



**Master craftsman Mark Soukup** shapes the back of a Windsor chair in his Monroe County shop.

# *Fit for a President* Furniture by Mark Soukup

By Cat Pleska  
Photographs by Ron Snow, West Virginia Department of Commerce

**M**ark Soukup places a slim piece of mahogany in a vise on his work table. With a spoke shave he gently contours the wood to form what will become the arm of a reproduction Philadelphia Windsor armchair. A glance out his shop window reveals the striking landscape beneath Peter’s Mountain, a mere few miles from the border of Virginia. Here, on 15 acres in Gap Mills, Monroe County, Soukup has crafted reproduction eighteen-century furniture since 1984. The land, the peace and quiet, and the nearby sawmills all combine to allow this master craftsman to create his art.

Soukup does not hail from a long line of traditional furniture makers. He was born in Cincinnati to scientists: his mother was a geneticist and his father was a chemist who later turned his interest to botany. Inspired by his father’s love of the natural world, Soukup explored plants, wildflowers, and trees. These activities set the stage for his eventual calling.

In high school, Soukup ran a tree service during summers. His father also built the family home, which lent another spark to his interest in wood. “I learned about wood by cutting trees,” he says. “And I grew up learning to use tools.”

Yet one more spark set Soukup on his path: His wife, Ann, asked him to try carving spoons. He did, and he discovered that he enjoyed the tactile sensation of working with wood using sharp carving tools. This ultimately sealed his interest in woodworking.

“I sort of knew from [observing] my parents that I never wanted to spend my life in a lab,” Soukup explains. “It took

me a while to realize that I wanted to work with my hands more than anything.”

### A Move to the Country

Soukup longed to leave the urban element and settle in the country, and Ann, who is also from Cincinnati, shared his desire. Both were attracted to the central Appalachians.

For eight years the Soukups served as caretakers on the 600-acre sheep farm of Dr. Clark Hansbarger in Monroe County. Hansbarger had been asked by then-Gov. Jay Rockefeller to be head of the state Department of Health, so he was living in Charleston.

The Soukups already had some experience sheering sheep when they took up residence in Monroe County. While caretaking, Ann became interested in fiber arts, spinning, and weaving, and Soukup began sheering on big farms in Virginia, West Virginia, and even out West.

“Seasonal employment, farming, and living dirt poor,” he says, ultimately allowed him to start his woodworking business in 1983. The Soukups eventually bought acreage across the road from the Hansbarger farm, where they now raise their own sheep. They also grow strawberries and blueberries. Here Soukup built his spacious woodworking shop (his previous one had been portable). Next came his lumber shed and then the house, all of which he built himself.

“My wife was very patient,” he says with a smile.

The Soukup farm is located in an area where hardwoods are bountiful and where there are a number of sawmills. Soukup knew he needed to be near sawmills so that he could purchase a number of different types of wood. The ability to select certain woods is crucial to his success as a furniture



**Mark Soukup uses traditional** woods and carving techniques to create museum-quality furniture.

maker. He visits sawmills in Monroe County, but the majority of his wood comes from a mill across the border near Covington, Virginia.

“The sawmill’s employees treat me like I’m part of the owner’s family,” Soukup says. “They allow me to go into their log yard and find the logs I want. They’ll pull them out and allow me to go up into the saw booth and tell the sawyer how I want the logs sawed.”

Personally selecting wood reduces waste and expense, Soukup says. It also ensures that he gets the high-quality wood required for making sturdy and stylish furniture.

Crafting the Windsor chair has long been Soukup’s chief interest. The Windsor style has legs, arms, and a back that originate from a hardwood seat. As Soukup puts it, it’s “a slab of wood out of which sticks protrude.” Most other chair styles use a frame that is filled in with cane, webbing, or upholstery for the seat.

“In college I came across books about traditional woodland crafts in Britain,” he recalls. “The chapter about Windsor chair making fascinated me. It was about how people in rural areas worked with simple tools to create this style of beautiful furniture.”

### Studying Antiques

In order to build traditional furniture of museum quality, Soukup studies antique pieces. He has spent a fair amount of time at Yale University, where they have a study collection of mostly eighteenth-century furniture. He has also studied pieces at Winterthur Museum in Delaware and Historic Williamsburg, and through antique dealers in Pennsylvania, eastern Virginia, and New York. A self-taught craftsman, he also builds chests, tables, and settees, but the Windsors remain his main body of work.

