



Chronicles

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JOURNEYMEN BILL PAVLAK AND BRIAN WELDY OF THE ANTHONY HAY SHOP IN COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

Being a cabinetmaker in the 18th century probably wasn't a whole lot of fun. You likely started in your teens as an apprentice, working from sunup to sundown.

After several years of this, you became a journeyman: still working sun-up to sundown, but finally getting paid. You might have dreamed of setting up your own shop someday.

"I have to imagine that if you start doing that when you're 14, by the time you're 30 you've had enough of it," says Bill Pavlak.

Pavlak and his colleague Brian Weldy, on the other hand, clearly love what they do. They work with 18th-century tools and techniques as journeyman cabinetmakers at the Anthony Hay Shop at Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia.

Of course, they enjoy many advantages over their predecessors. Not just indoor plumbing and modern medical care, but a job that is a lot more varied

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and interesting. "It's a nice balance between education, research, and hands-on," says Weldy.

Forget the romantic image some have of working back then. "So many people write about enjoying handplaning, but [in the 18th century] they didn't know of any other way," says Pavlak. "And they had to crank stuff out to make a living. Our economic reality is very different from theirs."

Weldy agrees. "We have to realize that these guys were tradesmen. They had to keep that balance between fulfilling the needs of the customer and their own artistic intent, but they've also got to make something that's financially feasible."

The two journeymen generally don't have the same deadlines and quotas as those earlier cabinetmakers. "If that means trying a new technique and failing a little bit at first and then working hard to perfect it before you really get into the project, it's OK," says Pavlak. "We have the luxury of time to do that."

Williamsburg has a wealth of

The Anthony Hay Cabinet Shop in Williamsburg, VA



PHOTO SOURCE: COURTESY OF AND USED WITH PERMISSION OF THE ANTHONY HAY SHOP, WILLIAMSBURG, VA.



Chronicles (continued-2)

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18th-century furniture. Other researchers have already established the backgrounds of the pieces. "I'm looking more at construction aspects of it," Weldy says. "What tool marks do we see? Do we see saw marks on the inside? Are there plane marks from a fore plane? How are the dovetails put together? Are they typical to what's attributed to a certain area?"

Pavlak says it involves "looking at every surface; trying to figure out how this thing was built. Every maker, every shop, and in every region, there were different approaches. We really want to not look at a piece from a distance and say, 'This is how I would make that.' We really want to look at it and figure out, 'How did they make it?'" That raises the question: Do you build it ex-



Bill Pavlak shapes a molding at the Anthony Hay Cabinet Shop.
Photo permission courtesy of Joshua Farnsworth (woodandshop.com)

'Hey, don't do this this way!'" According to Weldy, "We try to keep as close as we can to how things were done on the original. Try to determine why they made the choices that they did, then try to re-create it as best we can."

They're more likely to make some minor changes if a piece is leaving Williamsburg. As Pavlak says, "We want to make sure that we don't copy things that we know are destined to fail in the short term."

The Hay Shop has done so many pieces for Colonial Williamsburg over the years that most of what it produces now is for training apprentices or for conferences. Once these pieces are done, they are offered for sale to the public. The shop doesn't generally take commissions, although occasionally the craftsmen will build a piece for another museum or historic home.

Even a modern-day hand-tool fanatic might be lost in an 18th-century shop. Some of the tools we have today simply weren't available then. Pavlak says,

"We have a couple of infill shoulder planes that really are 19th-century tools. They're not using those yet in the 18th century. I've really started just trying to force myself to clean the tenon shoulder with a chisel instead. At first, you're mostly thinking that you miss the shoulder plane, but now it's, 'OK I know how to do that,' and can do it very fast and efficiently."

It's worth noting that both men had to spend several years as apprentices at Colonial Williamsburg, even though they both had woodworking skills.

Weldy studied technical production in theater and also studied at North Bennet Street School in Boston. "I was always interested in furniture. I was attracted to the history. I used to tell people I kind of like building things that will last longer than a ten-week run for a show." He got his journeyman papers in 2015.



Brian shaping the back leg post of a chair

Pavlak was studying for a PhD in Music Theory and started making furniture for fun. He realized he was enjoying it more than music, and thought about becoming either a

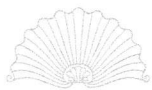
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actly as the 18th-century cabinetmaker did, even if there are flaws or mistakes?

Sometimes they will make minor, period-appropriate changes. But Pavlak says, "We never change those things lightly. We definitely believe in learning from the past... and copying what they do, but once in a while, the little lesson should be

Journeyman Brian Weldy working on a fan carving in the cabinet shop.





Chronicles (continued-3)

JOURNEYMEN BILL PAVLAK AND BRIAN WELDY OF THE ANTHONY HAY SHOP IN COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

curator or cabinetmaker. He jumped at the opportunity when there was an opening at Williamsburg. He became a journeyman in 2013.

Of course, I had to ask: What about having to wear those period costumes when meeting the public? Weldy laughs and says, "One of my classmates from Bennet came down, and the first question he had was not about hand tools but 'How do you deal with the breeches being so baggy in the bottom?' But for the most part it's fine, you get used to it."

Pavlak says, "People like to joke about the big poofy sleeves. Well, you roll those up, but sometimes you're sawing and the sleeve starts coming unfurled and it gets in your way, and you're kind of fighting that all the time, but otherwise you get used to it pretty quickly."

to be talking to your guests and take a break from it."

He often hears people say that it's a shame nobody makes furniture like that anymore. He says "That's a big part of it, educating the customers and guests as to good-quality work, what to look for, and let them know to support the people out there that are doing it."

Pavlak says, "I love it when people come into the shop...and don't necessarily want to be there. They'd rather be somewhere else. And then they get really into it by the time you're done, and that's pretty exciting."

"I bring people into this world and show them a little bit of it." —JB



Bill and Brian deliver the Mack Headley-designed chairs which they eventually finished, completing their apprenticeships.



Bill teaching young apprentices.

He says for the most part, people really like the costumes.

Meeting with visitors to Colonial Williamsburg is one of the highlights of the job for the two journeymen. "That's one of the best parts about it," says Weldy. "Especially when you're planing down a big old piece of curly figured walnut and you're sick of doing it. It's nice to know that you're going

— The Wandering Journeyman —

A journeyman, by definition, is someone who has completed an apprenticeship but still works for someone else, such as a master craftsman. But where does the actual word come from?

There are two schools of thought. Most, including Brian Weldy and Bill Pavlak, say it comes from the French *du jour*, or "of the day." This refers to the fact that, in earlier times, the journeyman was paid for a day's work. (Without getting incredibly technical here, the French word "*journée*," which has a slightly different meaning, would also apply.)

However, some also think of the word more in the sense of "traveling" from job to job. In some parts of Europe, some journeymen did travel from town to town to gain experience in different workshops. The Germans even have a couple of fancy words for that: *Wandergeselle*, which means "wandering journeyman," and *Wanderjahre*, which means "journeyman years."

These days a journeyman is usually someone with a trade certificate to show that he or she has completed an apprenticeship. That rarely involves binding the journeyman to a master for seven years or so, working for room and board while learning his or her trade. And *Wandergeselle* is rarely a requirement.

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