

# Joe Cress

Bringing history to life, one desk at a time

BY A.J. HAMLER

Most woodworkers think of a project as making a single piece, or maybe a small group of pieces. For the hobbyist, it's usually something one-of-a-kind for personal use. For the professional, it's something for a client, one of many commissions made in the course of a career. Either way, it's an undertaking with a beginning and an end.

But for furnituremaker Joe Cress of Logan Creek Designs in Abingdon, Virginia, no matter how many pieces he makes, they're all part of the same project. In fact, the project is the career.

Cress' signature piece is a striking reproduction of the field desk used by Confederate general Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. Although his line of historical reproductions has grown since making his first desk 12 years ago, it's all an outgrowth of that original desk.

"It's all about the experience," Cress says. "If I never make another desk, that's fine. It's the people I've met and the places I've been, the things I've gotten to touch and the things I've gotten to do that have made this all worthwhile. It could have been anything; it could have been writing or public speaking, but it just happens that the medium for me was furniture."

Cress never set out to be a furniture-maker. He started his adult life as a teacher of special education in the public schools. Cress was good at what he did, but as rewarding as the job was it just wasn't what he wanted to do, which was working wood. (While at the school, Cress created a wood shop for the students—a first for the school.) After teaching for nearly four years, he gave a year's notice. He's been a woodworker in one form or another ever since.

He established his first shop with his brother Jake in a tiny 300 square-foot space, where the two men did mostly kitchens and commercial casework, but also dabbled in liturgical furnishings and occasional one-off furniture. Jake started his own business after about a year, but Joe kept going with the original shop for a few more years before moving operations to his current 2,000-square-ft. shop behind his 1930s Sears & Roebuck house nestled in the Virginia hills. Cress expanded the business when he opened a combination wood-working/lumber store in town in the early 1980s—the first store of its kind in that part of the country—that carried some 30,000 bf of wood, along with a dealership for Hitachi, Makita and Freud tools, and wood-working supplies and magazines.

For the next four years, Cress divided his time between the shop and the retail store, which kept him running back and forth. But when Joe and his wife Margaret adopted two girls in 1987, aged six and eight, it was time for a change.

"I was a new dad and I had to choose if I was going into the shop business or the dad business" he recalls. "So we closed the store and moved here where I could be a stay-at-home dad with the girls."

To make cash flow easier, rather than waiting for commissions, Cress did work for an area defense plant making high-end laminated cabinets. Business boomed, and the shop sometimes did between \$20,000 and \$30,000 a month in hospital cabinets, millwork, Euro-style cabinets and laminates. Lots and lots of laminates.

"I had one job where they shipped me a hundred sheets of 5' x 12' laminate every

two weeks; that's how much laminate we were putting out of this business here," he says. "We had a spray room with 55-gallon drums of finish, five routers and two edge banders running all the time. The only thing good about working like that is the money, and you know when you sell it to them that they're going to have to replace it in five or 10 years. I never understood that, but I made my share of it. I was very good at laminate work, but you're basically

just spitting stuff out. You can't even get a splinter with that stuff, you just get cut. Your hands are always cut."

Cress had a shop full of work, but little satisfaction.

## "THE PROJECT"

By the mid-'90s, changing administrations and a cutback in military spending meant he wasn't getting as much defense work as before. With that part of his busi-

ness dwindling, he readily returned to making furniture on commission. That's when everything changed.

On an estimate trip to the Shenandoah Valley, Cress took a break to visit the museum at the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Virginia. A lifelong history buff and student of the Civil War, he was particularly taken with one piece on display, Stonewall Jackson's field desk. He spent a long time studying it before deciding that

he just had to make one. When he queried the attendant at the front desk about the possibility of being allowed to make a copy for his library, he was told to come back in a few months when that section of the museum was scheduled to close for remodeling. Cress took the attendant's advice, but was in for a surprise.

"I came to find out that the 'attendant' wasn't that at all, but Lt. Col. Keith Gibson, the executive director of the museum, who



Joe Cress with one of his newest reproductions: a drop-leaf table/desk from the office of Robert E. Lee.

PHOTO BY A.J. HAMLER





PHOTOS BY GREG FINNEY, FINNEY STUDIO, EXCEPT AS NOTED

just happened to be filling in for an absent cadet that day. It was a chance meeting—me being at VMI on the same day a cadet was on sick call, and somebody other than a museum curator filling in. All of this would never have come about if those three things hadn't happened on the same day."

