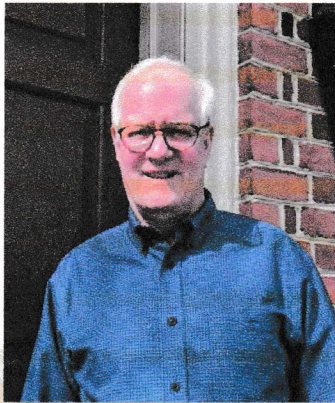




GEORGE NISSLEY—HIS HOME IS TRULY A LIVING-IN MUSEUM

Recently, an SAPFM member suggested that we do a Chronicles article on a fellow member named George Nissley. (We love it at *P&T* when someone does that!)

George Nissley (Lititz, PA) is a SAPFM member in both Chesapeake and Delaware chapters.



Our tipster said Nissley “has done an astounding job outfitting his home with period furniture, joinery, and stairs/bannisters.” He suggested we check out the photos on Nissley’s Instagram account. “You’ll think they’re photos of a historic house museum, but they’re actually of his home.”

We checked, and we were impressed. So we called him.

George Nissley is a member of both the Chesapeake

“I was the builder,” says Nissley. “We copied the proportions, the four fireplaces. We have four fireplaces in this house, in every corner. We stuck to pretty good detail.

“I did all the raised panels for the fireplaces. I ran everything. All the moldings, because I wanted the exact look. I made custom knives for everything. There aren’t any stock moldings.”



Finished handrails

One thing that immediately catches your eye are the staircases and handrails. Nissley says those have always interested him. “My feeling is a good staircase is a highlight of a home. And in fact I think most people, when they go into a house that has a fabulous staircase, they walk around and see all the other furniture and moldings, but when they walk out of that house, they will always remember that fabulous staircase.”

“My feeling is a good staircase is a highlight of a home...”

and Delaware River Valley chapters. He’s retired now from a career at a large construction company in Pennsylvania. He and his wife live in Lititz, Pennsylvania, about an hour-and-a-half west of Philadelphia. And yes, their house does look like a historic house museum, partly because it’s based on one: the Dr. Barraud House at Colonial Williamsburg.

Trouble is, making curved handrails is “complicated as heck.” Nissley wasn’t getting the answers he needed from books, so he signed up for a course on “tangent handrailing” at the Heartwood School in Massachusetts. “It was four days of doing all the drawings you needed to do to make a wreath, and then we made a wreath. (That’s the

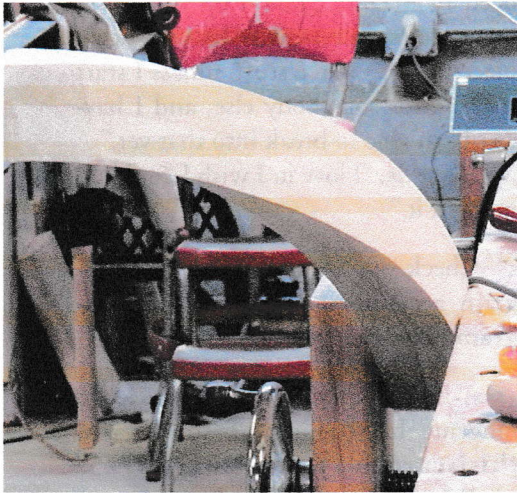


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Chronicles (continued-2)

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Wreath (curved section of handrail) under construction: "into the square" before carving

twisted piece of lumber in a handrail.) That just gives you the basics, but that opened my eyes, and then I was able to really interpret the books I had." (The school does not currently offer the course.)

What is tangent handrailing, you ask? Wikipedia calls it a method of layout that "allows for continuous climbing and twisting rails..." The rails flow uninterrupted around corners and up inclines, without abrupt changes. Curves are cut and carved, not bent or laminated.

