



WORKBENCH

MAKING HISTORY

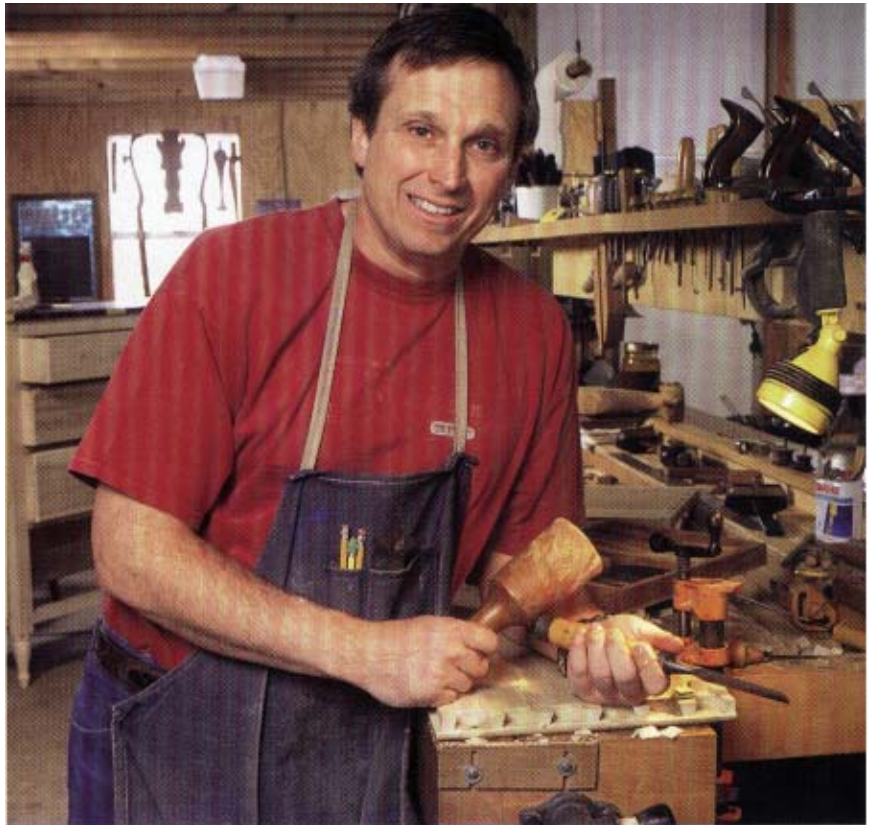
Frank Rhodes combines his knowledge of history with his talent for woodworking to authentically reproduce or repair 18th-century furniture

BY LEW LARASON

Maybe the reason I'm so attracted to Philadelphia Chippendale period furniture because I was born in Philly," joked Frank Rhodes recently. Although born in a Philadelphia hospital, he grew up in Newtown Square. Frank attended the Hill School in Pottstown where he took wood shop. He enjoyed it a great deal, beginning his interest in woodworking. After high school, he went to Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland. In 1982, he graduated with a B.A. in history.

He put his knowledge of history and love for woodworking together to create his business "Frank B. Rhodes—Furniture Maker," housed in two major buildings. One has a showroom where many upholstery swatches are displayed, along with samples of the upholstering talents of Bob, who has practiced his skills for more than 30 years. Along with his modern techniques, Bob and assistant Sandy also use the old techniques and materials like horsehair when upholstering antique furniture brought to Rhodes for authentic restoration.

The 4,800-square-foot building also is where furniture is stripped. There's a large modern spray booth they use when stripping in order to remove fumes. Of course, it's used as a spray booth for finishing newer pieces. In addition, Frank has his office and reference books in the building. The second building is where Frank restores antique furniture



and builds his 18th-century reproductions. This 4,000-square-foot workspace is more open, since everything done here is related to woodworking. Frank is proud of his many patterns and templates of early furniture, most of it from Philadelphia and the surrounding areas, including Chester County items from the 18th century. Along with the pat-terns, he has full-size drawings mounted on plywood of two Philadelphia highboys. "With these, people can see the true size and proportions," he said. The drawings were taken from pieces made by Thomas Affleck, one of the more important 18th-century Philadelphia cabinetmakers.

Although Frank designs and builds his own creations, he has patterns of many classic pieces, which he has accumulated, some from private sources, such as the furniture from the well-known Garbisch Collection. He comment-ed, "I also have clay models of feet of 18th-century furniture that I can copy when I make a reproduction of a period piece."

He's quick to give his helpers credit for the success of the business. "Rhonda is a big help. She does most of the stripping and refinishing work. She also helps in the upholstery and wood shops, as well as doing some of the lathe-work," he said. In the woodworking shop, Lori has been helping with repairs and restoration of early furniture for about 20 years. David, a part-time helper, is an experienced woodworker. Said Frank, "David's specialty is paying attention to detail!"

Rhodes has been in business more than 20 years. His attention to detail is obvious too. When making reproductions, he is careful to follow the original methods, including using the same types of wood and joints. Whether copying a classic Queen Anne wingback chair or a Chippendale chest of drawers, the construction methods used on the originals are carefully duplicated. For example, if the original had mortice and tenon joints, those are what he uses, pegged as the originals

were. When making Philadelphia-style chairs, Frank uses a through tenon joint where the skirt side rails join the end posts. The tenon ends then are wedged to help make a tight joint, just as area 18th-century cabinetmakers did.

When making a case piece with drawers, he hand cuts all of the dovetails. He uses white pine, poplar or white cedar as secondary woods, again just like the early cabinetmakers did. His authenticity in construction and wood carries over into the brass hardware he uses. Whether on reproductions or to replace missing pulls on period furniture, he has a source that makes sand cast brass pulls in the "traditional" way. Rhodes' attention to detail is everywhere.

