

# Windsor Writing Chairs

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

FAVORED BY THE CLERGY, DOCTORS, AND STATESMEN, THE WRITING-ARM WINDSOR CHAIR COMBINES PRACTICALITY, ELEGANT DESIGN, AND AMERICAN REFINEMENT. TODAY'S SKILLED TRADITIONAL CHAIRMAKERS CREATE AN ARRAY OF STYLES AND FINISHES TO SUIT ANY PERIOD DÉCOR—AND EVEN LEFT-HANDED WRITERS.



COURTESY OF WINTERTHUR MUSEUM, DELAWARE

No chair has earned such a distinctive place in history as the American Windsor. Unlike any piece of furniture before or since, the Windsor chair became a metaphor for the birth of a nation. After it arrived here from England in the 1720s, American chairmakers quickly stripped off its unnecessary ornamentation and, in a series of brilliant design breakthroughs using the strong yet flexible woods abundant in the colonies' timberlands, created an elegant, sturdy, utilitarian chair the nation's founders sat in as they declared independence from England.

At the top of the Windsor line was the writing-arm chair. Clever chairmakers added a writing surface to the basic chair design to combine the functions of a chair and desk. Men interested in composing thoughts and maintaining ledgers sought out the writing-arm form of the Windsor because it was so stable it would not tip over yet so portable it could be easily moved to the hearthside on a cold winter's night.

Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence in an early Windsor that later became one, and Henry Longfellow composed

**Ebenezer Tracy Sr. of Lisbon Township, Connecticut, was one of New England's earliest Windsor chairmakers, and his family became the state's most prominent producers of Windsors. This chair is attributed to the patriarch himself because of the base structure and rounded scrolls on the crest.**



poetry in another. President James Monroe's attorney general, William Wirt, used one, as did Iowa's first chief justice, Charles Mason.

"Many original owners were men of position, wealth, or stature in the communities, and some achieved national prominence," wrote eminent furniture historian Nancy Goynes Evans of Windsor writing chairs. "Members of the clergy constitute the largest group associated with the writing chair; undoubtedly, some found it a comfortable seat for writing sermons. Doctors were the second most numerous group of known writing-chair owners. ... Other writing chairs are notable because their owners were men of letters, public servants or political figures."

Today Windsor chairmaking remains one of the most venerable traditional American crafts. Hundreds of highly skilled woodworkers across the country continue to produce beautiful examples of the Windsor, and many of them feature writing-arm chairs as a highlight of their catalogs.

But, in some respects, both the customer's view and the chairmaker's efforts remain limited. "Most of today's chairmakers only know Windsors from the classic period, 1770 to 1790," said Michael Dunbar, founder of The Windsor Institute, where he teaches the craft to more than 500 people a year.

"Windsor chairmaking is still in its infancy and it'll remain stuck there until chairmakers become more educated," said Dunbar. "They don't make the low-back writing chair because the style is too early for them and they generally don't make the 19th-Century Windsors, which are the later styles."

The chairmakers we talked to tend to agree, but they argue that they create what customers will buy, and today's customers are not aware of the multitude of high backs, low backs, square backs, and slat backs—often painted in vivid blues, reds, and yellows, sometimes with pin-striping and floral decoration—that so pleased our ancestors.



MIGUEL FLORES-VIANNA, THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON; THE BAVOUBEND COLLECTION, GIFT OF FRIENDS OF MISS IMA HOGG, IN HER HONOR

Ralph Earl's 1791 oil painting, *Portrait of Dr. Mason Fitch Cogswell*, shows him sitting in a low-back Windsor writing chair, its arm covered with green fabric. The doctor considered the portrait as payment in full for treating Earl for "sundries" in the amount of "5s.6d." Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, Earl's biographer, believes the chair was made by Hartford, Connecticut, cabinetmaker Stacey Stackhouse, also as payment for the doctor's services. The chair beneath the painting was made between 1770 and 1803 by Ebenezer Tracy.

