

# Colonial Williamsburg Conference

## Working Wood before the 18th century: 17th century Joined and Turned Furniture

In January Colonial Williamsburg ran their ninth annual *Working Wood in the 18th Century* conference at the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum, Williamsburg. This year, to mark the 400th anniversary of the establishment of Jamestown, it had taken a step back in time to explore furniture making before the 18th century and RFS American Secretary Peter Follansbee, resident joiner at Plimoth Plantation, played a central role.

The programme spread over four days (run twice to keep numbers at a level where all could be involved) and comprised a successful mix of lectures and demonstrations, for which a temporary 'workshop' had been created at the front of the auditorium. Video cameras and a giant screen were employed to make everything clearly visible to the 200 or so delegates. Many of those

attending were members of the Society of American Period Furniture Makers (SAPFM). Proceedings were introduced and directed in an informal and relaxed manner by Jay Gaynor, head of historic trades at Williamsburg, and comments and questions were actively encouraged during the demonstrations. This led to many constructive and often humorous exchanges between the delegates and the floor, a forum that worked well.

Tara Gleason Chicirda, assistant curator of furniture at Colonial Williamsburg, introduced a cross section of surviving 17th century furniture from North America, with both slides and detailed examination of a number of pieces in the room. Many of these remained on show throughout, offering a rare chance to examine them at close quarters. The scarcity of 17th century American furniture has enabled it to be studied intensely, with a number of known makers and original owners being identified and clear regional styles found.

In some instances these styles have been linked to those in areas of Britain that makers originated from or trained in before emigrating, possibly on occasions with greater confidence and certainty than regional studies here have yet to reach. Whilst applying them too rigidly could oversimplify the complex context that existed in a larger,

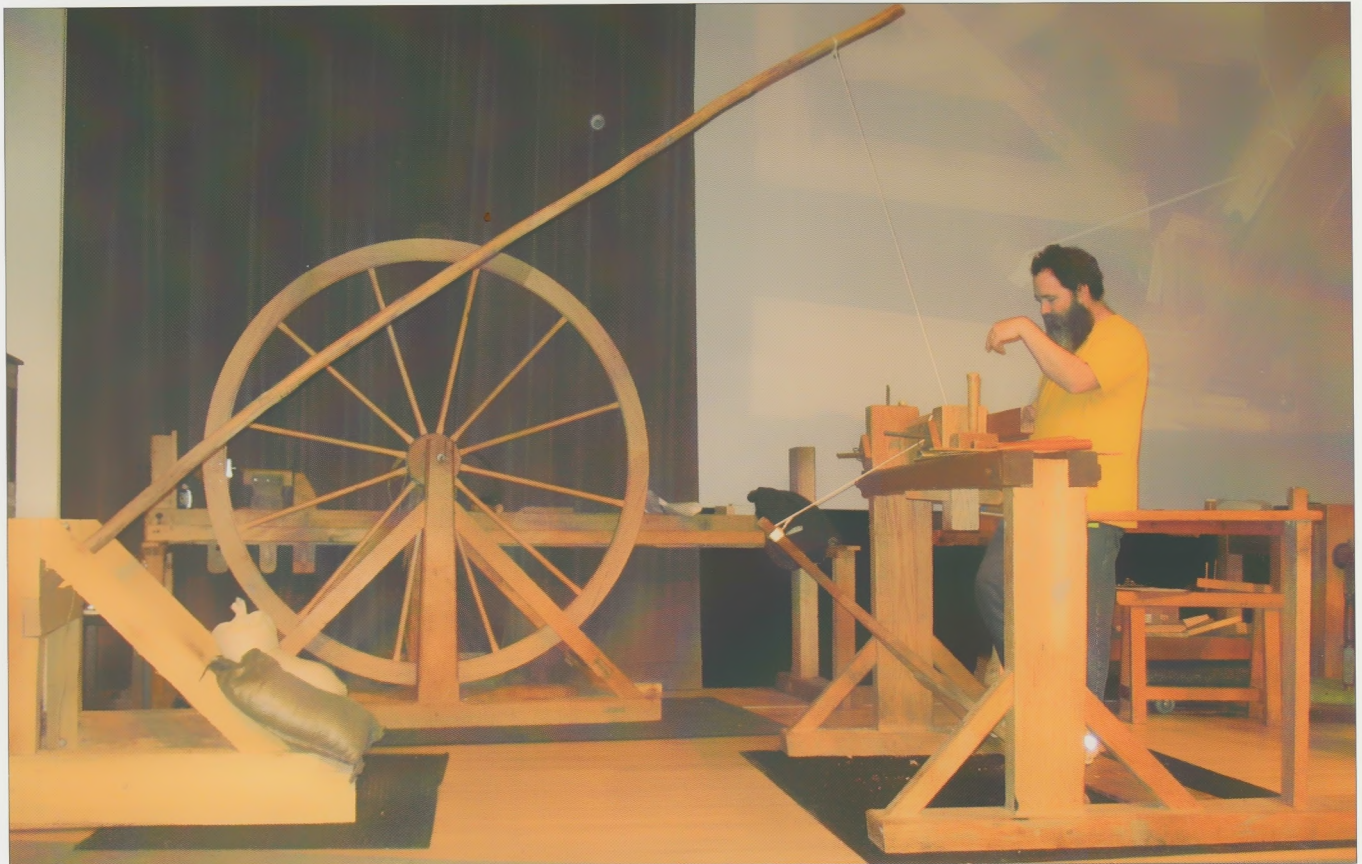


Fig 1. Peter Follansbee working at the pole lathe.



