



History of Woodworking in Vermont

1791–today



SINCE 1791

Vermont Wood Products Marketing Council



Beech tree/Joel Flewelling

Vermont's Forests

Forests are Vermont's most abundant and important natural resource. They provide timber for lumber and wood products that are important to Vermont's economy. They provide wildlife habitat, preserving the diversity of species. They provide nutrients to the soil for healthy plant life. They help control temperature and precipitation. They help prevent erosion. They contribute to clean water. They give Vermont its "Green Mountain" identity and lure people to hike, take a spring wildflower walk, hunt, snowshoe, or ski. Their brilliant fall colors attract hundreds of thousands of visitors to the state each fall. Most importantly, Vermont forests are a sustainable resource with only about half the annual growth of trees harvested each year.

"Much of the largest part of Vermont is yet in the state, in which nature placed it. Uncultivated by the hand of man, it presents to our view a vast track of woods, abounding with trees, plants and flowers, almost infinite in number, and of the most various species and kinds." --Samuel Williams, LL.D., (The Natural and Civil History of Vermont, 1794)

It is estimated that forest covered 90% of Vermont land in the 1760s when many of Vermont's towns were chartered. Travelers in Vermont in the 1700s would have found dense, dark wilderness. There were pines, maple, buttonwood, elm, oak, hemlock and basswood trees, some as high as thirteen-story buildings with diameters as wide as people are tall, some more than 300 years old.

George Perkins Marsh of Woodstock was a U.S. Congressman, statesman, and conservationist who published *Man and Nature* in 1864. The book was a sobering warning about the perils of altering the balance of nature, as he saw happening in Vermont.

“Steep hillsides and rocky ledges are well suited to the permanent growth of wood, but when in the rage for improvement they are improvidently stripped of this protection, the action of sun and wind and rain soon deprives them of their vegetable mould...They remain thereafter barren...producing neither grain nor grass.”

Marsh’s writings began to rouse public interest in the ongoing deterioration of Vermont’s landscape and ecosystems. Vermonters began to press the state government to take action.

“Owners of timber lands in our state are pursuing a ruinous policy in the method used in harvesting timber...There is no more valuable crop produced from the land than timber. Every decade will see timber more valuable and it is of great importance to the state as a whole...that some measure should be adopted to lessen the wanton destruction of our forests.” --Governor Urban M. Woodbury, 1894

In 1923 the Vermont Legislature created state forests. Their purpose was to protect watersheds, improve and protect timber, manage wildlife habitats, and provide national recreational areas and facilities. In 1933 the federal government established the Green Mountain National Forest. Advocates believed that it would foster new forestry and recreation programs and boost the wood products and tourism industries. They were right.

Today the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation has responsibility for the conservation and management of public land. An increasing number of non-profit organizations, such as the Vermont Land Trust and the Vermont Woodlands Association, are taking steps to conserve and manage private land.

Ranking of species by volume:

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------|
| 1. Sugar maple | 8. Paper birch |
| 2. Red maple | 9. Balsam fir |
| 3. Hemlock | 10. Ash |
| 4. White pine | 11. Red oak |
| 5. Spruce | 12. White oak |
| 6. Yellow birch | 13. Aspen |
| 7. Beech | |

Estimated percentage of Vermont land as forest:

1760	90%
1905	38%
1947	63%
2002	78%

Land use practices and attitudes have changed over the last seventy-five years. Professional foresters, scientific knowledge, conservation values, and stewardship of public and private land have replenished and rejuvenated forests. Healthy forests now dominate the Vermont landscape.



Oxen pulling log sled/Bill Gove

Logging in Vermont

Early settlers in Vermont were eager to establish farms. They cleared the forest quickly to create agricultural land and provide wood for building and heating homes. They also burned trees for potash and for charcoal to fuel iron furnaces—commodities they could sell.

By the mid-1800s logging surpassed agriculture as a major part of the economy. Burlington was the third largest lumber port in the country in 1840. By about 1850 large areas in Vermont's landscape had been logged. Landowners did nothing to renew the timber resources. The consequences of timber cutting and agriculture were soil exhaustion, loss of wildlife, erosion, and flooding, increased fire danger, and a significant reduction of the state's greatest natural resource: its forests.