#### FROM THE HUMBLE STOOL

The origin of the Windsor chair and its name remain lost to the ages. Furniture historians believe the chair evolved from the humble stool because the legs on both are similarly inserted directly into the wooden seat and splayed for maximum support.

The earliest versions of the Windsor have been traced to the late

1600s, to High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire, a region northwest of London that is resplendent with beech, a wood well suited for carving and turning. By the mid-1700s, High Wycombe was the chairmaking capital of the world thanks to its high output of Windsor and ladder-back chairs.

The Windsor's royal-sounding name derives either from Windsor





Castle or the town of Windsor. Some popular tales center on King George III discovering and then naming the chair, but those yarns ignore the fact that George was born in 1738, when the Windsor chair was already well known in England. Some modern English furniture historians say Windsor chairs were so named because they were used in the gardens

at Windsor Castle. Others remain convinced of the chair's association with the town of Windsor, lying only a dozen miles south of smaller High Wycombe.

The Windsor chair's arrival in America is similarly unclear. Some furniture histories cite a 1708 reference to a Windsor chair in a Philadelphia household inventory, but the

**This reproduction by Mark Soukup shows the elements common to an antique comb-back Windsor chair. Unlike early chairmakers who married various woods and painted the resulting chair, Soukup displays the natural wood on several of his chairs. This example has tiger maple for the seat, undercarriage, paddle, and crest. It sells for \$1,975.**



## WRITING CHAIR BECAME ONE AFTER THE FACT

more prevalent belief is that the first English Windsor appeared in the colonies in 1726 when Patrick Gordon, William Penn's newly appointed governor of Pennsylvania, moved to Philadelphia with his London household furnishings, including five Windsor chairs.

Shortly after Governor Gordon's arrival, somewhere along one of Philadelphia's cobblestone streets, an anonymous chairmaker shaved, carved, turned, and assembled the first American Windsor chair. Its design spread quickly among the city's woodworkers.

### A METAPHOR OF FREEDOM

Freedom of design is an American Windsor innovation. Unlike their English counterparts, American furniture makers were not constrained by the guild system, so they could create and market chairs of their own designs. Early on they stripped away the more ornamental aspects of the English Windsor chair—intricately scrolled back slats and cabriole legs that contributed to curvy, sumptuous pieces—and replaced them with ingenious modifications to increase the chair's comfort and strength while creating a cleaner, leaner profile.

For example, Philadelphia chairmakers around 1740 created the comb-back Windsor with its thin but strong spindles that raised the back of the chair to the height of the sitter's head. By 1760, woodworkers were manufacturing thousands of these Windsor chairs, popularly known as "Philadelphia chairs," annually.

In 1775, chairmakers in New York created the continuous-arm Windsor chair, in which the graceful compound curve of the back extends forward to become its arms, creating an aesthetically pleasing flow.

Chairmakers also benefited from the New World's abundant resources. American makers could modify the chair's design because of the superior species of local woods. English chairmakers were confined to elm, beech, ash, and yew. In America, makers had poplar and

The Windsor writing chair acclaimed above all others never really was one. Owned by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, the unique writing-arm chair purported to be where he drafted the Declaration of Independence is now believed to have gained its writing arm in 1791 or later.

The chair—featuring a unique circular swivel seat of Jefferson's invention—has been the subject of historical scrutiny because of the legend surrounding it. That legend is destined to spread because of the recent HBO feature film "John Adams," in which the characters of Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin praise the unusual chair.

Historical research points to Jefferson purchasing the chair in 1776 while he was rooming in Philadelphia at the home of Jacob Graff. It is uncertain who built it. Noted Windsor chairmaker Francis Trumble is often mentioned because he supplied Windsor chairs to the Continental Congress. Another suggested source is Philadelphia cabinetmaker Benjamin Randolph, who may have implemented Jefferson's invention of the revolving seat.

