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House of Windsor

by Joan Tupponce

Bill Jenkins fashions 18th-century-style chairs from nothing but wood and glue.



Bill Jenkins surrounded by his work.

Photography by Tyler Darden

Bill Bangham often wondered why someone would choose to sit in a Windsor chair. The solid wood spindles in the back and the wooden seat didn't look comfortable to the writer and photographer. But Bangham's opinion shifted 180 degrees after purchasing a writing arm Windsor chair from Montross artisan Bill Jenkins.

The chair, he discovered, was comfortable. “It’s my favorite chair. It’s a very easy chair to sit in. I sit in it for hours and work,” Bangham says. “It’s perfect for my needs.” Bangham bought his chair three or four years ago at an outdoor art show. “I saw this particular chair and fell in love with it,” he says, still remembering the story Jenkins told about the wood he used to build the chair. “The old walnut tree came from St. James Episcopal Church in the Northern Neck. It’s beautiful.”



Using steam to shape a chair back.

High Flyer

Crafting traditional Windsor chairs is a second career for Jenkins, 78. “I started making furniture by choice and necessity,” he says. “I had lost money in my monthly pension, and my wife, Lucy, asked me to make her some comfortable dining room chairs. So I turned it into a business.”

Before starting Locust Farm Windsors, though, Jenkins was a pilot. He grew up with his parents on his grandfather’s farm in Montross, intrigued by the airplanes that flew over the farm. “They gave me the

bug to fly,” he says, so he joined the Corps of Cadets at Virginia Tech and continued into the Air Force months after graduating in 1963.

After completing pilot training in Selma, Alabama, Jenkins was assigned to the Charleston Air Force Base in military airlift command. He attended forward air controller school before heading to Vietnam, where he worked with the Army. “I was the forward air controller (front plane) that flew with the Vietnamese Airborne Division,” he says. “They were Vietnam’s best fighters. The North Vietnamese were infiltrating the DMZ, and we went to meet them. We flew all night and would drop flares so you could see them. Vietnam was an intense experience.”

The Air Force awarded 15 air medals to Jenkins during his military career, including a Distinguished Flying Cross for his time in Vietnam, and he received a Commendation Medal for valor from the Army. He served in the Air Force Reserve on both the East and West Coasts, including acting as vice commander at Dover Air Force Base, then later flew for United Airlines.



Sharpening a chisel.



Shaping a spindle with a draw knife.

Second Act

After retiring from United in 2001, Jenkins moved back to his grandfather's house in Montross. "My parents had passed away, and I decided to renovate the whole house," he says. He was working on the renovations when his wife asked him to make some comfortable chairs; the ladder back chairs he had inherited were very uncomfortable, he says.

Jenkins' interest in woodworking had started in high school, when he joined Future Farmers of America. "I've always worked with wood," he says. However, he wanted to learn chairmaking from a seasoned professional. Through research, he found The Windsor Institute and master craftsman Mike Dunbar in Hampton, New Hampshire. Dunbar is credited with helping revive interest in the handmade Windsor chair. "Anybody making Windsor chairs today can be traced back to him," Jenkins says.

In 2002, Jenkins traveled to New Hampshire to take Dunbar's class and learn the art of making an 18th-

century-style Windsor chair.

“Any Windsor chair has angles. There are no straight lines. The first thing you do is carve out the seat and mark the lines for the legs,” he explains. The holes for the legs are bored at an angle so they spread out to provide stability. “Then you carve out the spindles. The arm posts are at a forward angle to counterbalance the person sitting. There is no metal. The chair is all wood and glue.”



Jenkins normally uses red oak for the top of the chair, white pine for the seat, and maple for the turned pieces. Most of the wood he uses is local. His father planted a number of white pines on the property, many of which were knocked down during one of the hurricanes that brushed the area. He’s found some fallen maples and red oaks, as well.

Although it used to take Jenkins two weeks to make a chair, experience has helped him shorten the process to five days. He produces approximately 50 pieces of furniture a year: chairs, footstools, settees, and bar stools. Prices for his work range from \$125 for a footstool to \$2,500 for a three-person settee. A basic sackback chair with arms is \$600, and a basic Windsor side chair without arms comes with a price tag from \$500 to \$550, depending on the style. His craftsmanship has twice earned Jenkins recognition from *Early American Life* magazine as one of the top artisans in the country.



TV Star

Jenkins originally marketed his furniture at farmers' markets around the Northern Neck. Then, he began talking with the coordinators of large annual events, such as An Occasion for the Arts in Williamsburg.

About five years ago, that approach led to a call from the annual Colonial Market and Fair at George Washington's Mount Vernon. The event features vendors and artisans from across the U.S. who use 18th-century materials and methods to produce their work. "All of the items for sale are authentic to the time we interpret here at Mount Vernon, which is the last few years of General Washington's life," says Emily Thomas, senior coordinator of events and protocol for George Washington's Mount Vernon.

Jenkins has been a vendor at the fair for several years. Like other vendors, he talks about the research and methods he uses to make his products so visitors can understand why each craft has been practiced for more than 100 years. "His work is completely beautiful," Thomas says. "It's



amazing to me that someone can produce what he does without using modern technology.

Hand joinery in an armchair.

... What we value about his work is that he is not only producing beautiful and historically accurate work, but he is also preserving a way of crafting from the 18th century. People are in love with what he does and thrilled to see what he has when they are here.”

Displaying his work has paid off for Jenkins in other ways, too. The art director for the television miniseries *John Adams* saw his chairs in Kilmarnock and asked for a meeting. “They showed up with an armful of designs and told me what chairs they wanted. They bought 10 chairs,” he says, noting that the series won an Emmy for set design. He also rented 35 sack-back Windsor chairs to the production for the Colonial Congress scenes. He had previously made the chairs for customers and borrowed them back for filming. Jenkins’ version of Thomas Jefferson’s swivel chair, made for the miniseries, was later rented to the production of the television series *Turn*.

Jenkins is proud he has had the chance to pursue both of his childhood passions. “I enjoy flying a journey and hearing ‘thank you captain’ as the passengers are departing,” he says. “With a chair, people can see it and enjoy it for the rest of their lives. It’s nice to have people buy my product with my name and date on the bottom and hand it down to generations in the family.” *LocustFarmWindsors.com*

This article originally appeared in our June 2019 issue.

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by **Joan Tupponce**

August 13, 2019 8:30 AM

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House of Windsor Article on Bill Jenkins

This kind of article on House of Windsor was a real bonus. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it and hope to see more in the future. We need to recognize the artisans that still exist and

produce quality products in our fine state. If you are in need of sources for more gifted artisans like this, then contact Rob Redus, The Accidental Artist, in Laurel Fork, Va. Rob is a master wood craftsman, creating one of a kind pieces including but not limited to console tables, coffee tables, writing desks, charcuterie boards, vanity tops, dining tables, etc. He will create custom pieces as well . He may be contacted at 276 398 2134 or rhr10664@gmail.com. You will be glad you contacted him. Thank you for featuring this kind of article.

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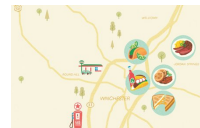
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