"By regulating when and how many trees were cut, timbermen and farmers could improve the health of the forest and nearby agricultural land."
--George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature*, 1864

Logging methods changed little over the decades until mechanized equipment was introduced. Men cut trees with axes and later used a bow saw or two-man crosscut saw.

"We didn't get a chainsaw 'til 1951... trees in the woods were 4 and 5 feet across... We would start in the morning and we'd saw one tree before noon... We didn't have to have gas, we just had to have a good meal."
--John Messier, Brookfield, VT (VT Folklife Center interviews)

By the 1940s logging operations were beginning to use crawler or wheeled tractors and mechanized skidders instead of horses. Some companies laid temporary rails for small steam railroads into logging works.

"We used to drive the team to the woods... one horse to skid the logs to the side of the road where we could roll them on the sled. And when we got a bobsled load of 300 to 500 feet... then we'd head down the mountain with our load of logs, standing on top driving the horses. The main thing was to keep the head of the horses up in the air. As long as their heads were up they couldn't fall down." --John Messier, interview

Today loggers use chainsaws and machines for felling trees, lopping branches and tops, and pulling trees to a logging road. They clean up with chippers and sell the chips to power plants for fuel and to paper mills.

"The biggest change I've seen is mechanization in tree felling. The machine grasps and saws, picks the tree up off the stump while it's standing, then lays it down. This minimizes residual damage."

--Richard Holden, Allard Lumber, Brattleboro

"We have a computerized sawmill. It assists fellows in setting the saws, determines what to saw next. It's a big efficiency. We use a circular saw for about half our work and a re-saw for half. The re-saw doesn't chew up as much wood as sawdust. It saves about six percent of the gross wood, which is especially worth it with high value woods."

--Joe Gagnon, Gagnon Lumber, Pittsford

Logging and milling in Vermont continue to be small-scale operations. There are about 800 independent logging small businesses. In 2002 the state had 168 sawmills and veneer mills; six percent of the mills produced forty-five percent of the lumber sawn, while ninety-one produced one percent of it.

"A lot less people are involved than years ago. Each person is more productive. We use chainsaws, knuckle boom loaders, and skidders. No one even carries an ax anymore. We have six or seven full-time employees and put three million board feet through the sawmill a year."

--Joe Gagnon, Gagnon Lumber

Today, logging is a full-time occupation supported by training and certification programs that include topics such as equipment and safety, first aid, forest ecology, water quality and erosion control, and woodlot management. The forest today is the result of repeated harvests by Vermonters applying common sense and sound scientific knowledge to sustain their heritage of the work and the landscape.

"I've always been a big believer in good forest management. Now we work with foresters, but Dad showed me how to decide which trees to cut." --Joe Gagnon, Gagnon Lumber



1920s truck loaded with hundreds of butter tubs/Stowe Historical Society

History of Vermont Wood Products

Two hundred twenty-five years ago every town in Vermont undoubtedly had several individuals who made functional items for residents from wood. As the population increased, demand for wood products spurred the establishment of small wood products industries. Since the 1870s wood products have been the single most important manufacturing industry in Vermont. Through the mid-1900s large numbers of mass-produced and individually crafted wood products were sold to customers all over the U.S. and abroad. The variety of items seems endless: cutting boards and wooden bowls, agriculture equipment and tool handles, bowling pins, baskets, drumsticks, toys, cow stanchions, musical instruments, refrigerators, golf tees, cheese boxes, wooden dolls, gun racks, Scrabble tiles, snowshoes, clothes pins, and wooden shipping boxes.

Wood created an identity for many Vermont towns. They have similar stories of logging, lumber mills, and a continuous succession of wood products manufacturers. In some towns, wood industries provided income for the majority of the population. Technology and products changed with the times to increase production and efficiency, meet market demand, and capitalize on popular trends and tastes. Owners of the mills and factories became community leaders who took responsibility for the commercial and civic growth of their towns.

In 1930 President Franklin D. Roosevelt referred to Stowe as a national example of “local industry fed by central power, using the raw materials and native skills of the countryside, workers living on the land.” He was impressed by the integration of farming and small manufacturing in profitable small town industries.