Soukup began selling his pieces through local shops, by



**Self-taught craftsman Mark Soukup** also creates beautiful chests and other pieces.



**Mark Soukup’s furniture designs** begin as careful drawings.

word of mouth, and at invitational furniture shows. But today, museum curators keep him quite busy.

Curators at Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson, commissioned Soukup to build 28 double-bowed Windsor chairs. For Poplar Forest, Jefferson’s retreat villa, he crafted 24 Windsors.

“Museum work has to be correct in every way with respect to historical accuracy,” he explains. “After all, the pieces are going to be on display within an authentic decorative arts collection. It is always a professional challenge for me to be meticulous in every detail.”

Recently, Soukup received an order for 32 chairs for Mount Vernon. Earlier reproductions at George Washington’s home have sat on the East Portico for 120 years and now are in sore need of replacing.

“The old chairs have held up well, considering their environment, but they were not copies of old chairs and they were not a style that Washington owned,” Soukup explains. “They want me to replace them in the style of one of Washington’s original chairs, the Philadelphia Sackback. We’re still working out a durable, painted finish.”

Soukup’s challenge is to create chairs that are resistant to the elements. He is using traditional woods such as hickory, maple, oak, and poplar, each chosen for its structural and working properties. Soukup says the chairs should be light in weight yet resilient and durable.

Crafting for presidential homes has been rewarding for him. “It’s an honor to be asked,” he says.

### A Tidy Shop

In his shop, Soukup keeps his tools neatly stored. “I try to own as few tools as I can because it’s time consuming to keep all of them in perfect working order,” he explains. He sometimes reshapes standard tools to suit his own needs. He doesn’t have a favorite one, however.



The classic Windsor chair captured Mark Soukup's interest many years ago. Today, one of his most popular pieces is the Windsor writing arm-chair, which can feature drawers and a secret compartment.

"I'm happy for any tool that works well," he says.

Soukup prefers to work wood manually using the age-old techniques of the eighteenth-century masters. However, he does use some power tools to cut rough shapes. Some chair parts are rounded, so it's necessary to make the wood fibers pliable. To accomplish this, Soukup places the wood in a steam chamber, made from a large, insulated stainless pipe, for 20 minutes to soften it. A stainless steel beer keg serves as a container for water, which, once heated, flows through insulated pipe to the steam chamber.

Soukup then removes the wood and places it around a form prebuilt to a certain curve. A fan cools the wood quickly, so he can use the form again within an hour. Then Soukup ties the wood so it will hold its shape. "I bend 50 to 60 pieces at a time, a couple times a year," he explains.

A tight fit of all the parts is crucial to a sturdy piece of furniture, particularly a chair. Soukup prepares some woods with a heat lamp called a *tenon dryer*. This tool dries wood down to a reasonable moisture content so it won't shrink anymore. He also uses a solar kiln to remove moisture, but most of his wood is air dried in the shop. This process can take a year or two.

Soukup has pieces for sale at the Washington Street Gallery and occasionally at the General Lewis Inn, both in Lewisburg. He also shows his work in Philadelphia and northern Virginia. But several pieces, including an unusual upholstered Windsor, are showcased right in his own living room. Eighteenth-century urban chair makers upholstered Windsor chair seats in leather. They often used bright colors, put fringe around the front, and finished the seat with brass studs.

Another chair in the Soukup home is a Nantucket Windsor with a wide, generous seat. "It's just an aesthetic

for the time," Soukup explains. "The settlers of Nantucket, who were whalers, were also Quakers, and they visited with their brethren in Philadelphia. They took the Philly form and turned it into a unique eastern Massachusetts variation."

Originally, Windsors were made by most eighteenth-century furniture makers and took on every sort of variation in style. Urban makers produced elegant and stylish functional furniture cheaply. Customers wanted chairs with classic forms and lines, and they wanted them painted. They felt no need to see the wood, unless the grain was highly figured. Occasionally, chairs were made entirely with walnut or curly maple. These woods, with highly figured grains, would not be painted.

Soukup's Windsor writing armchair is quite popular today. This chair has a large arm that curves around to a wide, flat writing surface. It can also have a hidden drawer for storing valuables. Years ago, many had "quill drawers" for keeping writing implements.

It's clear that classic Windsor chairs are still highly valued today. Soukup takes pride in using traditional woods and traditional crafting methods to create his pieces. This formula, combined with his exceptional skill, results in comfortable, beautiful, and desirable furniture that lasts.

Mark Soukup's website, [marksoukup.com](http://marksoukup.com), features a photo gallery of his pieces. You can reach him at 304.772.5052 or e-mail [furniturebymark@yahoo.com](mailto:furniturebymark@yahoo.com).

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