



## RANDY WILKINSON IS ONE OF THE CO-FOUNDERS OF FALLON & WILKINSON

**Mahogany. The beautiful reddish-brown wood that was the foundation for so much spectacular period furniture. You just don't see wood like that anymore.**

Except, as Randy Wilkinson will tell you, sometimes you don't even see it when you look at a piece of "mahogany" period furniture.

Wilkinson is one of the co-founders of Fallon & Wilkinson, based in Baltic, Connecticut. The company can build you a museum-quality reproduction or offer care and conservation for an existing piece. But these days, Wilkinson's focus is on identifying wood.

Take, for example, the case of "blond mahogany." That was the description of the wood in a bureau table made in 1764 for John Deshon of New London, Connecticut, by Edmund Townsend. Wilkinson had no idea what that was. "Somebody along the line looked at it and it was yellow and it was sort of mahogany, and by the way it was a great Newport form, so of course, what else would it be?"

He was able to take a wood sample and examine it under a microscope at high magnification. With help of wood anatomist Regis Miller, he determined that the wood was—if you'll pardon the pun—a pale imitation. It was ac-



Randy S. Wilkinson, co-founder  
Fallon & Wilkinson, LLC  
Furniture Conservators

wasn't all mahogany, but partly crabwood. He's not saying this is common, but there are mahogany look-alikes out there, and he believes it's important to correct the historical record. So Wilkinson is working to, as he puts it, "Tell the bigger story...to add to it in a more scientific way that puts science behind it as opposed to

folklore."

The problem as he sees it is "We have many different people, different disciplines, all looking at the same material, and not speaking the same language, and not even collaborating to come up with a story about what we're looking at." His goal is to get the botanist, the wood anatomist, the curator, the antique dealer and so on, "in the same park."

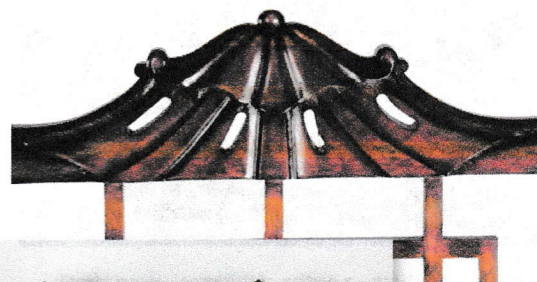
Working with Yale University and some government agencies, and helped by some private funding, he is trying to bring together more institutions and places of wood knowledge to build a reference library and ultimately to have reliable tests for identifying wood.

All of this involves some cutting-edge science. In layman's terms, he's getting right down to the molecular level. "We're exploring the use of LIBS [laser-induced breakdown spectroscopy] and stable isotope techniques." That is, using advanced gas chromatography and mass spectrometry to get detailed data on individual

chemical compounds.

Wilkinson says while most of this isn't new, advances in computer technology allow faster interpretation and sorting of data, making it more relevant. He says the key to all this is "having and developing a reliable data set by which an unknown sample can then be compared to."

One important step in that direction came in 2017. Wilkinson was allowed to take samples from some 16 pieces of Rhode Island furniture on exhibit at the Yale University Art Gallery. "These are some of the greatest," he says. "Goddard, Townsend, you name



Set of 10 Chinese Chippendale chairs, Mahogany

it. They were all signed, dated pieces. And we were able to take samples and do chemical analysis to determine what species of mahogany we actually had. And that led me to...work with other people in the decorative arts field, scientists and so forth, so that we could be helpful in using our information and help them solve some of their problems."

**"It was actually manchineel. (A very dangerous tree; even a tiny drop of sap will cause the skin to blister.)"**

tually manchineel (a very dangerous tree; even a tiny drop of sap will cause the skin to blister). Wilkinson still wonders, "How did it show up in Newport?"

Examining a "prominent" piece from another institution, he found it

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# Chronicles (continued-2)

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It's interesting that what's driving many of these advances is a 21st-century problem: the need to stop illegal logging around the world. Wilkinson says he was just lucky to spot this trend and adapt these technologies and thought processes to look at "how and why mahogany gets to where it gets in the 18th century."

He's well aware that his research may ruffle some feathers. Some curators are "a little uneasy, quite honestly, because they been talking about things they felt were very rock-solid true...

**But now, 30 years later, I basically tell them it's wood....until I really get a chance to examine it."**

him to restore antiques. In 1996 he was accepted into the Smithsonian Institution's Furniture Conservation Training Program, which he says "really launched my career in so many ways." In 2000, he joined with Smithsonian classmate Tad Fallon to open their conservation practice.

Wilkinson says he probably has well over 200 pieces in major museums or private homes, and he's treated thousands more. But he says "The more I learn, the more I am humbled by it. Thirty years ago you would have

it's going to end?"

"It certainly won't end with me. Like all good research, somebody else picks up where I left off and keeps moving."



Reproduction of sofa owned by Alexander Hamilton Hamilton Grange National Memorial, New York, NY

asked me what wood it was and I would have told you what it was, because I only worked with four or five different woods. But now, 30 years later, I basically tell them it's wood...until I really get a chance to examine it."

Wilkinson predicts that someday "we will get so sophisticated in the chemical and analytical world of wood identification that there will be no dispute any more. They're doing a lot of DNA analysis now...they'll take one little sample, and they'll run the DNA and it will put it on the continent, it will put it in the country, and it will put it in the region. And when that comes through, we will rewrite history books again."

So no more blond mahogany, or vague references to "light/dark/light" inlay in trade journals and catalogs. Wilkinson says, "We really don't know what this is going to open up, what kind of can of worms we're opening. But we've opened up a new chapter, we're cautiously dipping our toe into writing a new story, and who knows where

**For those of you attending the SAPFM Midyear Conference, Randy Wilkinson will be speaking on "Identifying Wood Species in Period Furniture," on Saturday, July 21.**

**Wilkinson is teaching his "Wood Identification" class at the Mystic Seaport, Mystic, Connecticut, October 27-28.**



Watch—a portion of Wilkinson's Wood Identification class at the Yale Furniture Study in 2014

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djY\\_Lh3vHSw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djY_Lh3vHSw)

some of that stuff may not necessarily be true." He adds, "People do the best they can with the tools they have. We're not trying to embarrass anyone, just using different tools to solve a problem."

Wilkinson has spent 30 years getting to this point. He graduated from college with a degree in electrical engineering. But faced with an economic downturn, "I decided I would do what I always wanted to do, which was to build furniture."

He met a master cabinetmaker, the late Harold Hayes, who befriended and inspired him. He worked for himself and others. Then people started asking



Double sided gallery bench. Walnut, tulip poplar, mohair fabric. The Frick Collection, New York, NY