The seat is actually top and bottom parts connected by a central iron spindle, enabling the top half to swivel on casters of the type used in rope-hung windows. According to documentation at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, which has owned the chair since 1836, "Revolving chairs were scarce in America, and Jefferson was castigated by the Federalists for boasting of a chair 'which had the miraculous quality of allowing a person seated in it to turn his head without moving his tail'."

Jefferson later shipped the chair to Monticello, where it became part of a peculiar, four-piece configuration combining the chair, a chaise lounge, and Windsor couch—spanned by a writing table with rotating top—to accommodate his rheumatic back.

Some researchers believe the writing tablet was attached to the right arm—and both arms were moved back so Jefferson could get in and out of the chair—at Monticello in 1791. Furniture historian Charles Santore, in an appendix to his 1981 book *The Windsor Style in America, 1730-1830*, suggests "the writing paddle is a later addition, made in a style consistent with the mid- to late 1830s."

In fact, it was Santore's description that contributed accuracy to the HBO portrayal of the chair. Windsor chairmaker William Jenkins of Locust Farm Windsores in Montross, Virginia, supplied nearly forty Windsor chairs for the "John Adams" filming. For the Jefferson chair, HBO set designers gave him a photo of the chair as it exists today and asked him to build it.

"I had read Charles Santore's book and I called HBO and said the chair today is incorrect," he recalled. "I recommended that it be historically accurate, without the writing tablet, and they said, 'Well, okay.' And I said I'd give it a try."

When it came to the unique swivel seat, Jenkins had to be nearly as enterprising as Jefferson. He eventually located a supplier for an industrial-strength lazy-susan mechanism he could sandwich between the top and bottom halves.

The swivel-seat replica Jenkins built was presented by HBO to David McCullough, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *John Adams*, on which the movie is based.



**Thomas Jefferson's swivel-seat Windsor writing chair as it appears today, with a writing paddle believed to have been added in 1791 or later.**

COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY





Americans who had their portraits painted in the late 17th and early 18th Centuries often did so sitting in a Windsor chair. This portrait of 79-year-old Mrs. Jonathan Jaquess from Posey County, Indiana, painted by Pennsylvania artist Jacob Maentel in 1841, shows her seated in a rare left-handed version of a writing-arm Windsor.

Independence.

Historian J. Stoddell Stokes, in the December 1925 *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum*, wrote, “So our early chairmakers, working out their own ideas, made from native woods a new chair, thoroughly American in feeling, light, strong, and remarkably comfortable for a wooden chair. It is not surprising that the Windsor held its popularity unbroken for a century, while other types came and passed.”

#### UTILITARIAN EMBELLISHMENT

Like so many other aspects of the Windsor chair’s history, mystery surrounds the earliest American writing chairs as well. A utilitarian embellishment of the standard Windsor, a writing pad could be attached because of the chair’s strength and stability—the chair could accommodate lopsidedness without toppling over.

“The idea of converting a chair to a desk or writing table appears to have come to America directly from England,” wrote Evans in her highly respected 1997 book *American Windsor Furniture: Specialized Forms*. She cited a specially constructed English writing chair built between 1766 and 1768, probably for use at St. James Palace, adding, “Although the writing arrangement differs from that in the American Windsor, all the necessary features are present: a board, drawer, and candle arm.”

By the 1790s, Windsor writing chairs were being built in Philadelphia and New York, with other versions soon to crop up in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Maryland, and Virginia. Some of the earliest were based on low-back Windsors but soon encompassed the whole range of American Windsor

pine to easily carve into comfortable seats. Hickory was perfect for spindles and, along with oak and chestnut, could be bent by steam. Maple and birch proved ideal for the crisply detailed legs, stretchers, and arms.

Because the English designed the Windsor chair for outdoor seating—and because each chair was built from at least two types of wood—they protected it by painting it, traditionally dark green. American chairmakers recognized that painting the Windsor enhanced its inherent design and generally stuck with green until the late 1700s. By then, the American Windsor had found its

way into kitchens and drawing rooms and demanded more flair. Consequently, chairmakers introduced a bright palette of reds, blues, pinks, and mustards. Not until the mid-1800s did Windsors assume the more uniform black so often associated with them today.