Fig 2. Ted Boscana and Garland Wood beside the Harvard joiners' cupboard.



Fig 3. The replica Harvard joiners' cupboard.

more established economy, the clarity offered by these small uncluttered samples remains of great relevance to the study of British regional styles and is one that should be used and built upon. An aspect of 17th century North American furniture that formed a central theme to this conference was the regular use there of green, riven oak (often in conjunction with wide yellow pine top and back boards); this was highlighted by the inclusion of an English stool made from sawn oak in Tara's examples.

The first practical session fell to Kenneth Schwarz, master blacksmith at Williamsburg, who discussed many aspects of period hardware and research into its replication, before talking through pre-recorded video demonstrations and slides of making items. These included acting out Moxon's step-by-step description for making cross garnet hinges.

Peter Follansbee's sessions filled two complete mornings. The first was spent demonstrating the stages involved in making a joined stool using only traditional tools and methods, including riving and preparation of timber, setting out and hand cutting joints, and turning the legs on a pole-lathe. John Alexander (whose passion and quest for understanding the tradition of working green riven oak helped to fuel Follansbee's) shared in this session, Follansbee at the bench and Alexander looking on; a double act with a great deal of humour.

They have shared closely in their research over many years and all the ribbing between 'Mr John', the ageing master, and Follansbee, the former journeyman who has gained the confidence and experience to answer back on his own terms, cannot conceal the respect they share for each other. Superficially, the processes demonstrated are simple ones, but the detail with which they have been researched and analysed through the study of period pieces raises them to a different level. Noted was the distinctive sound the spoon bit makes as it passes through the two quadrants of a full turn that its leading edge is cutting against the grain; through the creation of words when a vocabulary didn't exist, the resulting torn grain has been christened 'sprucks'. Even the distinctive grooves left by sprucks on pegs as they were driven home has not gone unnoticed and turned into an analytical tool when examining period pieces.

Follansbee worked quickly and casually before the audience with the confidence of one completely at ease in his labours; questions were answered and jokes exchanged without his eyes leaving the bench. He describes his approach as 'slap dash woodworking' (something that left many SAPFM members uncomfortable, the weight of interest being on the neat precision of the 18th century) and jokes about this being his solution to finding techniques fit for his ability that accompanied some of the wildest moments, did

not mask the truth that his methods result from the careful study of period pieces and an understanding of the context in which their makers had to work. Possibly some of the finer joined furniture produced in Britain and Europe over the period was overlooked by the emphasis on this style of work, but this conference was being held in America where the elite markets for which such pieces were generally produced would have barely existed.

Follansbee's second morning session was devoted to carving. The same 'one pass' approach taken to his joinery saw blank panels rapidly filling with guilloche, strapwork and S scroll designs, his sureness of touch resulting in a fluidity in common with period carving, yet so often lacking in more laboured efforts at reproduction. Once again the techniques employed were based on careful study and included a minimal amount of setting out with dividers, freehand work with a V tool and inferred rather than actual symmetry. The benefit of using riven timber was emphasised, its grain being sympathetic in all directions.

The afternoons following Follansbee's sessions saw Williamsburg carpenters Garland Wood and Ted Boscana replicating a late 17th century court cupboard attributed to the Harvard joiners Taylor, Poffry and Hicks. This added some key aspects of 17th century joined work to those covered in the morning sessions, including framed panels, applied mouldings (scratched and planed), channel mouldings, split turnings and pin-hinged doors. With an element of *Blue Peter* style 'here's one I prepared earlier', the cupboard was largely complete by the end of the sessions. Wood and Boscana primarily work replicating 18th century carpentry, an area in which they excel, and this exercise was openly a step back in time into slightly unfamiliar territory for them. The way in which they rose to the challenge is a tribute to their skill as craftsmen, and the relaxed 'open forum' nature of the event meant that on the few occasions

problems were encountered everyone was able to share in exploring solutions, something that enhanced the learning process greatly.

On the final morning Ernie Conover demonstrated producing the turnings for the court cupboard, using both pole and great wheel lathes, as well as setting out and cutting open spiral twists. Everyone was invited to turn the wheel of the great lathe, a task requiring a high level of concentration and co-ordination as well as physical effort. It also placed the volunteer in an ideal position to both see and sense what was happening at the lathe; a vantage point from which thousands of apprentices must have gained an initial understanding of their future trade.

Finally Susan Buck, a conservator and authority on the analysis of surfaces, guided delegates through 17th century finishes. Slides were used to explain how the process of fluorescent microscopy can reveal the layers of finish applied to period woodwork using only pinhead size samples, through the various colours produced by different materials as they fluoresce; fluorochromes being used to colour those that don't fluoresce naturally. The technique can make it possible to analyse the make-up of varnishes. One case study showed the sequence of layers on a desk box to be wood, penetrated red layer (low viscous paint), red lead, plant resin (colophony - rosin in turpentine), glaze, grime (suggesting a finished surface), second varnish layer, more grime. The process has enabled Follansbee to make replicas of the Peabody Pope Chest using authentic finishes and colours, and it helped establish which details on the Harvard joiners' chest had originally been painted. It was also used to guide the removal of layers from the Hannah Barnard cupboard, now in the Henry Ford Museum, to reveal its full decorative effect. Susan finished by demonstrating the preparation of several paints and varnishes using traditional materials.