“In a valley in Vermont, a woodworking factory...has been so successful that the trend of population to the city has been reversed. Every state could be dotted with small country industries.” --President Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Stoware opened in 1933 after refrigerated bulk transport of milk made the local butter tub company obsolete. Its household woodenware was made from local maple and birch logs and decorated by area residents. The company capitalized on Vermont’s wood identity by advertising “DeLuxe Woodenware Specialties —From the Green Mountains of Vermont” in Boston and New York markets.



Stoware/Library of Congress

The **Bristol Manufacturing Company**, incorporated in 1877, was the largest maker of caskets in the country, a business so profitable they discontinued making baby carriages. Other Bristol industries made chair stock, butter tubs, wooden boxes, silos, hanging clothes dryers, and woodenware.



Bristol Manufacturing Co./
Bristol Historical Society

Granville Manufacturing Company has been producing the same two products—wooden bowls and siding—on the same 19th-century machinery for the last 150 years. Customers buy the one-piece turned maple bowls for their functionality but also for their Vermont authenticity and old-fashioned quality.

Roy Brothers mill in East Barnet was said to be the second largest manufacturer of wooden croquet equipment in the 1920s and ‘30s. When the game became a popular new pastime, the company made 40,000 sets a year that were sold by Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward.

Forestdale’s economy depended on **Newton & Thompson Manufacturing Company** that cut and milled its own timber for its “novelty” products like checkers, spinning tops, buttons, and toy parts. In 1850 Andrew Newton invented the automatic machine for turning small parts that revolutionized the industry—hundreds of thousands of identical items could be produced in a short time.

From 1853 until the 1950s, the **Estey Organ Company** of Brattleboro built over 500,000 individually numbered pipe and reed organs for homes and churches in a variety of styles and prices. For years, Estey was a household word worldwide.



Bowl crafted by Luke Mann/Photo by Paul Rogers

Contemporary Vermont Wood Products

Vermont woodworking in the 21st-century is a vital industry. The state has several small manufacturers and is well populated with wood products craftspeople who work primarily in rural shops and small towns, much as they did two hundred years ago. They pride themselves on the quality of their work and business relationships. Many have national and international reputations. Some work exclusively with hand tools, reproducing or interpreting traditional designs and products or creating imaginative, unique items. Others use state-of-the-art computers, laser woodcutters, and automatic routers. The motivation for many contemporary woodworkers comes from living in a beautiful, peaceful, natural environment.

Vermont woodworkers make a wide range of products that are functional, innovative, and decorative: furniture and cabinets, inlaid boxes, carousel horses, carvings, birdhouses, wooden bowls, flooring, weathervanes, boats and paddles, bentwood chair parts, jewelry, fishing rods, violins, flutes and didgeridoos, tool handles, toys, cutting boards, walking sticks, wooden hats, and many more. They market their work through websites, catalogues, craft shows and galleries, media coverage, and word-of-mouth. While their goal is to sell their work, they want to educate potential customers about the principles that guide their work and add to the value of their product.

Maple Landmark Woodcraft of Middlebury, founded in the 1970s, is one of the largest manufacturers of wooden toys in the U.S. Its award-winning line of Vermont-made toys includes the Name Train and MY Train wooden railroad systems, games, building blocks, trucks, rattles, and pull toys as well as laser-cut ornaments and home accessories.



Maple Landmark Woodcraft

"The word 'maple' in the company name paired with our location in Vermont is valuable to our business. We live and make our products by the rules and wisdom that our society developed over 100 years." --Mike Rainville, President

JoHannes Michelsen of Manchester Center makes baseball caps, garden hats, top hats, and cowboy hats...from wood. Using grinding tools and devices of his own design, he turns 100-pound maple, box elder, beech, birch, ash, or other Vermont hardwood logs and burls into hats that weigh six or seven ounces. Customers all across the country purchase the hats to wear, display, and collect.



JoHannes Michelsen

"I think that Vermont has more artists and artisans than any other state. It seems like there's a vortex of activity in so many Vermont towns."