By the time of the Revolution, the Windsor chair had become the most uniquely American piece of furniture in existence. Windsor chairs seated the First Continental Congress in 1774 and the Second Continental Congress in 1775 and then its delegates in 1776 as they signed the Declaration of



styles, including high-back, sack-back, square-back, and even later slat-back and tabletop Windsor chairs.

Thomas Hamilton Ormsbee, in his 1930 history, *Early American Furniture Makers: A Social and Biographical Study*, explained, “This chair with its broad right arm, frequently had a small drawer beneath the arm for quill pens, nut-gall ink and sand, and sometimes a second drawer under the seat for writing paper and the like. It usually had a high back and comb top and was nearly always made with the writing arm stationary. Sometimes, however, the writing arm was on a pivot so that it might be swung closer to the writer. Occasionally one is to be found with the writing arm on the left side; evidently a special-order chair.”

Certainly the Windsor writing chair was not for everyone. “Some individuals would have preferred a desk, or in the absence of that furniture form an ordinary table, to conduct their business,” Evans said. “The writing-arm chair was bulky and required considerable space, thus it would not have worked well in some rooms or in small houses.”

In fact, most people in the 18th and 19th Centuries relied on more standard furniture for their writing platforms. “Lap desks were fairly common, as were freestanding desks and the popular desk-bookcase combinations called secretaries,” noted Thomas Kelleher, curator of historical trades at Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts. “Merchants and schoolmasters, among others, had standing desks. For most people, the parlor dining table was probably the most common place to sit and write.”

Still, the writing chair had important benefits. “Because the writing chair was portable—which a regular desk was not, without a lot

of trouble—it could be moved about to suit the occasion or need,” Evans said. “For instance, in the dead of winter, the chair could be transported to the kitchen or keeping room, which likely had the only fire lighted in the house.”

### MAINTAINING APPEARANCES

As with any complex woodworking project, introducing a foreign element in a Windsor affects every other aspect of the piece—adding a large writing paddle to one side upsets the balance of an otherwise symmetrical chair.

“Any time a chairmaker makes such a dramatic change, he sets into motion the four objectives that govern furniture making,” said Dunbar. “First, the chair has to perform its function. The tablet has to provide a surface on which one can work.

“Second, the chair has to be

comfortable to use. This means the tablet has to be large enough. It also has to be at the proper height and angle, and the sitter has to be able to get in and out easily.

“Next, the chair has to be well made. The sitter will write on the tablet and lean on it. Incidental accidents will occur. Children will hang on it. The chair will be bumped when it’s moved. This means the tablet has to be securely attached and supported.

“Finally, the chair must be pleasing to look at. This is the hard part. The tablet has to be integrated into the design so it does not look like an obvious addition or an afterthought.”

Dunbar speaks from experience—he has taught more than 3,000 woodworkers how to make Windsor chairs and has authored seven books on the subject.



**A distinctive feature of early Windsor writing chairs built in New York is the pronounced tilt of the writing surface and back rail, enabling the writer to adopt a somewhat reclining position. The maker of this c. 1790 chair is unknown.**

COURTESY OF WINTERTHUR MUSEUM, DELAWARE



**Brian Cunfer uses a draw knife and spoke shave for greater authenticity in building his Windsors. He refrains from distressing the finish, creating a chair close to what a customer would have purchased in 1790. It sells for \$2,750.**

Although Dunbar has had substantial influence on contemporary American Windsor chairmaking, several of the makers we interviewed learned their trade from more solitary mentors or are self-taught.

