

TWO KENTUCKY TAVERNS MAKE A HOME

SWEET
POTATOES

Early American Life

traditions
period style
antiques
architecture
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Great-
Grandparent's
Log Cabin

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PLACES | Building on Tradition

Founded 140 years ago to give students a path to meaningful lives and livelihoods, Boston's North Bennet Street School has continued that work despite the pandemic, hosting on-site and remote training in nine enduring crafts.

The vocational school prepares students for careers in traditional trades that use hand skills together with evolving technology, with a mission to preserve craft traditions and promote a greater appreciation of craftsmanship. The students' success has earned the school national and international recognition.

Thanks to its workshop environment with long-practiced safety protocols, NBSS was able to bring full-time students back last September to finish coursework they began in the spring, noted Rob O'Dwyer, director of admissions and enrollment.

"We have a deeply ingrained

culture of safety at NBSS—things like wearing goggles, following health guidelines, self-reporting any issues, and so on," he explained. "Wearing face masks and maintaining physical distance became just another part of the training for our students, which they will be expected to follow when they enter the workforce."

Temporarily suspending continuing education courses allowed school officials to enhance the safety of faculty and students within the 64,000-square-foot building. "Our faculty have had to adjust the curriculum and groupings to make sure everyone stays productive, but they've been exceptionally creative about doing so, and students have continued to learn on off-site projects," O'Dwyer noted.

Students can choose from nine one- to three-year programs: Book-binding, Cabinet & Furniture Making, Carpentry, Jewelry Making & Repair, Locksmithing & Security Technology, Piano Technology (Basic

and Advanced), Preservation Carpentry, and Violin Making & Repair.

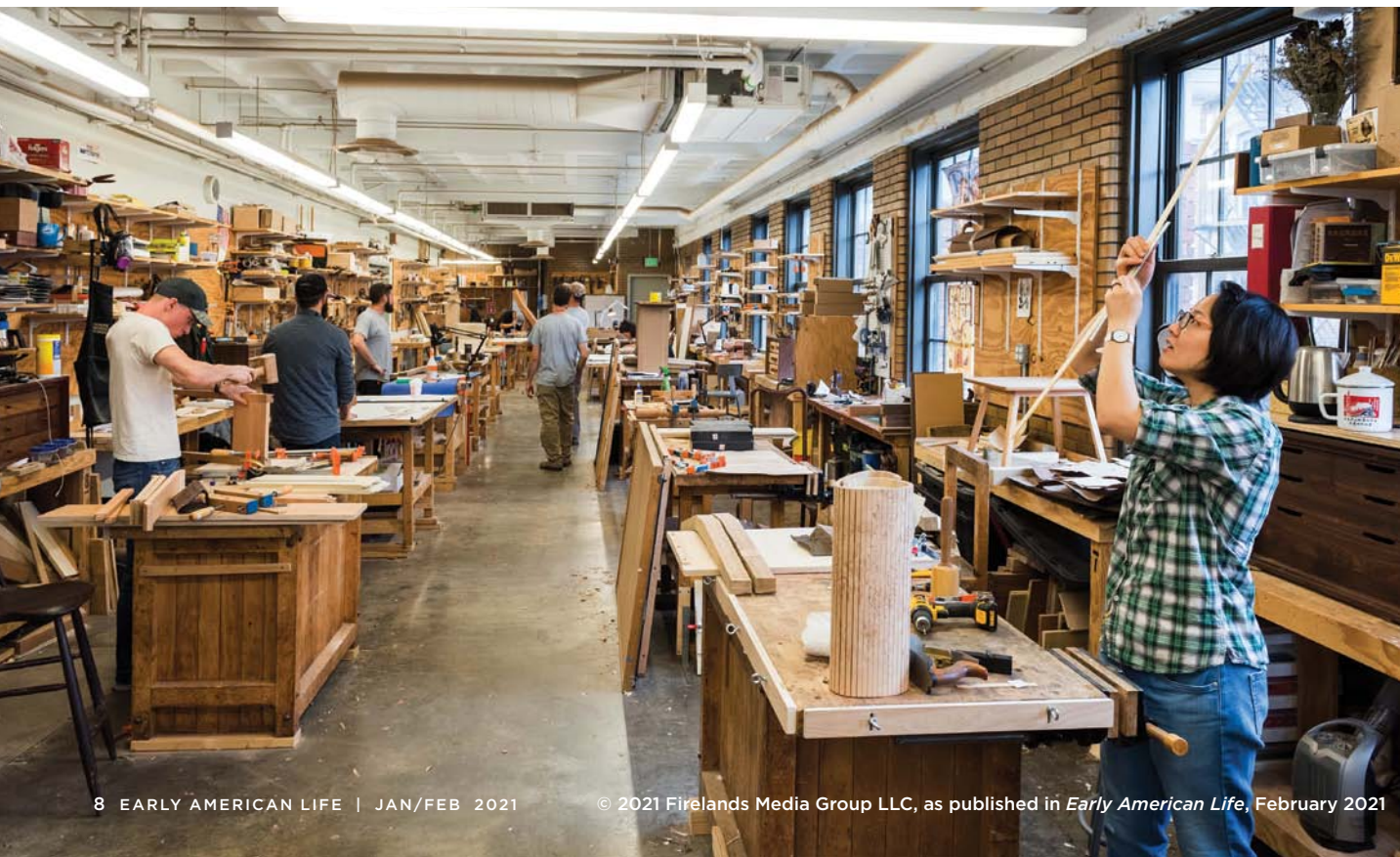
O'Dwyer explained that the hands-on nature of the work in these fields means teaching the relevant skills cannot be outsourced or automated for the foreseeable future.

