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Beauty of Time

A Massachusetts woodworker and his crew of craftsmen make modern heirlooms using yesteryear's materials.

By [Lisa Whitcomb](#)



This cupboard, found in one of the company's two showrooms, is indicative of an old door "wrapped in function." Meaning — a new cabinet box was built to suit the door's size and complement its style.

Yes, his unique furniture pieces are beautiful, even rustic — but Stephen Staples, co-owner of Staples Cabinet Makers in Plainville, MA, will be the first to tell you they are functional as well.

Staples says he wants clients to use his furniture pieces that are made with reclaimed woods and other ancient "treasures," such as tin, copper, natural stone, tile, and various historical architectural fragments and hardware.

A skilled craftsman and entrepreneur who sailed around the world twice with the Maritime Academy before he was 25, Staples made a name for himself when he began working with reclaimed wood

in 1996. "I was in the right place at the right time, for the first time in my life," Staples says, joking that it only took him a few decades to get there.

Before making his own furniture line from reclaimed wood, Staples had an interesting work history. In the early '90s, he ran a side business for several years selling rocks, minerals and fossils, after having to close his woodworking shop when the state of

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Massachusetts' economy collapsed in 1989. The custom woodworking industry in the state dried up at the time, and he had to liquidate his custom door and window shop.

Prior to making doors and windows, Staples tried his hand at making authentic antique furniture reproductions in the mid-1980s. But reproductions proved hard to sell and never paid well, he says. Going back even further, Staples got his start in woodworking during the 1970s when he worked with his wife Christine (also a co-owner of Staples Cabinet Makers) refinishing and restoring furniture.

Today, he has found his niche and is quite successful — even having his work appear in Time Magazine once. His one-of-a-kind furniture pieces are shipped across the United States. Christine runs the office and his mother, Jean, greets and guides clients through the company's two showrooms, located adjacent to the shop.

Preserving History

Staples says his transition into working with reclaimed materials was easy. "I love finding artifacts and treasures. Time is the best craftsman," he says. "Today's wood does not offer the same deep patinas and tight grain patterns found in old-growth wood."

In his 10,000-square-foot shop, Staples fabricates farm tables, tavern tables, cupboards, center islands, writing desks and other artistic pieces of furniture from 18th, 19th and early 20th Century old-growth wood. The wood is reclaimed from razed homes, barns and mills in the New England and Mid-Atlantic areas.

The wood is primarily culled from old beams, floors, walls and mouldings. Old doors are the focal point for new cupboards, because Staples says he likes to "wrap it in function," meaning build a new cabinet base around an antique door.

Staples will also appropriate hand-blown glass, hardware, knobs, pulls, tiles, slate, tin, copper, iron, certain circa 1920s cabinetry, as well as marble (from old hotels) for his furniture.

"A table made out of reclaimed materials is recycling exemplified," he says. "It pleases people to no end to know they saved something from the landfill, to think that they have done their part in saving the planet."

Staples hires professional deconstruction teams to harvest the materials, but has been known to go occasionally to local locations himself to extract materials with his team. When he does, he uses an 18V

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portable hand-held power tool kit from DeWalt. It includes a saber saw, circular saw, drill and flexible-neck flashlight, which is great for locations that have no electricity, Staples notes. “Sometimes we are just ahead of the wrecking ball. We’ll get a call and only have a few hours to get into a location and take what we want,” he says.



Staples uses his own blended finish on pieces. The durable spar varnish can be colored or left clear as shown on this island and its wooden top.

“Wood talks if you are listening,” he adds. “You can see pie cutter marks in a countertop, burns from the hearth in a floorboard and curry comb marks in the barn wood. It is interesting to watch a home built in the 1700s get torn down. I cannot help but think of the families that lived there — the holidays they spent together, the babies that were born.”

He does not reclaim materials at random. “When I look at something in a house, I’ll wonder first if it will make a tabletop, then, if it can be turned into a cupboard, or perhaps a table base or table legs,” Staples notes. Recently he made a tabletop out of a 1928 wooden car running board. When he makes table tops out of stone, slate or marble, he wraps the edges in wood to give it a more finished look.

“None of my work is ‘cookie-cutter.’ I look at the way something can be used, be it right-side-up, upside-down or inside-out. I love to put old tin on cabinet doors instead of a raised wood panel for its reclaimed value and appearance, or apply tin to patch a hole in a board like people used to do,” he says. Other decorative elements he uses are wooden butterfly patches applied across cracks in wooden table tops as structural supports. He also removes and reapplies original floor nails (called roseheads), after a board has been planed.

“Nails have a great history. You can date them to within 25 years of when they were made. Saw marks are another way [to date wood]. People really like wood cut and planed with hand tools, because these date back to before 1860. After that time, boards were cut with circular saws and these are less desirable,” Staples adds.

He stores reclaimed woods and other architectural materials in a 5,000-square-foot storage area on the same property as the shop. “It’s great, I can walk into the storage area with an idea and go shopping. I can pick boards and accessories when I need them. This is something others cannot really do in this business, and that is why it is cool,” he says.

Preserving Beauty

When Staples began working with reclaimed wood and materials in 1996, he says, "I didn't have a clue. I researched the subject on the Internet after noticing the flooring industry was grabbing up the wood. It was an untapped furniture market niche, and I saw an opportunity. I must say, though, there was a huge learning curve in figuring out how to work with older wood."

