

# The SAPFM Chronicles

STORIES OF YOUR PROJECTS - TRIALS & SUCCESSES

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## The challenges of building the Gene Landon Philadelphia Side Chair

When I stumbled across the SAPFM website a few years ago, my first thought was *"I'll never be able to build furniture like these guys. They're amazing."* I figured the only way to find out was to try.

I've come a long way since then, and yet there's still so much to learn. I suspect I was asked to write the first feature article for *Chronicles of SAPFM Members* precisely because of how much I *DON'T* know. Hopefully those of us

lower down on the learning curve can learn from each other's experiences. For those who actually know what they're doing, maybe this will bring back some memories.

A little

background first. I live in Toronto. Recently retired after some 35 years working in TV news. Always liked working with my hands but started furniture-making just a few years ago. Attracted to period furniture for the elegance, the technical challenges and the mix of hand and power tools involved. Have a reasonably-well equipped but small basement shop. Would kill for more space, a higher ceiling and, if it's not too

much to ask, a window.

My current project is the Philadelphia Side Chair described by the late Eugene Landon in *Fine Woodworking* #186. He said *"Construction is not as hard as it looks."* I say I'm way in over my head. It's important to keep pushing yourself. My rule is that every project has to be a new learning experience.

My approach to a new project usually depends on how the planets are aligned that day. Sometimes, I just plunge right into the deep water, with no idea of how to get to the other side. Other times I'm uncertain, warily circling it, over-thinking it, finding excuses not to actually apply tools to wood, until I can't put it off any more. This chair is no different. Maybe more balance comes with time.

I have drawings for the chair and, as plans go, they're OK. Unfortunately, no two-dimensional drawing can really capture what's going on in a complex, curving chair like this. At times, this project seems more like sculpting than

have to trust your own judgment as to whether that's a fair curve or a too-chunky leg.



*Mary May, master wood carver and instructor, demonstrates her technique to approaching John Borley's side chair crest rail at CVSW.*

The legs on this chair curve all over the place. Cutting them out is similar to the approach for a cabriole leg: cut the pattern on one face, cut the pattern on an adjacent face, and throw away the bits. What's left should resemble a leg. I just wasn't "seeing" it, and I couldn't afford to mess up with 16/4 walnut stock.

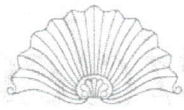
So, I glued up some two-by-fours and did a practice exercise on the bandsaw. It came out fine; I could see what exactly was going to happen; problem solved. I do a lot of practicing with cheap stock. Maybe some day it won't be necessary, but for now the training wheels feel just fine.

One area I struggle with when



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furniture-making. Good photos help if you can get them (these plans came with a set). But at some point, you just



# The SAPFM Chronicles *(continued)*

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making chairs is the joinery between the legs and the crest rail. The plan shows a nice straight line and a tenon at the top of the leg. As is often the case, the legs are slightly canted outward, so the angle at the top of the leg has to be corrected in order to meet the crest rail. I spent a huge amount of time messing around with a block plane and a chisel. After my experimenting, a really good woodworker I know who is building the same chair shared his method. He simply clamps a straight piece of wood across the legs and removes most of the waste with a pattern-cutting bit, front and back. Now, why didn't I think of that? (You still have to form the tenon sides with a saw and chisel.) I've seen his results; it works.

One thing I haven't figured out yet is the joinery between the seat rails and the legs. In the plan, the mortises run parallel to the legs. But again, the legs are canted outward. How do you join a vertical seat rail to a non-vertical leg and mortise? Still pondering that...



The main reason I even have the nerve to take on project like this is that I've had some good teachers, including SAPFM members Mickey Callahan and Mary May. My first real teacher was Hendrik Varju, a custom furniture-maker in the Toronto area.

I also studied with Mark Paddison, the head of the Cabinetmaking/Industrial Woodworking department at Toronto's Humber College. All are incredibly talented woodworkers who love to teach. Each brings a different background and perspective to the craft, providing one of the most valuable lessons of all. You take a bit from each and slowly develop your own style.

A few things I've learned the hard way. Keep notes of how you build something, because you will forget. (Unfortunately, I still don't always do this.) If you take a course, practice what you've learned as soon as you get home. (See "forget," above.) Keep your hands away from the pointy end of the chisel. (Don't ask me how I know.)

As I write this, I'd say the chair is maybe 25% done. There are huge challenges ahead, including a lot of complex carving and some difficult joinery. I've done enough furniture by now to know that when the last of the sawdust is finally swept up, there will be a chair. Hopefully, a good one!

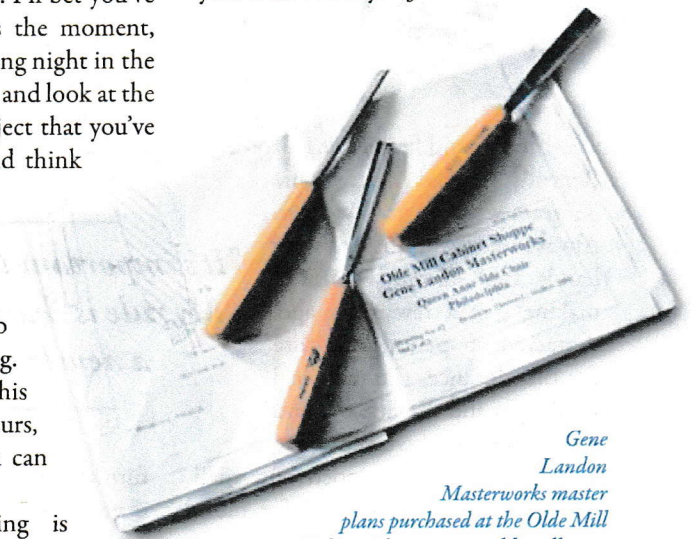
For me, there's always a special moment in each project. I'll bet you've experienced it, too. It's the moment, usually at the end of a long night in the shop, where you sit back and look at the partially-completed project that you've been wrestling with, and think "Hey, that's starting to look like a chair." You realize that it's actually going to come together. Now, the rest of the job doesn't seem so daunting. You realize that if this project takes 100 hours, then the next time you can do it in just 99!

Furniture building is



a never-ending learning process. My advice is, if you see something you want to build, go for it.

In future newsletters, we want to hear from other SAPFM members about their projects, their learning curves and how they got into period furniture. I've been asked to help find you. Don't be shy! ~JB



Gene Landon Masterworks master plans purchased at the Olde Mill Cabinet Shoppe: [www.oldemill.com](http://www.oldemill.com)