Vermont Utensils in Williamsville is a family-owned business that makes nineteen different gourmet kitchen utensils – servers, spatulas, dough cutters, toast and BBQ tongs, pasta measures – handcrafted in Vermont, using primarily Vermont-grown species. The company sells to many nationally known retailers that sell the products under their own name. Orders can be for as many as 20,000 pieces at a time.



Vermont Utensils

"I personally talk to the people who call about orders. Even the huge companies know they can talk with me. That's good for business." --Kevin Moore, President

Alan Stirt of Enosburg Falls is a nationally recognized bowl maker who crafts his unique pieces almost entirely from Vermont black cherry, butternut, hard and soft maple, ash, and yellow birch that he gets from local firewood cutters, farmers, and loggers. He uses a chainsaw mill and a home version of a lathe that can cut several bowls from one chunk of wood.



Alan Stirt

"Utilizing elements of pattern, line, weight, texture, and form...I seek a balance between the dynamic and the serene. By playing with the tension ...I create pieces that have life."



Armchair, 1815-1830/ The Bennington Museum

History of Vermont Furniture

Cabinetmaking flourished in Vermont during the late 1700s and mid-1800s. There were 900 cabinetmakers in the state before 1855. Most Vermonters furnished their homes with simple, functional furniture they built themselves or had made by an itinerant craftsman or neighbor who was a joiner or housewright. Others had the means to purchase more elegant pieces from a skilled cabinetmaker.

Bennington, Woodstock, Middlebury, Rutland, and Burlington were centers for commerce, professionals, education, and government. Furniture makers opened workshops and showrooms in town centers. They advertised their trade and wares in local newspapers, enticing customers who wanted the latest styles. Vermont furniture makers took pride in their work and often extolled their abilities in their ads. Many signed their pieces.

Vermont furniture makers produced a variety of sophisticated styles that were popular in Boston, New York and Philadelphia: fine Hepplewhite sideboards, Sheraton beds, Chippendale chairs, Empire sofas. Some cabinetmakers were trained to build high style furniture in the city. Others honed their skills as apprentices in Vermont towns.

"I have never been...engaged in any business which I enjoyed so much as the cabinet shop...I felt contented...and never aspired to any distinction than that connected with my trade and improvements in the arts."

--Stephen Douglas, Apprentice to Nahum Parker, 1828; US Senator 1847-61; 1860 candidate for President

Vermont furniture was often built from local woods such as pine, cherry, maple, birch, and butternut. Exotic woods like mahogany and rosewood were ordered from Boston or New York. Some cabinetmakers developed a "Vermont look," using a mix of colored or figured wood, such as curly maple, tiger maple, or vibrant yellow birch to call attention to a piece.

Tall case clocks were popular. Simple clocks built in rural areas often had wooden works while elegant clocks sold in large towns had cases with inlay and fine movements. This c. 1805-1810 clock has works by **Nicholas Goddard**, a well-known Rutland clockmaker.



Tall case musical clock/The Bennington Museum

The Middlebury workshops of **Hastings Warren** produced custom and ready-made furniture for a fashion-conscious clientele. This Empire cabinet-bookcase was built around 1825 from local white pine and cherry. Its fine mahogany and satinwood veneers, carved Ionic columns, and jigsaw work are evidence of a highly skilled cabinetmaker.



Empire cabinet-bookcase/ Henry Sheldon Museum

By the mid-1800s cabinetmakers had specialized tools—circular saws, planers, molding machines, jointers, and mechanized lathes—that improved efficiency and quality and enabled mass production. Vermont furniture manufacturers printed catalogues of their products, employed traveling salesmen, and sold wholesale. Some developed markets abroad, like the **Hale Furniture Company** in Arlington that made regular shipments to Latin America.

The **Patterson Chair Company**, a three-generation family company in Norwich that made parts for Victorian-style chairs, purchased in 1874 a "New Giant Waterwheel... to drive a Board Saw to cut 1000 board feet per hour." In 1895 it added an 80 hp gasoline engine to help run the sawmill and workshops.

The **H.T. Cushman Company** in North Bennington, founded in 1870, grew in 30 years from producing wood novelties to manufacturing 150 different furniture pieces. In the early 1900s it manufactured Mission furniture and later introduced its popular "Colonial Creations" with a "scuffed" maple finish that looked 150 years old.



