

Reproducing Emily Dickinson's Furniture

by Helen Hannon

image courtesy of Michael Medeiros, Emily Dickinson Museum



A Woodworking Experience

What is it like to reproduce a significant historical piece of furniture? What if it once belonged to an internationally known figure? Woodworkers Boyd Allen and Caleb Schultz had that experience. They were asked to reproduce the writing desk and chest of drawers used by the American poet Emily Dickinson.

The originals of the furniture currently reside in Harvard University's Houghton Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Dickinson's distant cousin Gilbert Montague donated them in 1950. The reproduction project began at the behest of the Emily Dickinson Museum (shown above), located in Dickinson's family home in Amherst, Massachusetts, through an initial contact with the North Bennet Street School (NBSS) in Boston, where Dan Faia heads the furniture program.

Both Boyd and Caleb attended the Cabinet and Furniture Making Program at NBSS, but they had taken different paths to woodworking. For Caleb it was his "grandfather having

image courtesy of the Bcullen Company



The originals of 19th-century poet Emily Dickinson's writing desk and dresser belong to Harvard, but the Emily Dickinson Museum in her former home commissioned reproductions of them to place in the bedroom setting.

image courtesy of Archives and Special Collections at Amherst College



Fan and measuring images courtesy of Steve Brown/NBSS

Inlaid fans made from rosewood and maple adorn the corners on the top of the chest of drawers, with maple stringing on the drawer fronts. Mahogany banding is also found on the dresser top.

a small workshop and he taught me a few things.” Caleb is now a full-time cabinet and furniture maker. “I live in Canada on a 10-acre hobby farm that has a reasonably sized shop.”

Boyd had a different approach. “I had repaired and refurbished furniture most of my life, but finding North Bennet Street School changed everything. I left my career in graphic design to pursue furniture making after discovering the program at an NBSS Open House.”

Sourcing Woods

When it came to the reproduction project, Caleb emphasizes that he and Boyd “worked very hard to find the appropriate woods for the project.” For example, for the chest of drawers, on which Caleb took the lead, he and Boyd drove to Sharp’s Lumber in New Hampshire and looked through dozens of 24"- to 30"-wide pine boards to find the perfect pieces.

“It was very beautiful wood, just spectacular!” Caleb said. “The boards we purchased

had almost no flaws. Imagine that: over two-foot-wide pine, over eight feet long, with no knots.”

The sides of the original bureau, Caleb

noted, were made with a “very specific, figured cherry joined in the middle. There are actually six different woods on the piece.” The cores of the drawer fronts (which are veneered with cherry) are made of basswood. The stringing on the drawer fronts, as well as an edging on the top sides and front, is maple. The fan on the top is rosewood and maple. Also on the top is a mahogany banding. Cherry and pine make up the rest of the piece. Drawer sides, runners and the bottom of the carcass are pine. The drawer bottoms were a single piece of clear pine, and the back of the dresser was made with one very wide piece of pine and a smaller piece to finish it off. The carcass sides, top and drawer fronts are cherry.

Irion Lumber in Pennsylvania found cherry close to the original, while antique hardware dealer Joan Parcher found accurate period items. The nails came from Tremont Nail in Mansfield, Massachusetts. Caleb said, “It was a lot of fun using nails to build the pieces, I must admit!”

Veneering

As for the veneer banding on the top of the piece, Caleb said that NBSS instructor Lance Patterson “went into the school’s loft and rummaged through a pile of old veneer. He pulled out some sawn mahogany veneer that was almost 1/8" thick. I’m not even sure I would consider it veneer.”

Caleb worked on the piece at his bench at NBSS, applying the veneer using a hammer veneering technique with hide glue. “Hammer veneering the front was harder than I thought it would be. It took me a little bit to get the hang of it,” he said.

The joinery also required some finicky techniques. For instance, the sides of the unit on the original were attached to the top with a housed tapered dovetail. “I used a hand plane to cut the dovetail, which allowed me to take off tiny amounts in order to get a perfect fit,” Caleb said.

When it all went together, however, “This was very satisfying,” Caleb said. Overall, “Figuring out all of the details and going over all of the pictures and measurements, as well as drawing the piece, was the most work. It was a lot of fun, though.”



image courtesy of Emily Dickinson Museum

Woodworker Caleb Schultz built the reproduction of Dickinson's chest of drawers at Boston's North Bennet Street School, drawing on their expertise for wood identification.