Gibson allowed Cress to thoroughly examine the desk inside and out—wearing gloves the entire time to protect the integrity of the rare artifact—and to take measurements and photos. When he took the completed reproduction back to VMI, he was in for another surprise: They not only liked it, but they asked him to make more.

Colonel Gibson arranged for Cress to have an exclusive license to reproduce the desk for sale. In addition, Cress agreed to make "private edition" versions of the desk for VMI's use. Before he knew it, his career had just taken an entirely new direction. The project had begun.

"There was no business plan for this," Cress recalls. "I didn't sit down and plan it out like I was starting a millwork shop or whatever. There has been no plan, it's just the way things have come together. I believe

it's a destiny, and it's both a blessing and a curse. There's nobody else doing this kind of stuff in Civil War reproductions. I make products belonging to three generals, all under license. If you set out to attack that as a business plan, I think you'd be laughed at. They'd say there's no market for it."

When he originally began the project, Cress planned to make a total of 1,863 desks, a reflection of the year in which Jackson was fatally wounded during the Battle of Chancellorsville. He's since come to realize—especially after expanding his product line—that making that many desks was a bit ambitious, and he no longer has a set number of desks in mind.

As to how many Jackson desks he's made so far, he's a bit guarded in the details due to his agreement with VMI. However, he admits that the last numbered desk he delivered to a customer was #167, while VMI has received several private-edition desks that aren't part of his numbered customer series. The school has at least one desk per class, and uses them for a variety of purposes; some have been given in memory of an alumnus who has passed away, while at least

**"Stonewall Jackson Field Desk and Table"** (1995); cherry, brass hardware, leather blotter; Desk: 29" x 34½" x 14", Table: 28½" x 34½" x 24".

one is reserved for the grandson of an alumnus who plans to attend the school in the future. Cress has made additional desks that reside in a number of places. Desk #1,863—already given that commemorative number, though he may never make that many—sits in Cress' home office. Another is on display at the VMI museum, while yet another can be seen at the museum at the New Market [Virginia] Battlefield. One of his Jackson desks, as well as his reproduction of cavalry general J.E.B. Stuart's desk, appeared prominently in the film *Gods and Generals*. (Cress, a Civil War reenactor, also appeared as an extra in the film.)

#### THE BUSINESS OF HISTORY

Cress loves the business he's created, but he has no false illusions that he's going to get rich.

"This is not a money-maker," he says. "It could be, if I were willing to take on three or four guys, or even 10 guys and set this shop

up somewhere in town and go all out with marketing, I could make the hell out of this stuff. But my vision of it is one guy, at one bench, working on one piece of furniture, just the way the original Jackson desk was built."

That's how Cress works, and although he may work alone, he always talks of the business as a team effort. When he talks enthusiastically about his work, he uses the words "we" and "our" frequently.

"I'll be honest with you: if my wife was not a professional on a medical school staff, with insurance, retirement and benefits, there's no way I could have done this project," he says, emphasizing the importance of Margaret's contribution to the business. "I would've had to take in a lot of side work, and then I wouldn't have been able to take the side trips and bring in these new projects. I've had a partner in this the whole time. I can't take all the credit that this is Joe Cress' monument to the Civil War. She's been there the whole time."

In addition to the Jackson desk, Cress has licenses to reproduce items from two other generals—J.E.B. Stuart's field desk and Robert E. Lee's camp chest. Although Jackson used his desk on the battlefield, it isn't a traditional officer's field desk but rather a large schoolmaster's desk, measuring 29" high, 34-1/2" wide and 14" deep and sitting on a matching table about 28" high. Stuart's field desk is more traditional and considerably smaller. Cress' copy of the Lee camp chest, based on the original at the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, features a hand-forged hasp, hammered corners and hand-laid hemp rope handles.

All three of the reproductions are exactly like the originals...almost. As part of the terms for being granted a license to reproduce them, Cress agreed to do at least one thing with each that would be inaccurate—a different wood species, or maybe a slightly altered dimension—so they can always be identified by expert eyes as reproductions (See sidebar).

His line is rounded out with additional

**TOP—"Logan Creek Field Desk, Work Table, Chair"** (1996); cherry, brass hardware, leather blotter, rope handles; Desk: 26" x 20" x 12", Table: 28½" x 56" x 24".

**RIGHT—"2nd Virginia Cavalry Company Desk with Cross Stand"** (1997); oak, brass hardware, leather blotter, hammered iron corner angles, rope handles; Desk: 26" x 20" x 12".



items of his own design under the banner of the Logan Creek Collection.