Charles Shackleton Furniture Makers/Thomas Ames, Jr.

Contemporary Vermont Furniture

All across Vermont, in workshops small and large, skilled cabinetmakers continue the long tradition of furniture making. Some make reproductions and adaptations of early styles. Some create innovative one-of-a-kind pieces. Others blend tradition with personal expression. All contribute to the evolution of a Vermont style of furniture making that unites the skills of the builder, imagination of the designer, needs of the customers, and characteristics of the wood. Vermont furniture does not have one definable style but much of it has common characteristics: it is made of North American hardwoods, much of it from Vermont; it is simple in design; it makes the most of the wood's grain; it has a natural look; and it is beautifully made.

"The Vermont furniture industry is always about solid wood," says one furniture maker. Today it is also about forest sustainability and prudent use of wood resources. Fine cabinetmakers are making use of wood that not long ago was deemed unusable. Some are using only "certified" wood, grown in a forest managed according to criteria for sustainability.

Dwight Sargent began **Pompanoosuc Mills** in 1973 in East Thetford. His goal was to build furniture that is “beautiful to the eye, does the job it is designed to do well, and stands up to the rigors of everyday life in homes where the quality of life is important.” The company produces 200 beds, chests, desks, chairs, and dining room tables a week in New England and Mission styles. Each piece is built individually from birch, maple, red oak, and cherry, often obtained from local mills or woodlots. Pompanoosuc Mills, the largest build-to-order furniture company in the country, sells through its own showrooms in six states.



Pompanoosuc Mills

“We are responsible citizens who embrace Vermont values—quality, natural beauty, and clean air. The story of our company is that our products are from Vermont, made by Vermonters who make a good living while making good furniture.” --Dwight Sargent, President

Charles Shackleton Furniture Makers builds contemporary interpretations of classical pieces in an old brick textile mill in Bridgewater. The company’s fourteen skilled woodworkers each build one piece at a time, from start to finish. Each selects the wood, mills it, smooths it with a hand plane, shapes it with a drawknife and spokeshave, assembles it, finishes it, and signs it.



Charles Shackleton

“I want to show the hand work, the evidence of hand tools. I want a feeling that someone made that piece of furniture. Mass-produced furniture has lost the feeling of being made by hand, and I believe that’s a great loss. It’s missing personality.” --Charles Shackleton, President

Beeken Parsons is the creative furniture making partnership of Bruce Beeken and Jeff Parsons located in the historic farm barn at Shelburne Farms. Beeken Parsons designs and builds joined solid wood furniture for residential and institutional clients. They see design as the integration of aesthetics, process, and function, with materials. Their commitment to using local materials has led to an examination of how wood products businesses can contribute to sustainable forest management. “We believe that ‘character wood’ with knots, heartwood, sapwood, and mineral streaks, brings a natural beauty to our furniture. We highlight rather than eliminate these characteristics; they give our furniture soul.”



Beeken Parsons

“Beeken and Parsons...bring together the technical sophistication and efficiency of a production shop and the expressive qualities of one-off studio work. Their constant interplay between stripped down form and production methods...enables them to develop subtle designs, the simplicity of which belies considerable conceptual depth.” --Edward S. Cooke, Jr., Department of History of Art, Yale University



Rick Schneider

Rick Schneider of **Vermont Custom Woodworking** is a life-long Monkton resident whose property encompasses his workshop and 75-acre woodlot managed as a sustainable forest. His specialty is architectural woodworking. He makes striking spiral staircases, fine furniture, and 3-D sculptures and carvings, most of which are one-of-a-kind pieces. He works closely with clients to meld functional needs with style, design, and personal taste. He carved the acorn and oak leaf forms that were used to restore the ceiling of the Governor's Chambers and the Statehouse.

"Wood and woodworking are a passion for me. I like that wood is organic and renewable, and that natural wood provides a varied palette of rich grains, colors, and textures. I also love the softness and warmth wood adds to almost any setting."



Janet Collins/Henry Bryson

Janet Collins of Ryegate makes custom furniture in traditional styles, including chests of drawers, tilt-top tables, looking glasses, four-poster beds, side chairs, and writing tables. Her patterns incorporate components from various 17th- or early 18th-century furniture.

