Amherst, Massachusetts. Luther recounts his making of a Hadley chest, a style of chest prevalent in the Connecticut River valley in the late 17th century. Luther calls his project “a personal adventure in imitation” and says this of its effect on him: “When one has actually gone through the paces, handled the tools, rived the lumber, traced the design and assembled the parts, repeating the processes one by one, in so doing he has entered into the



PHOTO BY JEREL DYE, COURTESY OF PLIMOTH PLANTATION

Reproduction work done by Peter Follansbee for the Plimoth Plantation includes casework such as the carved box at the left and the turned chair (painted ash with cushion, 42½” x 24” x 19”) at the right.

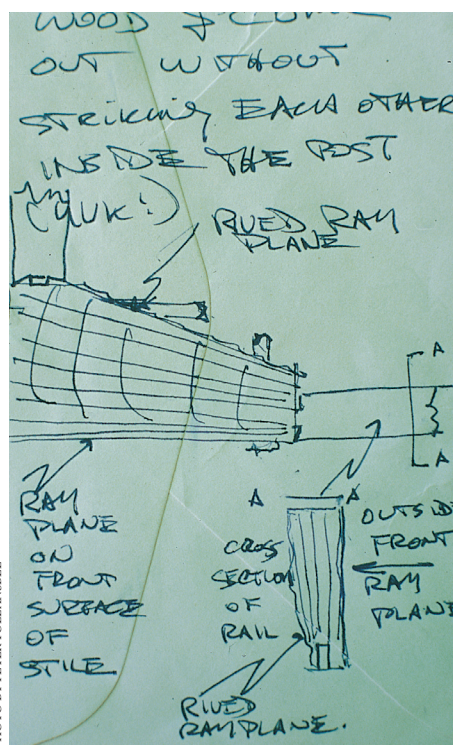
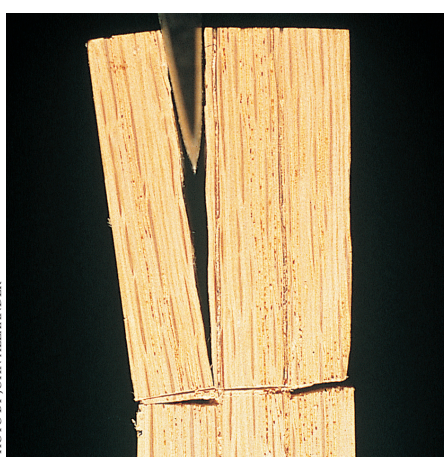


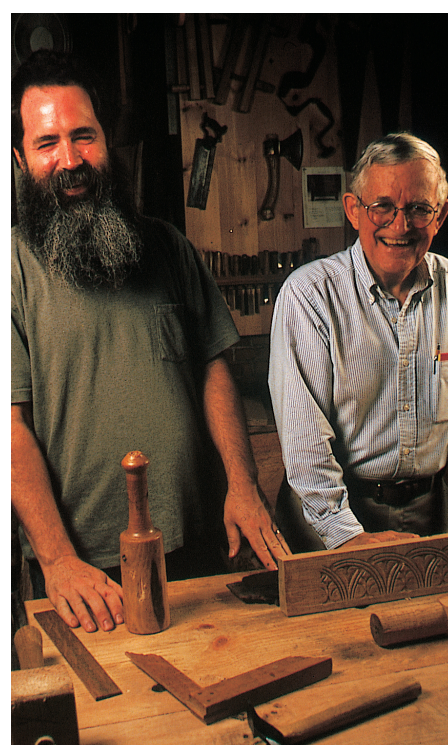
PHOTO BY JOHN ALEXANDER



The envelope of a letter from John Alexander to Peter Follansbee, November 1989.

Splitting the waste from a tenon cheek with a cleaver. The riven stock permits such accurate work. The cheek is then cleaned up with a chisel.

Follansbee and Alexander, 2004.



