



# You're Always Planning Ahead

JOHN BORLEY  
Toronto, Canada

## WHO WANTS TO WASTE MONEY OR TIME?

A posting on the SAPFM Forum a while ago caught our eye at *Pins & Tales*. Jeff Headley noted that there are all sorts of stories “to help you build the piece of your dreams. What about time and material? How to save both and earn a living in today’s economy?”

A fair question; so we called him.

Headley and his partner Steve Hamilton run Mack S. Headley & Sons, in Berryville, Virginia. Headley is the fourth generation in what is now a fifth-generation shop building and restoring 18th-Century furniture. The two also run a school, the Woodworking Workshops of the Shenandoah Valley ([www.wotstv.com](http://www.wotstv.com)). So they’ve got a pretty good idea of how to squeeze the maximum benefit from an hour of shop time or a board-foot of lumber.

What inspired him to post that comment? Headley said, “It’s a hard business to be in right now. So you have to do what you can to find efficiencies, but still have the piece last over the years. There are ways of speeding things up. And then there’s lots of little tricks you do to help yourself build furniture, to be able to look ahead. When you build eight hours a day, you want to make sure you’re not waiting for glue to set up or something like that. You’re always planning ahead of what to do.”

I point out that the 2014 SAPFM members’ survey shows that only about 15 percent of members are professionals; the rest are amateurs and hobbyists. So why would this matter to them?

“It wouldn’t be quite as much of a concern,” Headley agrees. “They’re not doing it to eat. We kind of are.” But then he rattles off a list of tips and tricks that anyone can use. As he puts it, “Who wants to waste money or time?”

“You’re doing the bottom of a chest that’s dovetailed up into the two sides. Rather than having a full walnut bottom

if the sides are walnut, you just put a strip across the front of it. You don’t want to waste material.”

We get 6/4 poplar and then saw it in half so we get three-quarters on each side, maybe five-eighths or so, and that works well for drawer bottoms and sides, rather than getting a 4/4 piece and cutting it down, and half of it’s waste. That’s a time-saving and material-saving step that everyone could use.

“I’ll use a machine to size my lumber rather than hand-plane it down. You could hand-plane it all down, but why would you waste the time doing that when you could spend it doing other things?” (They still hand-plane the surfaces before final finishing.)

“We do hand-cut our dovetails, but we use a mortiser to clean out between the pins. That’s a step we use that seems to save time and money.

“If you’re doing tails first, you can stack your drawer sides together, left and right, then saw them out at the same time. That saves time and money.

“Rather than getting one drawer side and taking it over to the table saw, and sawing one, take them all over and make one trip. Just little things like that.”

This does raise an obvious question: Where is the line between looking for efficiency and cutting corners? Headley says, “I try not to cut corners. I would take cutting corners as halfway doing it or not doing it the complete way it should be done. Efficiencies would be how to transfer your skills so you can speed up your handwork.”

Does working in a shop that’s been

around for almost 100 years mean the partners have pretty much mastered the learning curve?

“No, we haven’t,” laughs Headley. “No, you quit learning, you might as well give up. We’ve taught out at Marc Adams School of Woodworking (Franklin, IN), and going out there and listening to other instructors, listening to how they do things, we’ve brought home things from there. You’re always learning. Everybody has tricks, and it’s worth listening to all of them, and then you decide on which tricks you want to use.”

Their own woodworking school website highlights their philosophy: “With a mix of both modern machinery and hand tools to help speed up the construction we will send you home with a better understanding of what is needed to build fine period furniture.”

Speeding up construction isn’t something you usually see featured on school websites. Headley says, “That’s what we’re trying to teach: How we would go about doing it so you could earn a living doing this if you wanted. You want to know how to do it quickly.” He figures probably half the students are professionals, half are doing it for enjoyment.

Again, he makes the point about the importance of efficiency. “You have to sell to earn a living. If you’re doing it for enjoyment, that’s a different story. But if you’re doing it to produce things, whether it’s for yourself or your family or for clients, then you want to get on to the next project and you want to do things as fast and efficiently as you can. You want to make sure you’re always continuing because if you’re standing idle, then you’re not getting anything done.”

And that’s good advice whether you’re amateur or pro. —JB