Prices for today's Windsor writing chairs range from below \$1,000 to nearly \$3,000, depending on the amount of time and effort a chairmaker puts into his product. Chairs created almost entirely by hand typically cost more. Some chairmakers purchase legs, stretchers, spindles, and seats from The Windsor Institute and do more assembly of chairs than shaping of them, and accordingly tend to charge less.

#### **BRIAN CUNFER**

Brian Cunfer lives just eighty miles from Philadelphia, but he prefers reproducing the Windsor styles of New England.

"I pattern most of my Windsor chairmaking after the New England style rather than the Philadelphia style because the New England Windsors have more flair, more splay to the spindles," he said. "To me, it gives a more appealing look to have those curves rather than the straight lines of the Philadelphia chair."

Cunfer, who operates The Windsor Chair Shop in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, presents another paradox when it comes to the appearance of his chairs. On one hand, he uses the laborious 18th-Century methods of carving his spindles—painstakingly shaping each piece by hand—but then disdains any attempt to make his chairs appear old.

"All of my spindles are hand-drawn with a draw knife and spoke shave," he said. "Some of the other chairmakers use a lathe and turn them, but I believe that gives them too much of an exact look. When you hand-draw them, you get more character. It's the way the old chairmakers really did it, and the results



are simply more authentic."

Cunfer's chairs are essentially what a 1790s customer would see, because his woodworking bears the aesthetic evidence of being created by hand, yet the chair's finish is unblemished.

"A lot of chairmakers try to make their chairs look two hundred years old by banging them up and putting wear on the paint finishes," he said. "I don't like something to look forced. It's not my style." Cunfer instead uses a mix of milk paint, linseed oil and varnish, painting each chair with at least two coats—his favorite combination is old red covered with black—then waxing the finish to a gentle sheen, so his customers are buying a Windsor that appears new and will age through normal use.

Chair making is Cunfer's second profession. He spent thirty years in

construction and in 1993 began taking classes from Dana Hatheway at the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina, where Cunfer now teaches chairmaking. For more intensive study, he took one-on-one training from master Windsor chairmaker Curtis Buchanan of Jonesboro, Tennessee.

When it comes to writing-arm Windsor chairs, Cunfer agrees with most other Windsor chairmakers that affixing the writing tablet to the chair can be tough. "Getting the writing tablet to fit properly is the most challenging thing," he said. "Getting it at just the right plane takes the most time."

Today Cunfer makes nearly twenty different styles of Windsor chairs, plus a few settees, candle stands, and stools. His writing-arm Windsor is his top-of-the-line piece and generally sells for \$2,750.



## ROLF "BUD" HOFER

When Rolf Hofer wanted to make a Windsor writing chair, he could imagine it but just couldn't find one that suited him. So he did the same thing the early Windsor chairmakers did—developed his own design based on what he liked best about the Windsor style.

"Early on, customers asked me to build a writing-arm Windsor, but I was reluctant until I could find the right chair to reproduce," said Hofer, recalling a period some thirty years ago. "My wife and I visited museums, antiques shows, and antiques shops looking for the right chair to build. Most were lacking something—overall symmetry, weak leg turnings, primitive volute, carved ears, seat shape, splay of the legs, or just the general stance of the chair."

He eventually settled on adding a writing tablet and drawers to his own successful version of the Philadelphia comb-back, "and I incorporated the best design elements from the other chairs I build," he explained, quickly noting that the same approach held favor with the leading creators of American Windsores, such as one of his favorites, Ebenezer B. Tracy Sr. of Connecticut.

Hofer, who works from his shop in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, has been building Windsor chairs since 1972. He worked previously in sales and learned to restore antique furniture from an elderly German cabinetmaker and later—with encouragement from his wife and some fellow woodworkers—decided to tackle Windsor chairs. He still works with mainly hand tools and relies on chairmaking techniques of the 18th and 19th Centuries, securing each chair with walnut wedges, hickory pegs, and glue. "There is no metal in my chairs," he said.

