



MARION SMITH—ABOUT TO BUILD HIS FAVORITE PIECE

You might not think that practicing law and making period furniture have much in common. Marion Smith would respectfully disagree.

“Being a lawyer has got a huge amount of academic work associated with it. If you’re any good, you’re in the books a lot. Building furniture, if you’re going to be any good at it, is also academic. You can’t just say, ‘Oh, there it is; I’m going to build that.’”

Smith should know. He practiced law in Georgia for 45 years and has been building furniture for about 25.

You get a sense of just how meticulous his research is when you ask if he has a favorite piece.

“I haven’t even built it yet. [It] would be the Nathaniel Gould secretary in the Met. I’ve been studying it for about five years.” That includes going to see the piece several times, collecting photographs and written material, and constantly discovering new details.

“Every time I go back and check my plans I find I have something else I need to straighten out.” He adds, “Proportions and dimensions, in large measure, are everything about this stuff.”

For example, while studying the Gould piece, Smith asked himself, “Why do I get the sensation that it’s towering more than it actually is? So you just study until you find out that the guy used two different axis points to cut the tombstone ends of the cabinet doors. The radiuses are different.”

Ordinarily, you would scribe the inner line of the tombstone, then reset your compass and scribe the outside line. What Smith discovered in this case is that the builder also moved the axis point for the compass up by half an inch before scribing the outside line. So the radius at the top is now ½” longer than the radius at the bottom. That is

just not obvious when you walk in and see something.”

He adds, “It really is interesting to go through and try to figure out what the guy who built the original had in his mind.”

That piece may soon move from planning to production. Smith says, “I’ve got the lumber in my storage bin to make it with. I found it in Florida. It’s hurricane-damage material. It’s Cu-

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ban mahogany, which is kind of hard to come by these days.”

One of his favorite completed pieces is a reproduction of a sideboard from Athens, Georgia, dating back to about 1800. It’s American Federal style, with inlay, stringing, banding, and native walnut. The original now resides in the Georgia governor’s mansion. Smith has made three of them: two for his children, one donated for a fundraising event. A photograph of one those pieces alongside the original is now on display at the mansion.



Desk and Bookcase: ca. 1779

Maker: Workshop of Nathaniel Gould (1734 – 1782)

Origin: Salem, Massachusetts

Wood species: Mahogany (figured)
White pine (secondary)

Dimensions: 105”H x 45”W x 24”D

This tall and stately secretary, fashioned of the finest figured mahogany, is a masterpiece from the shop of Nathaniel Gould, the leading cabinetmaker of Salem, Massachusetts, in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. When Gould died in 1781, he was listed as a gentleman, having presumably given up working with his hands. On an inside surface, the desk and bookcase bear the enigmatic inscription: “Nath Gould not his work.” Presumably a master joiner in his shop wrote these words so that posterity would not credit Gould himself with actually having crafted the piece.

A Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1909

Accession Number: 10.125.81a, d



PHOTO AND COPY FOR NATHANIEL GOULD SECRETARY COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART (THE MET), (ONLINE OPEN-ACCESS INFORMATION); ALL OTHER PHOTO IMAGES COURTESY OF MARION SMITH



Chronicles (continued-2)

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He also reproduces furniture from the Piedmont region. That's the area running roughly from the Appalachian Mountains to the Atlantic Coastal Plain. One example is a blanket chest



from Chatham County, North Carolina, built in 1844. The original is now at Colonial Williamsburg.

Smith says Piedmont pieces, "In a lot of instances, have similar lines, but not nearly the refinement" that you would see from Boston or Newport work. Still, they have an attraction for him.

"I just did them because I have a granddaughter who is adopted. And I'm making, over a period of time, furniture for her that comes from everywhere my family has been [several states—from Massachusetts to Georgia] because I want her to feel that when she got adopted that every ancestor that came out of that same family adopted her."

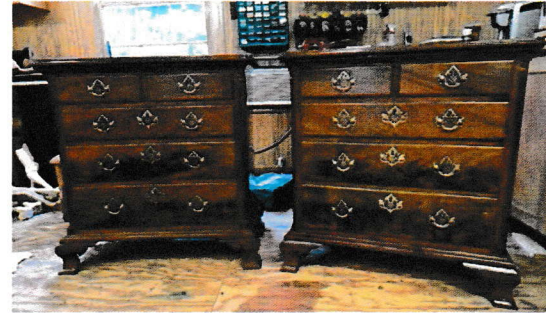
Smith works out of a 20-by-30-foot converted garage on his property in Atlanta. (That's a substantial improvement over an earlier shop. He says the light there wasn't good. "What I would end up doing is taking the piece out on the front walk of my house, and set it up out there, and these people were looking over [and saying] 'The crazy man's at it again!'")

He has "a fairly predictable set of machinery" and a substantial collection of hand tools. "I've got maybe 25 hand planes, and that doesn't count a set of hollows and rounds. You get

great surfaces if you just take the time to learn how to use a hand plane and a scraper. You get such glorious surfaces out of them."

Like many SAPFM members, Smith got into woodworking in a serious way when he started working on his house. He had boats he built cabinets for. "Then one day, I just said, 'I'm going to make that table over there.' And it came out just fine. My daughter uses it for a dining room table. I was going to build a chest-on-chest. My wife said, 'No, I want you to build a secretary instead.' I said OK. Then I built it and I haven't stopped since. That was 25 years ago."

He took courses at Highland Hardware in Atlanta, which he calls a "quality operation." Joining the SAPFM Peach State Chapter also allowed him to study with some top teachers, including Phil Lowe, Al Breed, Jeff Headley, and Mary May. He in turn has become a teacher and a mentor to others. He says, "One of the most gratifying things I have done is share what I



*A pair of Philadelphia five-drawer bookmatched chests inspired from one in Albert Sack's book *The New Fine Points of Furniture, Early American**

know with other people."

He can't say enough about the Peach State Chapter. "I think you have a bunch of guys down here who are absolutely committed to produce and work on the levels that the guys who did the originals did."

Smith adds, "Why I think a lot of these guys find it fascinating is they find the academic side of it to be as fascinating as the sawdust side of it."

Words to consider when you're planning your next project! —JB