"This is a hodge-podge of my versions of Civil War field furniture, for people who want something like the Jackson desk, but can't really afford it," he says. "Not everyone is going to plunk down three or four grand for a table to put in a tent, but we have several reenactors who have bought pieces

from the Logan Creek collection for about half of that. It's the same quality of work, but there's no licensing fee to pay, they're a bit smaller, and quicker to produce."

Cress currently gets \$3,495 for the Jackson desk with matching cherry table. The Logan Creek desk, a traditional field desk similar to the Stuart reproduction, measures 26" x 20" x 12" and sells for \$1,750.







TOP—"Robert E. Lee Camp Chest" (2000); walnut, hand-forged iron hasp and corner angles, rope handles; 16" x 30" x 16".

BOTTOM—"Logan Creek Chest" (2000); cherry, hand-forged iron hasp, rope handles; 16" x 32" x 18".

Logan Creek, he did everything he could to work to a strict schedule because that's what he was used to when building cabinets, but it didn't fit.

"This is a whole different thing. In order to experience the project, I had to slow down. So now I tell people it'll be mid-fall or early spring, something like that. It's not like I'm saying, 'No desk for you!' It's just that the schedule was killing me, and sometimes I'd be building five of them at a time. So, I decided I wasn't going to make a lot of money in woodworking. The kind of woodworking you have to do to make money, I don't like it. You have to make a million things and just keep going. I made more money in one year during the '80s than I've made in all the years working on this whole project. But I'm a lot happier now."

Cress has a website ([www.logancreekdesigns.com](http://www.logancreekdesigns.com)), but does no other advertising, preferring instead to get customers by word of mouth. Most, of course, are history buffs, but customers come from all walks of life.

"I have customers who pay me with bad checks, and I have customers who pay cash in advance" he says. "I have customers who buy these for their friends and give them away, and I have people who can only pay a little bit every month. There are school teachers, doctors and Civil War reenactors. And there are people who don't like the Civil War but just like neat furniture, and even some people who don't like the Civil War or neat furniture, but like me."

So far, Logan Creek Designs has furniture in 33 states. Cress uses a trucking company to deliver much of his work, while some customers insist on picking up their furniture. But in many cases he likes to deliver himself. "I enjoy that," he says. "I enjoy setting up the furniture in the people's house and watching their reaction to their new furniture. I've made a lot of friends. And I get brownies everywhere I go." It's all part of the experience.

#### FUTURE HISTORY

Cress constantly sees pieces he'd like to make with thoughts of adding them to his

line, but forces himself to go slowly, picking only the most important to receive his time and efforts. Often, he'll consider something for years before actually making it. As with the rest of his line, most of the items he'll consider reflect his southern heritage, but not all.

"I don't want to presume that I would never do a Federal piece—after all, when you look at it, Jackson, Stuart and Lee were all Federal officers and great Americans before, during and after the war—it's just one direction among many that I haven't gone yet. There could be no end to the directions I could go, but there's only one of me to go around."

One such Union piece he's considered is a reproduction of a tack box belonging to Ulysses S. Grant. It's a large chest, big enough to hold all the general's tack along with extra uniforms and boots.

"I would consider doing that because it's such a neat piece," he says. "I may never make one for sale, but I'd definitely make one for myself. Unlike a lot of students of the Civil War, I don't have a problem with U.S. Grant. He rose to the occasion late in life, and did in two theaters what more talented military before him couldn't do."

The newest item in his line is a reproduction of the bed in which Stonewall Jackson died. A large, four-poster with acorn tops, the bed is copied from the original, currently on display at the Chandler Plantation in Guinea Station, Virginia. The bed is cherry with turned posts, and will feature the traditional rope supports for bedding found on beds of the period.

And, if he can find the time, there's one other series of reproductions he'd love to do, if only for his own pleasure. Taking some time out from touring Civil War sites a few summers ago, Cress visited Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home. As usual when touring historical sites, his attention is drawn to the furniture. The original slave quarters were part of the tour, and inside he found some remarkable primitive furniture, including a rope bed, table and chest. He peppered the docents with countless questions about the slave-built furniture, few of which they could answer to his satisfaction. They recommended he come back another time and speak to Monticello's resident cabinetmaker. Unfortunately, he wasn't scheduled to be there that day.

"So, I had a moment to myself, and as



I'm leaning over the rail taking pictures, I set off the alarm," he recalls. "I figured they'd take me away in irons, so I just stood there and waited for them to come, but kept taking pictures. This big burly guy about 6' 4" comes walking up to me, and I apologized and told him I was just taking pictures. He left and I went back to taking pictures, and of course I set the alarm off again. This time a different guy comes who's not quite as burly, with a nametag that said 'Bob.' I admitted I set the alarm off again, and we looked at each other for a minute and I just felt like I knew this guy, and I said, 'You're a cabinetmaker, aren't you?' We shook hands and he looked at me and said, 'So are you.'"

