



## The Bean-Town Report

by Ben Blackmar

This spring, a dream came true for me. After operating a woodshop for several years in my hometown in Georgia, I had the chance to relocate to New England and pursue woodworking in a new way – by studying fine cabinet and furniture making at North Bennett Street School.

Techniques covered so far are proper sharpening of plane irons and chisels, the use of those hand planes, proper chisel techniques, wood technology and gluing techniques, many types of traditional joinery such as sprung butt joints, mortise and tenon, wedged mortise and tenon, when to use haunched tenons, dovetails both blind and through, and housed tapered dovetails. We have also studied some traditional finishing techniques, specifically milk paint (used in Windsor chairs and some other colonial furniture), shellac, and oil.

### The Old and the New

Although the school is thought of as a “traditional woodworking” school and does teach all of the old hand techniques, we are also being taught how to effectively use each modern machine commonly found in wood shops today. In my personal taste, many modern tools and machines are faster and more efficient for woodwork, but there are still a handful of hand tools and techniques that I fall back on instead of picking up a power tool. For instance, during a job this summer I was asked to build two solid wood doors. Since the shop didn’t have a wide belt sander, normally I would have reached for my handheld belt sander after gluing it up, and smoothed out the joints. But instead, I used my Stanley No. 5 hand plane, and achieved the same result- as fast, and with no need to progress up through finer grits to remove scratches. A few good passes with 120 on the palm sander, and everything was smooth and flat, and ready for sealer.



### And You Used a 90-Year-Old Tool to Do All That?

Here are a few other techniques that I go back to just because I enjoy them, and take pride that I can do it just as well by hand.

- I like to use my hand plane to fit a glue joint a little tighter, rather than returning to the jointer mill for another pass.
- Another is using a shooting board and jack plane to square the end of a piece of wood and size it down- it takes about as long as walking across the shop and chopping it on the miter saw, and I know that its as good a cut as ever there will be, and its dead square when I’m finished.

The best part about these simplistic operations is that they leave me with no hearing loss, and no micro-dust blasted into the air for me to ingest and inhale.

### The Long and Short of It

This experience is affording me the time and instruction to learn time-tested techniques and the most conservative and traditional ways of the craft. I’m learning that it comes down to a pride that we take in our work, and having the satisfaction of knowing that we are at the top of our field, whether in business, construction, cabinets, furniture, millwork, or any other type of work - something we can all relate to. And the only thing better than that feeling is the support of other like-minded peers, all striving for personal perfection, and encouraging you on in your own.

*-Ben Blackmar owns his own business making furniture and custom woodwork, and is also a student at the North Bennet Street School in Boston, MA. He currently resides with his wife Angie and dog Fender in Malden, Massachusetts. You can see his work at [www.blackmarstudio.com](http://www.blackmarstudio.com). ❖*