So, how do you make a wreath? You start by creating a two-dimensional layout, then projecting the information onto what's called an "oblique plane." Since this isn't a "how-to" article, and explaining tangent handrailing is way beyond my pay grade, I'll let Nissley pick it up from here.

"That layout is basically the plane opened up. So if I were to fold that box together, you

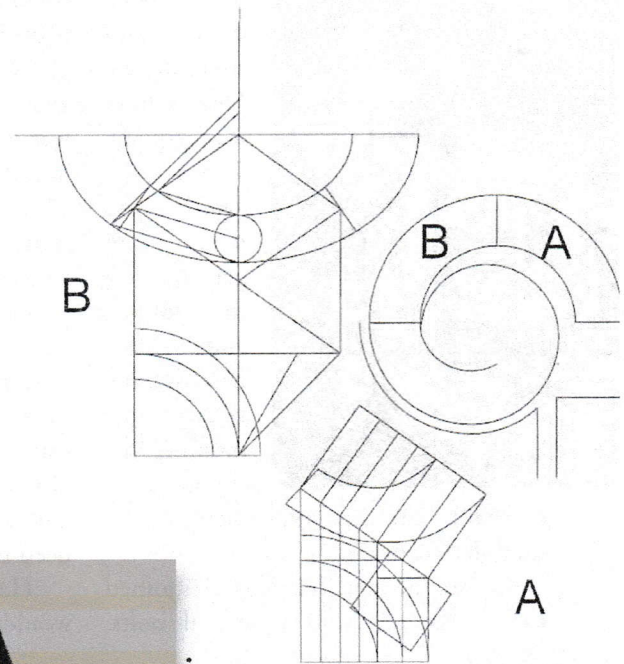
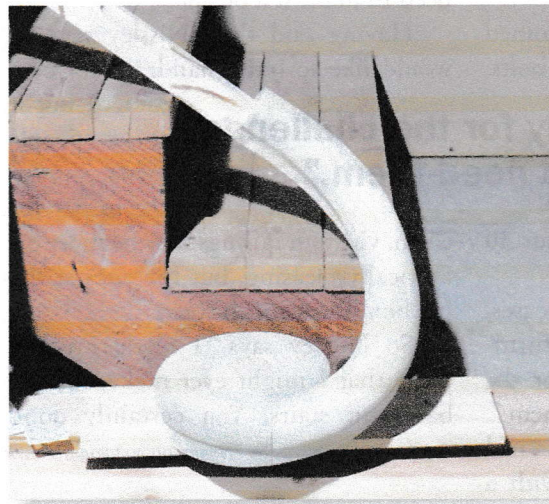


Folded drawing: drawing for ascending volute folding into oblique plane for handrail to lie on

would see it as a big plane. All you're doing is taking that oblique plane and folding it open so that you can draw it, then you fold it back together again."

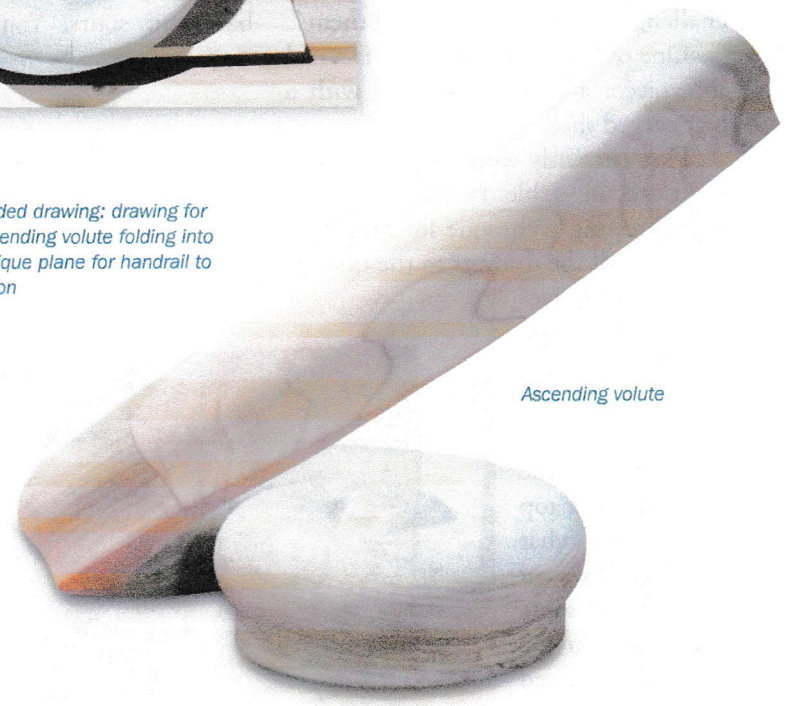
I say that sounds like rocket science to me. Nissley says "It's not easy, but it is doable."