He currently offers about a dozen different styles of Windsor chairs, as

well as a settee and a table. He uses a home-brewed milk paint simulating period colors and applies several coats of colors to achieve a richly aged effect. "I try to produce chairs that are historically accurate, graceful, and comfortable for today's body, which is not always easy," he said.

Hofer, an avid fly fisherman of trout and salmon across the country, has a long list of chair-making credentials, including shows at leading museums, a miniature Windsor chair for the White House Christmas tree, and numerous magazine articles to his credit.

Still, the writing-arm Windsor—in both right- and left-hand versions—is one of his most challenging chairs and sells for \$2,285.

"I hand-turn all the legs, stretchers, spindles, and writing-surface supports," he said. "The writing arm itself is an intricate combination of oak and poplar to provide not only the support of the writing surface, but also the visual balance to the chair."

## RALPH AND CARON QUICK

A serious traffic accident in 1996 sent Ralph Quick's life into a tailspin, and he came out of it one of the leading Windsor chairmakers in the country.

He was driving a big rig for Federal Express when the accident occurred. "I woke up in the hospital with a white sheet over my head," he recalled. "I pushed it off and there's



Employing the freedom ascribed to many early Windsor chairmakers, Rolf Hofer combined design characteristics of his popular Philadelphia high-back Windsor with some of his other styles to produce this writing-arm chair, which he sells for \$2,285.





Ralph and Caron Quick of Missouri say these two writing-arm models—a child's chair at left and an adult size at right—are their top sellers. Each of their writing chairs has a pewter inkwell inset into the paddle. The child's size sells for \$500 and the adult version, available for right- or left-handed writers, for \$850.

a crowd of people standing around who thought I was dead." Although he had defied their prognosis by coming back to life, the bad news still wasn't over. "They said both legs would have to come off."

Quick told them no and settled for a wheelchair and possible paralysis. "I don't make a good paraplegic," he said. His wife, Caron, cared for him as best she could. "But she still had to go off to work and I'd just sit there. I started to get some funny thoughts."

For a man of Quick's character, "funny" thoughts can be deadly. He is big, burley, and boisterous—a tattooed former biker with a gray ponytail, now the town Santa Claus and an active colonial-era re-enactor—not a man to be contentedly confined

to a broken body.

"Caron was getting worried about me when she spotted an ad in *Early American Life* for the Windsor Institute and she thought making chairs might help," he said. "She called Mike Dunbar and he told her, 'Hell, he doesn't need legs to make a chair.'" Some time later, Quick returned to Missouri from the Windsor Institute. "I'd made my first sack-back Windsor chair and got a new purpose in life in the process."

Before long, Quick (who recovered completely) found himself flooded with requests for chairs from friends and relatives. In 2001, he and Caron moved to historic Clarksville, Missouri, and opened The Windsor Chair Shop.

"We eat, sleep, and drink Wind-

sors and can't think of anything we'd rather do than create these beautiful antiques of the future," said Caron, who also has taken several classes at Dunbar's Windsor Institute.

The Quicks make about a dozen styles of Windsor chairs, plus a couple of settees. The writing chair is their top seller, especially in left-handed and child-sized versions. "Our society generally doesn't cater to left-handed folks," Ralph said. "We go to shows and can't even get the child's chair off the truck before people start placing orders for it."

"One thing that makes our chairs different," Caron said, "is that we counter-sink a hole in the paddle with a pewter inkwell, which really adds to the chair's look and is very functional." The pewter ink-



wells are made by the Quicks' friends, Tom and Pat Hooper of ASL Pewter in nearby Louisiana, Missouri.

The Quicks charge \$850 for the adult chair and \$500 for the child's size. As a result of their low pricing and workmanship, the Quicks are back-ordered about two years. "Trust me, I'm not complaining," Ralph said.

### JIM RANTALA

Jim Rantala talks a lot about the high technology of building a chair. But he means something quite different by it than anyone else born in the last hundred years.