Boyd Allen measured the original desk where Dickinson did much of her writing, which is surprisingly small.



Images courtesy of Steve Brown/NBS

Three half-blind dovetails join the desk drawer sides to the front.

Small Desk

While Caleb took the lead on the dresser, Boyd took point on the desk — which is surprisingly small, the size of a contemporary nightstand. The primary woods were black cherry, and the secondary were white pine. The inside of the desk wasn't finished, which was common for the period. Boyd said, "It was likely a production piece and inexpensive, though the quality is excellent." Although there's no definite information about where the desk was made, a possible clue to its origin is the grain direction of the drawer bottom, which is parallel to the drawer sides in the original.

This configuration brings an increased risk of breakage due to wood movement, so the furniture industry at some point changed the orientation of the grain of drawer bottoms to run perpendicular to the drawer sides, allowing for expansion at the back of the drawer.

"I have heard that some furniture makers in eastern Massachusetts, north of Boston, continued to make drawers the old way into the 1800s. This is likely when the Dickinson desk was made," Boyd said. "In the reproduction, we ran the drawer

bottom parallel to the drawer sides, like the original, but we allowed for expansion by cutting deeper grooves than we usually do."

Visible Tool Marks

Boyd also noted that "simple, utilitarian furniture" like the desk was made quickly. "Tool marks are clearly visible inside the desk, especially where the screw pockets on the rails were hastily chiseled out. The maker cut them out quickly and just enough to get the job done," he said. Four screws hold the top to the base of the original. The top also acts as a drawer divider. The drawer was made with half-blind dovetails in the front (black cherry) and through dovetails in the back (white pine). The drawer was small, so there were only three half-blind dovetails on each side.

"I did my best to match the angles, which weren't perfect and consistent," Boyd said. "The saw kerfs for the dovetails on the back of the drawer front were cut longer than we would do today."

All of the cherry used in the desk reproduction came from one 8/4 board that measured 19" wide by

The grain of the original desk's drawer bottom runs parallel to the sides. The reproduction mimicked this, adding deeper grooves to allow for wood movement.

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Image courtesy of The Bollen Company

The desk drawer extends all the way to the back of the unfinished interior, using the back as a mechanical stop.





The original pieces underwent restoration simultaneous to the reproduction builds. This photo shows the two desks side-by-side for the first and only time.



Images courtesy of The Boallen Company

A finishing process that combined powdered lye, several coats of shellac and a brown glaze created an aged look for the reproduction desk.



image courtesy of Emily Dickinson Museum

The photo at left shows Dickinson's bedroom in the Museum, with the reproduction dresser and desk in place.

approximately 8' long. "I used a circular saw to rough-cut the board into parts and then resawed the top of the desk, which measures 17³/₈" x 17³/₈" square," Boyd said. "The desk drawer extends all the way to the

back of the desk, and it ultimately uses the back rail as a mechanical stop. The face of the drawer is flush with the case. I created a larger reveal than necessary to mimic the wear and age of the original desk drawer."

Aging Patina

While Boyd and Caleb were making the reproductions of the dresser and desk, the originals were being restored at the same time by Sean Fisher at Robert Mussey

Associates. He assisted Boyd in finishing the cherry surface of the desk to get an accurate patina.

"To age the wood, we used powdered lye diluted in

water, which ages cherry instantly," Boyd said. "We applied lye quickly, let it sit for a minute, then wiped it dry. You can see the change immediately. We allowed it to dry overnight, and then began applying heavy cuts of orange shellac with a brush. Think maple syrup!"

They leveled out the shellac with 320-grit sandpaper in between each application. "We used at least six coats of shellac and didn't stop until it was level. We applied a brown acrylic glaze, basically artist paint diluted with water, between the last two coats of shellac to deepen the tone of the desk. The finishing process took a few weeks because we let it rest and cure for as long as possible between each process," Boyd explained.

See the Furniture

The restored originals of these furniture items can be seen, with other Dickinson family belongings, on Friday afternoon public tours of Houghton Library. Visit <https://library.harvard.edu/libraries/houghton> or call 617-495-2440 for further information. Long-time library staff member, Peter Accardo says, "Emily's writing desk and chest are among the most beloved objects in the library's collection."

The reproductions reside at the Emily Dickinson museum, which also offers a virtual 360° tour of the bedroom where they are placed. Visit www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org or call 413-542-8161 for more information.