He does all of his layout on CAD, then gets full-size drawings made at a print shop. "It has to be perfect because, when you make that twist, it isn't just arbitrary, it has to be able to line up, and everything has to fit to

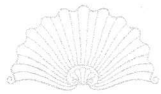


make it around the curve and go up the staircase."

Once the plan is done, he heads down to his basement workshop. First, the wreath is cut out on his bandsaw. "From there I use a drawknife



Ascending volute



Chronicles (continued-3)

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to rough it in, and spokeshaves. Now I have it square. That's the key, you have to get it into the square, and once it's square, you start molding the thing, and I

do that by carving, and by scraping the final details into it."

When the wreath is done, it's joined to the straight rails with rail bolts.

"I build things typically for the challenge, not because we need them."

His most recent project took about 30 hours to complete.

When he's not building staircases, Nissley enjoys making period furniture. "I build things typically for the challenge, not because we need them."

One of his favorite projects is a real showpiece: a corner cupboard with a big, carved shell.

He's currently working on a block-front dressing table. He came up with an interesting technique for matching the curve of the drawers to the rails. "I made a negative/positive piece. You cut the one, you shape it, make sure it's perfect, then you trace the other one over top of it. Then what I did is I waxed one side, put some body filler on the other side, pressed



them together, and all of a sudden I got it perfect."

Nissley is pretty much self-taught, apart from a couple of courses. One was with Michael Dunbar on making Windsor chairs. He figures he's made 15 or 16 of those. He also took some of Mary May's online carving courses for a couple of years.

He's been building furniture for about 50 years. His father was a builder. "I started with him out of high school as a carpenter. Working with wood was a logical extension." But he says, "I spent my life dealing with schedules and deadlines, and this is fun. I don't need to make it a business."

Having said that, Nissley says he would like to build handrails for customers, but it seems people aren't willing to pay for

them. Custom railings may be more esthetically pleasing, but the ones at the big box stores are cheaper.

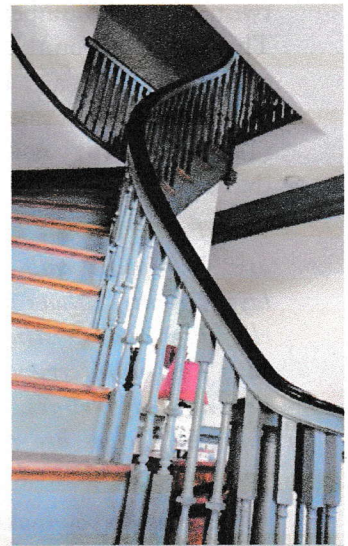
So Nissley says "I made my last piece that I might ever make, for my basement stairs. You certainly don't

need an ascending volute on your basement stairs, but I really had no other place to go to make stuff, unless I start making for somebody else, and I haven't been able to break into that yet."

He adds, "I love it. I wish I could do more of it."

Check out George Nissley's Instagram account at <https://www.instagram.com/george3357/>.

A link to a good online article on tangent handrailing: <https://www.thiscarpentry.com/2011/11/25/traditional-tangent-handrail/>



Planning/building the railing in his home shop