Although the pandemic has lessened the call for work in some areas, others such as construction and security continue to thrive—along with the pressing need for skilled labor to accomplish them.

"We continue to see great interest in our programs, and as the nation ramps up efforts and investments for economic recovery, we expect the built environment and other sectors in which we teach will only grow," he said.

The students who choose to pursue diplomas in these fields share some common goals, O'Dwyer noted, like a sense of calling to tasks that require high levels of hand skills and problem solving, or the courage to pursue such work or to rediscover or redirect a

Students in the Cabinet & Furniture Making program, shown here in 2019, focus on 17th- and 18th-Century designs. Today they work in an enhanced safety environment using integrated video technology, masks, Plexiglas barriers, and physical distancing.



COURTESY OF NORTH BENNET STREET SCHOOL

passion for technical work.

“People here tend to have a self-awareness about making a career choice that is also a satisfying lifestyle choice that is tangible,” he explained. “Whether people realize it or not, we all want to feel useful. To make and repair useful objects that bring shelter, security, or beauty all serve this greater purpose.”

The school’s faculty share their students’ passion. Claire Fruitman, a former instructor and graduate of the Cabinet & Furniture Making program who now serves as the provost, put it simply: “Attending North Bennet Street School changes peoples’ lives.”

In fostering a sense of personal fulfillment and accomplishment, the school often inspires students to remain there and pass their skills on to others.

“Those who teach here have a great love of the school, which many attended as students, and they want to give back,” Fruitman said. “They’re committed to keeping their field alive, which supports the school’s mission, and they want to share their knowledge with a new generation of craftspersons.

“The instructors love those moments when students come to understand a difficult concept or find they have gained the ability to do something they weren’t able to do before,” she continued. “The instructors feel that it’s a privilege to teach here and be part of the school’s story and reputation.”

The school was founded in part as a reaction to mechanical industrialization during the Arts and Crafts movement, and the current digital age of economy and production has sparked a similar desire to preserve hand crafts. O’Dwyer believes this makes the work coming out of the NBSS as relevant as ever.

“This is the most exciting moment to be a part of NBSS since its founding,” he said. “Moving to a new building, breaking enrollment records, and now with the vision and leadership of President Sarah Turner—who has prioritized diversity, equity, inclusion, and online learning at NBSS—it is indeed the most exciting time to be here.” ★



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Two students in the 2019 Preservation Carpentry program mix horsehair plaster to apply to the lath walls behind them. Even before the pandemic, students often wore masks to work with some materials. Off-site projects like these are a core part of their curriculum.

A student in the Locksmithing & Security Technology program examines a mechanical lockset (pre-pandemic). The school fosters problem-solving, a high level of hand skills, and a passion for technical work in its students.



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