When looking at one of his bed-

piece or building a reproduction, hand tools are important," Frank said, pointing out his personal toolbox full of carving chisels, vital when he has to carve the crest rail of a Queen Anne or Chippendale chair. Since he makes copies of period case pieces, carving also is important for the decorative shells, knees in cabriole legs and other details seen on early, eastern Pennsylvania furniture.

Rhodes is aware that to build quality reproductions, he needs quality wood. He always is looking for wide black walnut, cherry and maple boards. "I like working with walnut. But, tiger maple is so nice when finished," he said, as he showed off his lumber storage. Along with stacks of wood, he also has an electric kiln in this building. "We strip-stack and air dry wood until I need it for a piece of

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steads, the only give away that it isn't of the period is its contemporary size. End post turnings are accurate. Also, he uses bed bolts to hold the rails and posts together. However, instead of setting the bolt nuts into the rails, he uses a modern method that looks very much the same, does a fine job and is easy to assemble or disassemble.

Frank's woodworking shop is full of workbenches and power tools. Among all of the tools, his pride and joy is a large heavy lathe. It was built in the early 1900s and has an eight-foot bed. "This is a perfect size to turn end posts for our beds," he said, while showing it off "It's so heavy that when I turn spindles, there's no vibration."

Along with power tools, he has a fine selection of hand tools. "Whether restoring an 18th-century

furniture. Then, we dry it to about seven to eight percent moisture content." Wood to be used soon is stored in the workshop after the drying. It's ready to be surfaced, sized and turned into furniture. Although he uses mostly Pennsylvania woods, some of his formal period reproductions are made from mahogany.

Frank's wife, Susan, helps as his business manager~ knowing that few craftsmen also are good businessmen. They and their two daughters, Molly 12 and Katherine 9, live in Chestertown, Maryland. Before moving there, they lived in a small house next to the workshops. Now, it's used as a showroom for Frank's finished reproductions. "It's a great way to show off the furniture," he said.

Recently, he decided to make a

copy of a Mahantango Valley chest of drawers. These pieces date from the early 1800s and were made only in a small area of Pennsylvania. He spent a lot of time researching details and making drawings of the construction of these case pieces, as well as the particular type of painting that was found on them. After his research, he built and painted the chest. "I like doing special jobs like this," he said, proudly pointing to the piece.

The finish used in Frank's shop depends upon the piece of furniture. If it's newer and needs refinishing, after it has been stripped and sanded, it gets a spray finish in the spray booth. But, when he's restoring an antique, he uses shellac because it was the finish on early furniture. After he has completed one of his classic reproductions, he applies a hand-rubbed shellac finish. "The natural color of walnut under shellac is really nice," he said. "I use a wood filler on open-grain woods like mahogany, and sometimes on walnut. I don't put it on tight grain woods such as cherry or maple."

Using wood filler is a lot of extra work, so he uses it only when it will benefit the finish. After the wood filler has dried, he adds two coats of shellac. Without filler, he sometimes applies three. After each coat has dried, it is rubbed down before the next is applied. Often, the last one is rubbed with oil to give it a fine finish.

When asked about stains, Frank replied, "I never know until the piece has been completed. Sometimes I need stain to even out the colors of the wood or give a surface a little more depth." After all of the rubbing, he usually applies a thin coat of paste wax.

Along with many Maryland and Pennsylvania clients, Frank has worked on antiques or made reproductions for customers in many other areas, including Delaware, New Jersey, Alabama, Colorado, Michigan and Europe.

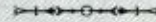
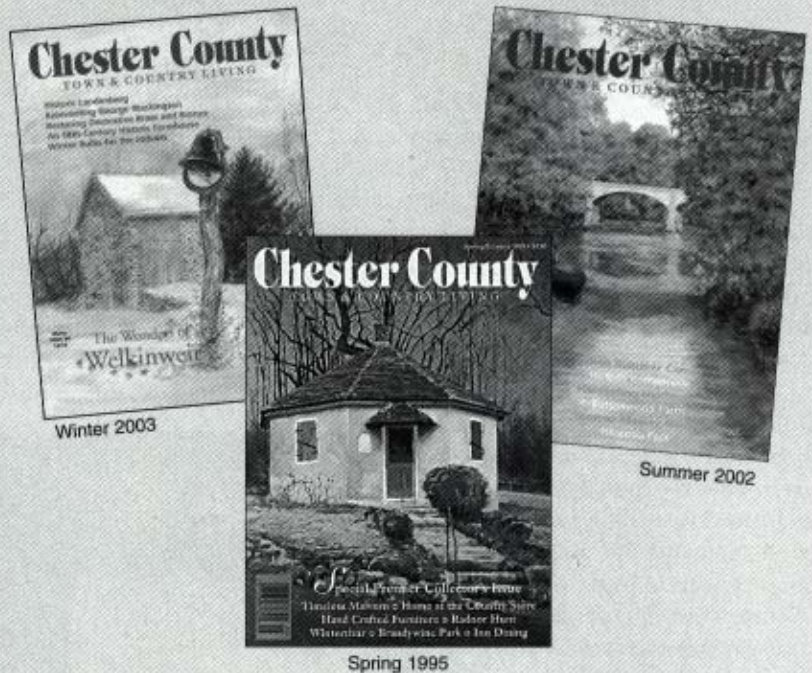
To talk to Frank about his furniture or for directions to the showroom, call him at 410-778-3993 or visit (www.frankbrhodes.com).

Lew Larason is a freelance writer who specializes in antiques and furniture.

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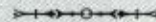


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