For example, he had to learn that there are several types of pine. Some are named as species and others are named after their original uses. To name a few, there is heart pine, a New England longleaf yellow pine (now depleted), and white pine, as well as attic pine, feather-edge, rough-sawn, well-walked, unpainted, grain bin and wide pine. Pine is the primary wood reclaimed, since it was used so prevalently in buildings during our country's youth. But there are other reclaimed wood species Staples likes to work with as well, such as black walnut, American sweet chestnut (virtually extinct after the blight in 1904), hemlock and oak.



Repurposing pine boards, drawer knobs and drawer fronts (as shown here) is recycling exemplified, says Co-owner Stephen Staples of Staples Cabinet Makers.

Staples says he loves spalted wood, too, which he uses for turning bowls (something he does in his spare time). He also works with tiger maple (not reclaimed). "I make tables with it because people love the look of the grain when I cross plane it to give the wood a hand-hewn look," he says.

He recently took possession of a water tower made from Florida Cypress, a wood that can only be obtained from

recycled sources. "It's beautiful. When it's resawn, it looks as if a rainbow is passing over it because of all the mineral deposits," he says.

Staples also loves the look of cherry and maple, but says, "You just don't find those woods in an old home. The only way we get them is when someone finds a dead tree standing in the forest. We'll buy and use this wood like we do reclaimed woods, because it is not live timber being felled," he adds. How does he get his reclaimed wood?

"The wood finds me," Staples says. "People know I am in the business and call me to come and retrieve wood when they're going to raze a building. I tell as many people as I can what I am looking for. When they bring me something, I take it, whether I have a need or not. I don't want to burn bridges," he explains. "I work closely with those in the deconstruction business and tutor them in what I'll buy. This way, when they take something down, they'll go after the stuff I want."

The average cost of a table, depending on the materials used, typically runs between \$1,800 and \$5,000. Clients can choose from three different table ends. “They can get a 1 1/2-inch breadboard border, or a city scape where each board is cut at a different length, or a mountain range where I free-cut the ends in the shape of hills,” he says. Staples also offers tables with a “live” edge. This comes from lumber that still has its bark.

Matching boards is the hardest part, Staples says. As a way to pull a piece together visually, when two or more boards are glued together to make a tabletop, Staples gently uses tools like a curry comb or pie cutter to add markings. He likes to refer to these distressed marks as “time embellishments” and “whispers of deceit.” Such marks are used to cover surfaces that look too new or unmatched, Staples says, and adds that this time embellishment should never look contrived.

Preserving Techniques

Discerning clients get to “shop” for wood and other historic accents in the company’s warehouse. “Before we select the wood, they tell me what they want built and how they’ll use the piece. Then, we get to work,” says Staples.

First, Staples creates a design that best complements the materials being used. “My furniture designs usually begin with a fragment of wood,” he says. Next, the wood is washed in a warm soap-and-water solution to remove century-old dirt from its outer layers. It is imperative to do this or the residue will dull his planing knives and saw blades, he says.

Getting the wood wet also allows Staples to see its grain patterns and artistic potential. “When it is wet, we can see the colors and what about the piece is special. From this, we categorize the lumber into stacks,” he says.

The next step is to lightly plane the undersides using 3-inch planers from DeWalt and Festool. This smoothes otherwise rough-sawn places. Staples adds that his hand tool is the hard-to-find Stanley 4 1/2-inch hand plane. To remove unwanted paint from boards, Staples sends them through the shop’s Grizzly 13-inch power planer.

“I try to avoid buying painted wood,” Staples explains. “There is too much work involved to remove old paint. If I take a painted piece, it’s because of the patina, and I will use the unpainted side.”

Boards are cut on a 12-inch SCMI sliding table saw. He also has a 10-inch Powermatic table saw fitted with a Biesemeyer fence. In addition, the shop also has two bandsaws, a circa 1901 saw with a 27-inch throat that Staples bought when he was sixteen, and a 14-inch Rockwell. Drill presses from Craftsman, Powermatic and Walker-Turner and shapers from Grizzly are also used in the

furniture-making process.

Staples hand turns table legs using a circa 1900 Yates-American lathe. "I can do them without calipers, using only a stick as my guide for the humps and valleys. I also employ dados, dovetails and mortise-and-tenon joinery," he says. A 13-inch SCMI joiner/planer/mortiser machine is used for some of these tasks.

Tabletops are built to "float" using channels with clips, so they can expand and contract when humidity levels change. This is important, since reclaimed wood has not been dried in a controlled environment like new lumber, he says. Legs are secured with wood blocks into key ways and are removable for shipping.

Staples created his own durable finish. "Each table is hand-rubbed with multiple layers of a phenolic resin spar varnish, blended with linseed oils, driers and thinners. My furniture is meant to be enjoyed by many generations," he says.

Shellac flakes are also used in the finishing process. He buys them from India where lac deposits from the lac beetle are culled from tree branches. He tints the finish when requested with dark garnet, medium amber or light lemon coloring, but recommends a clear finish because scratches are easily repaired.

What does the future hold for Staples Cabinet Makers? For Stephen Staples, the future will always be in the past — gathering satisfaction from preserving the richness and style of yesteryear's treasures.

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