

Shaker Tree

Peter Anderson, handcrafting Shaker furniture for decades

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PHOTO MICHAEL LAVIN FLOWER

For 34 years, a now-weathered, white-clapboard storefront has sat quietly on Main Street in West Stockbridge, its windows featuring an array of classic Shaker furniture and ornaments. But the shop is open only on Saturdays, leaving weekday passersby to wonder what other treasures sit behind the doors of Anderson & Sons Shaker Tree.

Time it right and you'll find in every corner within the shop, pieces painstakingly made by Peter Anderson. On the walls and draped over racks are intricate Shaker quilts created by his wife, Beverlee.

"I grew up in Berkshire County and I saw Shaker furniture in the '40s. I didn't like it. And I wasn't neutral to it," says Anderson. "It was old-fashioned."

Old-fashioned, perhaps, to a little boy but, ironically, the Shaker style he had disliked so much in his youth was exactly what he found himself making when he married in 1957, when his hobby turned into necessary endeavor. Anderson has worked with wood since childhood, building an elaborate two-story doghouse at one point. So when he needed furniture, he had the skills.

"I didn't have very many tools," he says. "The more I adjusted things to look right, I kept saying to Bev, 'I don't know what I'm making but I've seen it.' I didn't have a clue. And then I picked up Family Handyman magazine, and there was a cover story on how to make what they called a Shaker commode. I looked at the picture and I said, 'Bev, that's it! That's what I'm making.' Like a duckling, I absolutely got imprinted."

Anderson now sees that Shaker furniture's clean lines give it an appealing modern feel, a style that has heavily influenced Danish modern furniture.

To supplement his income as a grad student, Anderson started a part-time business crafting furniture. As people saw what he was doing, they began to commission him to make pieces. He continued to do so throughout his teaching and writing career.

“We had children and I couldn’t afford to live on an assistantship,” says Anderson. “The minute anybody heard I could do anything, they wanted bookcases, tables, so I was always busy.”

For this white-haired professor of English literature, the passion has only grown stronger over the decades he has been toiling in his workshop. “I’ll never retire. Retiring means someone isn’t doing what they want to do. I’m doing what I want to do.”

Anderson uses a variety of woods in the reproductions he crafts, most of them indigenous. “Pine, maple, and cherry were the most commonly used for the eastern communities. Occasionally you’d find walnut or ash or hickory. Now if you go out to the Shaker communities in Kentucky or Ohio, a lot of the furniture was made out of walnut because it was available. But occasionally you’ll find seldom-used woods, like butternut,” and he points to a satiny, caramel-colored piece on the floor of the shop.

The Shakers also used more than one type of wood in a piece. Gesturing to the table where he is seated, he says, “For instance, this maple and pine trestle table is a six-foot version of the original eight-foot table that’s in the Met in New York.”

Wood for his projects comes from a variety of sources, from specialized lumberyards to the Internet. He even purchased a large lot of cathedral pine from the Nature Conservancy after a tornado took down a swath of trees in Connecticut.

While the word “reproduction” might indicate factory-made, what this craftsman does is anything but. The meticulous Anderson doesn’t sand the wood; he planes it by hand to ensure a tight fit with no lumps or bumps.

“I’m working like Shakers worked, starting cold and following the same models and aesthetics that the Shakers did. They turned out many, many copies of something that worked. That’s reproduction. Technically, I am reproducing Shaker furniture. But then, so did the Shakers. They made articles and implements and useful things for the Shaker way of life. Shaker furniture is very utilitarian and it is distinctive, but it is also institutional furniture. Most of the things the Shakers built for themselves. Certain things, like chairs and brooms, they made for the world at large.”

Although they did have templates for particular items such as oval boxes, furniture designs varied among the different Shaker communities.

“When they wanted to copy something, they would usually send the exact piece to one of the other communities. It wasn’t necessarily made exact. The classic period of the furniture is probably the first quarter of the 19th-century, until about 1830. You’d see a mid-Atlantic furniture influence in Kentucky and Ohio. If you look at a leg in eastern furniture, it looks very much like a Hepplewhite leg. Shaker furniture is very different. You can probably genuinely say that it’s American-bred.”



Regardless of interest or the state of the economy, handmade furniture is a time-consuming process, and Anderson only does commissioned work. Although his home/workshop is more than an hour’s drive away in Staffordville, Connecticut, he chose to have his shop within closer range of Hancock Shaker Village.

“When we came here 35 years ago, there wasn’t enough deep interest, deep knowledge of Shaker life anywhere else like there is here. This is very special.”

Anderson & Sons Shaker Tree, Main St, West Stockbridge, MA (413) 232-7072

VISIT THE VILLAGE A short drive from Anderson & Sons is [Hancock Shaker Village](#), an outdoor living museum with all things Shaker.