House of the Interpreter of the forgotten past and became [sic] kith and kin with the unknown." In contemporary parlance, Peter echoes this sentiment: "To be physically connected to an item from 300-400 years ago, like the compass points on carvings—it's exciting. Not many woodworkers get that opportunity. The only way to get closer is to be in that shop."

It's hard to believe that Peter didn't apprentice in the 17th century: he uses the tools and the techniques (as far as he can know them); he's hunted down and studied many of the surviving objects; and he's published his findings in scholarly journals, including the Chipstone Foundation's *American Furniture*. But he demurs at the suggestion that his 17th-century craftsmanship is largely of his own creation. "It was John Alexander who taught me chairmaking and green woodworking—the basis of what I do now—and he introduced me to the basics of joinery."

Peter has saved a letter to Alexander postmarked 1989. In it, he tells Alexander that he's "recently bagged a major league red oak" and that he's "thinking of fooling around some with your post and panel chest idea and would like to pick your brain regarding that subject." Alexander's remarks, drawings, and directives are squeezed in between the lines of Peter's note and around the margins, and finally carry over onto the back of the

envelope he mailed back to Peter. He gives Peter how-to construction tips; he tells him to go to the Museum of Fine Arts and study the chests, especially the grain and the pegs. And to get and study *New England Begins* by Fairbanks and Trent, and *The Wrought Covenant* by St. George. It appears that Peter did have a 17th-century apprenticeship of sorts.

During my visit to Plimoth, Peter does a photo shoot with John Alexander for a book Alexander is writing on 17th-century joinery. Their likeness of mind and fondness for one another is evident. Peter credits Alexander with getting him hooked on working green wood with hand tools. Referring to Alexander's book, *Make a Chair from a Tree* [Taunton Press, 1978; Astragal Press, 1994] Peter says, "It knocked me out that you could take that small tool kit and make a chair. I was caught [snaps his fingers] like that." The two have been studying and learning from each other—by telephone, mail, interlibrary loan, and the occasional visit—ever since that note in 1989. Alexander tells me that his notebooks chronicling their work together take up 6' of shelf space.

Among the other people who have influenced him, Peter credits Robert Trent (considered by many to be one of the seminal authorities on the 17th century) and Drew Langsner, who runs Country Workshops in North Carolina. Then he speaks at length

in a reverential tone about Daniel O'Hagan, who lived with his wife and two children in a log and timber-framed house in eastern Pennsylvania. There was no electricity and no phone, so when Peter visited, he just showed up and hoped Daniel would be home. "He showed me that this was the road for me, with no deviation," Peter says. "Once he told me, 'I didn't know I couldn't do it, so I just went right in.' And I loved his commitment to hand tools."

Peter works so effortlessly as we talk that I ask him if he would be competitive with a 17th-century joiner. "I doubt it," he replies. "They worked longer hours, steadier, harder. My times have flattened out. The Savell chest here in the shop took me 67 hours with no apprentice." And why doesn't he use power tools? "I don't like 'em," Peter says. "Also, I want to replicate the process as well as the product. The only way to make a 17th-century piece is with 17th-century tools. I can show you the difference."

And he does. The next day, we take a trip to Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, where we start out crawling around a great chair by Thomas Dennis (1638-1706) of Ipswich, Massachusetts. An interesting find—one that supports Peter's contention that 17th-century furnituremakers made things "good enough"—is that the rear stretcher tapers in thickness, with an almost normal tenon



PHOTO BY TED CURTIN, COURTESY OF PLIMOTH PLANTATION



PHOTO BY PETER FOLLANSBEE



PHOTO BY RANDY ORourke, COURTESY OF PLIMOTH PLANTATION

At top, left and right, are the original Pope family cabinet being measured by Follansbee, and one of his reproductions of the piece; red oak, maple, walnut, and pine; 17" x 17" x 9".

Follansbee reproduction of a Braintree/Savell chest; red oak and white pine, 27" x 52" x 21½".

on one end and a bare-faced tenon on the other.