She especially likes to work with figured woods like curly maple, cherry and oak, ribbon-grain mahogany, and burls and woods with rich color. Her meticulously made pieces feature the detailed decorative handwork that she loves to do. "Carving is a form of one's signature," she says.

"The early designs were and still are beautiful. I look for the 'most figured' maple I can find. I've bought some from a man in southern Vermont who seeks out particular trees, mills the wood, and sells it to violin makers. That wood is really 'alive.'"



Steve Holman/Cook Nielson

Steve Holman of **Holman Studios** in Dorset has a reputation for doing non-traditional, often whimsical work. His furniture may have jaunty angles, sweeping curves, or novel shapes; or it may be handsome and practical. He likes to work with many varieties of wood, local and exotic. Customers' needs and aesthetics guide his custom designs. He wants to know what will be displayed in a cabinet, what other furniture in the room looks like, what sort of "feel" the customer wants.

"I fit into the image many people have of Vermont woodworking—clean industry, small individual business, natural product, high quality of life, people living in the woods doing crafts. I enjoy working in lots of different styles to fulfill customers' desires... and am interested in doing work that people will remember me by after I'm gone."

Uniquely Vermont

Authenticity. Integrity and honesty. Craftsmanship. Tradition. Creativity. Quality.

Lasting value. Many consumers find it easy to describe why they buy Vermont wood products: Made-in-Vermont furniture or crafts evoke a sense of well-being, a feeling that they are helping to preserve a way of life.

Vermont woodworkers and wood product manufacturers view Vermont's rural character, small communities, and distinct identity as motivating factors for high quality work and as assets in marketing their products.

"We do have some competitive advantage—a little bit of it comes from our proximity to abundant raw materials that are prized worldwide. However more of our potential competitive advantage is kind of intangible and is rooted in where we live and how we allow this place to inform our business values and our aesthetic values.

Some comes from the fact that we live and work in a place and a culture that historically has placed a higher value on small villages with small simple understated but well designed structures that inform all of our aesthetic sensibilities, a culture that historically has been more prone to preserve and reuse than to tear down and replace.

A little of it comes from the fact that most of our businesses are small—and located in small communities. It's much easier in a small business to know everyone and to inculcate that organization with a commitment to quality." --Tim Copeland, Copeland Furniture

Vermont's forests and forest products industries are very appealing to consumers. They are also fundamental to sustaining the rural character and economies of Vermont communities. From forests to sawmills to finished products, there are more than 500 wood products companies in Vermont. The industry employs almost 12,000 Vermonters who actively demonstrate their commitment to preserving the environment. Partnerships have formed between Vermont foresters, loggers, woodworkers, manufacturers, and others who share goals of healthy forests and a healthy wood products industry that today enjoys an excellent reputation in the marketplace.



Richard Montague demonstrates Springpole lathe turning/Mary Jeanne Packer



Robert Bouvier, Wood-U-Believe



East Poultney General Store/Joel Flewelling



Lumber from the S.A.W. Mill

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Vermont Dept. of Tourism and Marketing (www.vermontvacation.com)

Vermont Dept. of Economic Development (www.thinkvermont.com)

Vermont Dept. of Forests, Parks and Recreation (www.vtfpr.org)

North East State Foresters Association (www.nefainfo.org)

Vermont Woodlands Association (www.vermontwoodlands.org)



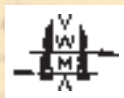
The Vermont wood products companies featured in this brochure are merely representative of the hundreds of companies—large and small—making high quality wood products in Vermont. This diverse population of businesses and their products are accessible through the associations listed below.

Vermont Wood Manufacturers Association (www.vermontwood.com)

Vermont WoodNet (www.vtwoodnet.org)

Guild of Vermont Furniture Makers (www.vermontfurnituremakers.com)

Vermont Forest Products Association (larrisonfour@earthlink.net)



Research and copy: Liz Fitzsimmons

Front cover photos: top - Ralph Tursini, Ralph Tursini Bowl Works; center clockwise - Beeken Parsons, Bill Gove, Rick Schneider, Bill Gove