"I still make all my Windsors by the green-wood process," Rantala explained. "It's high technology for wood construction. I literally split all of my legs and spindles right from the log and do green turnings and then shrink the ends of the legs before putting them into the sockets. I dry the ends of the stretchers in a bucket of hot sand to pull out the moisture. They end up creating their own tight joints, whereas most chair-makers are totally reliant on glue."

That speech is pretty typical of Rantala's approach to many things. He did woodworking on the side for several years as he built a business in Texas as a successful commercial photographer. But it was too lifeless for him. He moved to Cedar, Michigan, and began making furniture fulltime in the early 1990s.

"I get bored doing just one thing," he confessed. "I began making Windsor chairs for people and then they asked for tables and it just evolved from there." A few years ago, he threw himself with the same passion into tin and more recently into brooms, and today is both an accomplished tinsmith and broom squire.

He makes about twenty different Windsor chairs and settees, but only one style of writing-arm Wind-

sor, a sack-back model that sells for \$2,185 and has become his signature piece. He fashions it after one he saw on the dust jacket of a 1917 Wallace Nutting book. That chair had a candleholder attached to the writing paddle, so Rantala has a blacksmith friend replicate the candleholder for his chairs.

Rantala, who was featured on a cable television's Home & Garden Network crafts program, pays considerable attention to a chair's comfort. "The whole comfort of a wooden chair depends on how deeply you dish out the seat and the angle at which you set the back of the chair," he said. "If you don't pay attention to these things, it's like sitting on a flat board at a stadium."

Even the writing-paddle portion of his Windsor writing chair is subjected to Rantala's ergonomic scrutiny. "I'm always aware of what people will be doing with the furniture," he said. "With the writing-arm chair, the paddle itself is actually tipped toward the person and tilted in just a bit so it'll be more comfortable for actually writing."

"There are just a few things about making a Windsor," he said. "You keep it historically accurate, you modify it a bit for modern man, you make it extremely comfortable. And then you step away from it, and you still have this remarkable piece of furniture—complete with its engineering and structural function—that's just beautiful to look at."



Jim Rantala patterns his signature sack-back writing chair after one on the cover of Wallace Nutting's 1917 book *Windsor Chairs*, down to the wrought-iron candleholder. This chair sells for \$2,185.





A highly linear, square-backed Windsor form appeared c. 1800. The chair at right is the work of brothers Andrew and Robert McKim of Richmond, Virginia, 1802. Although such chairs were relatively rare in the South, Windsor makers in Petersburg and Richmond produced them, according to Ronald Hurst and Jonathan Prown, authors of *Southern Furniture 1680-1830: The Colonial Williamsburg Collection*. Mark Soukup used the McKim brothers' chair as a model for his version, left, built with walnut arms, paddle, and drawer. It sells for \$2,200.

## MARK SOUKUP

Mark Soukup's catalog of Windsor writing chairs has more styles than any of his chairmaking peers. While some other chairmakers may build lesser-known writing-arm styles via special order, Soukup offers right up front his square-back, sack-back, small Connecticut, and three versions of the familiar comb-back style.

"I do a lot of different Windsor chair styles anyway," he said from his shop in Gap Mills, West Virginia, a few miles from the Virginia state line. "From a business standpoint, maybe you're always going out on a limb by making different forms, but it's something I do that keeps my interest up. Besides, there are so many forms I've wanted to do, so many I've appreciated."

Perhaps even more distinctive than his variety of Windsor writing chairs is the range of colors Soukup uses and his penchant for displaying bare wood.

"Originally most Windsors were just painted green and were decoratively limited," he explained. "It wasn't until late in the 18th and into

the 19th Centuries that the older chairs were repainted or decorated with striping and different colors. There are simpler Windsor forms that were designed from the start to be more decorated. It interests me to use a lot of the original colors the chairmakers used and not just the typical black and green and dark red.

"The straw colors and light blues and bright greens are a lot of fun to work with, and they open up a whole new area of design challenges," he continued. "You learn what the chairmakers had to do in the 18th Century to keep bread on the table. It certainly broadens my perspective and my appreciation."