When the guard reprimands us for using flashlights on the piece, we repair to inspect the Pope cabinet, a modest affair that recently sold at auction for 2.4 million dollars. It is dated 1679, and attributed to the joiner James Symonds (1633-1714). "I thought it might be worth a half a million... I was only off by a factor of five." I wrestle for a moment with the concept of value—what makes one old box junk and another invaluable. Then Peter casually adds that he once had the piece in the back of his car. "One day a guy stopped by the shop, pulled out a Polaroid picture, and asked, 'Can you make me a copy of this?'" "Where'd you get this?" Peter shot back, realizing what he was looking at.

It turns out that the cabinet had been in the man's family since the 17th century. An antiques dealer had told him that the chest was something of value, and he wanted to have a copy made before he sold it. Peter needed photos to get the dimensions right, so they went to the bank where it was stored. "But there wasn't any room in the bank, so we took it out to the parking lot, and did it in the back of my car. I told him that the new one would be a lot brighter, that the nails would be visible on the new wood. But he was into it." In the end, Peter made five cop-

ies: several for the family, one for Peabody Essex, and one for the Plantation.

Finally, we stop by the visitor's center to see a reproduction of a Dedham chest that's related to the Fairbanks chest Peter is reproducing. Peter's review of the piece is telling. Most 17th-century joiners left the backs of chests rough because they faced the wall. Inspecting the back of this contemporary chest, Peter notes, "You could run your tongue along the back of this thing. It's okay for machine work, but it bears no resemblance to the work of the period. If you want to copy handwork, you do handwork."

Peter's love of working green oak with hand tools may be what drew him to the 17th century in the first place. Peter doesn't just work the wood—he works with the wood.

SLEUTHING THE PAST

Peter's high standards for craftsmanship extend to his scholarship. Since no one alive has observed a 17th-century shop in action, and few records survive, Peter has to glean bits of evidence about period techniques from the pieces themselves and from period documents [see **Looking Back**, page 80]. So, when he's not in his shop, Peter is likely to be found in the library, weighing evidence about objects and their makers' tools and techniques. His approach to research is a

combination of caution and exuberance. "It's detective work," he says. "It's a fun game."

One of Peter's detective projects is the shop of William Savell of Braintree, Massachusetts, one of the most skillful joiners of his day [see Follansbee & Alexander, "Seventeenth-Century Joinery from Braintree, Massachusetts: The Savell Shop Tradition"; *American Furniture*, 1996]. Peter's research to date has documented the Savell shop tradition in New England; his goal now is to discover the English craft tradition that produced it, and to understand the blend of styles that characterized his work. Peter looks for answers wherever he can find them, in the written record or the objects themselves; sometimes, with research in hand, Peter goes back to his shop and tries to reproduce an object, like a Savell chest, according to his findings. This iterative process may lead to answers, but it always leads to more questions.

Peter went to England recently to research an article for *American Furniture*. Unlike New England, where the objects are rare and the records scanty, in England objects abound and records are extensive. For Peter's research, England holds the promise of putting New England in context. "I'm looking at what New England settlers popped out of. One day they packed their bags and here they are," he says. One of the places Peter visited in England was the Guildhall Library in London which has the records of the trade guilds, or "companies," of the period. "For me, the amount of detail is staggering—you could make several careers out of studying documents in the Guildhall Library." Indeed, Peter says without hesitation, "I'd like to go and live in England if I could afford it. I just love it."

Wait a minute. The Follansbees have lived in Massachusetts since they got off the boat 350 years ago. Peter himself has always lived within 30 miles of his birthplace; he's so into New England that he can't get his head around Virginia of the 17th century. How can he say that he'd love to live in England? Because if Peter went to England, he wouldn't be going away—he'd be going home.

Stephanie Stone, a research psychologist, teaches at Johns Hopkins University. She writes, rides, and gardens on her farm. For information about Plimoth Plantation, visit their website: www.plimoth.org.