Soukup has been making and selling Windsor chairs full time for more than two decades. Years ago he read Herbert L. Edlin's *Woodland Crafts in Britain*, which included information on making a Windsor chair. "Windsor chairmaking is one of those things where you can turn a tree pretty quickly into an elegant, finished product, and that has always appealed to me," he said.

Always preferring to stay close

to the forest in both spirit and livelihood, Soukup—the father of five—moved his family from Washington State to West Virginia many years ago, finding there "a good source of high-quality hardwood timber." Plus, the many museums throughout the East have provided ample opportunity to study the old chairs.

Asked about particular challenges presented by a writing-arm Windsor, Soukup views the matter holistically. "Whether it's a writing-arm Windsor or any other chair, you first have to meet the design challenges of producing a comfortable chair," he said. "Then adding a writing surface is just adding another element of function. It's a pretty straight-forward thing."

Soukup's chairs start at \$1,775 for a Small Connecticut comb-back, with his sack-back at \$1,825 and square-back at \$2,300.

## BILL AND SALLY WALLICK

It's doubtful that Bill Wallick realized back in 1977, as he sifted through the ashes of his family's home and possessions, that this



event would lead to a livelihood making Windsor furniture.

"We had no renters' insurance and everything was lost in the fire," Bill said. He and his wife, Sally, picked up moderately priced antiques at yard sales and auctions, but the pieces often needed repairing, which is how Wallick learned the methods of 18th- and 19th-Century woodworkers.

A couple years later he spotted a chair at an auction—"a unique chair, unlike anything I'd ever seen"—and bid twenty dollars. It went for three hundred. "I asked the auctioneer why, and he told me it was a period Windsor. I asked, 'What's a period Windsor?' and he gave me that you-don't-deserve-an-answer look and walked away."

That's when Wallick, who today works from his shop in Wrightsville, Pennsylvania, began studying how to build Windsor chairs. "Somehow, I knew this was all going to have something to do with my life's work," he said. He began cutting down trees for green wood and making Windsor chairs completely with hand tools. "I thought those first chairs were pretty spectacular."

But when a tree-cutting accident laid him up with several broken ribs, he knew there had to be another way. He began relying on local saw-



**The Connecticut high-back writing chair is the most popular in the line built by Bill and Sally Wallick. It incorporates design characteristics of the famous Tracy family of early Windsor chair-makers and features an unusual candle slide. It sells for \$2,400.**

mills for his green wood, and in 1985 bought a cabinetmaking shop equipped with more modern tools. "Even though I was still using a lot of hand tools, I realized that if the 18th-Century woodworkers were alive today, they'd incorporate some of the more modern methods into their work," said Wallick, who was featured on two episodes of PBS's "New Yankee Workshop" in 2004.

Determined to build the best Windsors he could, he and Sally—who joined the business in 1987 to focus on finishes—traveled to muse-

ums, private collections, and antiques shops to examine the originals. "Whenever I could, I'd buy old chairs to copy an ear here, a leg there, knuckles and seats, but mostly I copied designs from photographs and from memory after having seen them," he said.

Over the years, the Wallicks have made several versions of writing-arm chairs amid dozens of styles of Windsor pieces. They get upwards of \$1,200 for a Philadelphia writing chair and about \$2,400 for their Connecticut comb-back Windsor writing chair, complete with drawers and candle slide.

"The most challenging aspect of the writing-arm Windsor is the mechanicals—the drawers, the candle slides, and getting everything to fit and operate properly," Wallick said. "I make both right-handed and left-handed writing-arm chairs, even though they only made right-handed ones in the 18th Century." ★

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**The low back, an early style of Windsor writing chair, is not often replicated by modern makers. The c. 1790 chair, left, was built by Anthony Steel of Philadelphia. The reproduction in old red paint, by Bill and Sally Wallick, sells for \$2,200.**