In a repetition of his good luck at VMI

ABOVE—"Little Sorrel Casket" (1997); walnut, brass hardware; 18" x 13" x 13".

BELOW—"Stonewall Jackson's Death Bed"; cherry, rope, iron hardware; 53" x 54" x 80".

a decade earlier, "Bob" turned out to be the very Monticello cabinetmaker who had made the reproductions Cress was admiring. (The docent he'd spoken to earlier hadn't been aware he was in the shop.) The two spent the next hour discussing the furniture and comparing notes.

"What are the odds of that? That's the kind of thing that happens all the time in this project," he says. "It was yet another one of those things of being in the right time



The last item in Cress' line is more than a little unusual: a small casket he designed at the request of VMI, used for a formal burial of the remains of Stonewall Jackson's horse, Little Sorrel. While the horse's hide had been professionally mounted at the end of the 19th century and is still on display at the VMI museum, the school kept the horse's bones for many years. A few years ago the school decided to have a cremation and proper burial of the ashes.

"The ashes—there was 37 pounds of ash—were placed in five or six wax-covered bricks, and brought back to VMI," Cress says. "Col. Gibson contacted me and asked me to design and build a walnut box for burial. He gave me the dimensions he wanted—

13" x 13" x 18"—and that's all he said. He wouldn't tell me what it was or what it was for, but he left the design up to me."

When it came time for the burial, Gibson asked Cress to personally place the wax bricks inside before locking it. The small casket was buried on the parade ground at VMI near Jackson's statue in front of the four original artillery pieces the general used when teaching the cadets. Cress doesn't get a lot of requests for the casket, but he's offered it as part of his line to customers ever since.

Cress works at a leisurely pace, finishing between 30 and 35 pieces a year from his line, plus the occasional commission for longtime customers he's known since his cabinet shop days. When he first started



PHOTO BY BOB MARTIN, TRAILBLAZE MEDIA



## Guarding History

MAKERS OF REPRODUCTION furniture have to do a good job to please the customer, but is it possible for a recreation of an historical piece to be too authentic? In short, yes. The last thing that Cress wants is for one of his pieces to be mistaken for the real thing. In fact, places like the Smithsonian Institution and the Museum of the Confederacy take potential counterfeiting so seriously that they ask makers of historical re-creations to introduce a subtle bit of inaccuracy into the work they do.

When I first started making the Jackson desk (from the Virginia Military Institute), which is made from walnut, they requested that I make it out of a different wood and to make something off-scale. I've done both.

It wouldn't have occurred to me, but Col. Gibson, the director of the museum program, pointed out that there once

were 11 Stonewall Jackson bibles that showed up for sale in New York soon after his death. Even back in the 1860s they were already counterfeiting things, so we make it in such a way that that can't happen.

On every desk, I make something just a little bit off-scale—a drawer too large, or maybe instead of a rabbet or a mortise-and-tenon in a particular spot, I may

use a dovetail. Instead of a dimension being exactly 30-1/4", I might make it 30-3/8" or 30-1/2" on purpose. Every one I make, I make it a bit different, and I make it out of a wood that will age and mellow in the same way walnut does



Cress carefully adds subtle inaccuracies to his "Stonewall Jackson Desk" to mark it as a reproduction.

PHOTO BY A.J. HAMLER

reason why. We went to another museum not long after that and we peeled off from the tour to look at a piece of furniture. I told him to bend down just a second and take a close look underneath of it at the back legs. "Well, they're all wrong," he said,

but I told him no, they were all right. Those were made by a guy by hand, in probably poor light with most likely a set of inferior tools. And he was probably hungry or his wife was fussing at him. I told him that's the way hand work is, and he understood.

All of the hardware comes from Ball & Ball, a company in Pennsylvania. It's stock hardware that doesn't quite match the original. The original had iron hardware, of course, but at this price point I wanted a very nice drawer lock and key, knobs and such. Under each lockset on the Jackson desk, I sign and date it and then I sign the desk in another place that only a customer would know.

One of the biggest concessions I made with the Jackson desk was to drill two holes so the desk would register with the table, so it can be screwed together. A hundred years from now, or even 50 years from now, these things could be floating around all over and someone might think that one of them is the real thing or, worse, try to sell one claiming it's the real thing. Those two holes and the other things we've done will keep that from happening.

—Joe Cress

All the customers I have are totally in line with that; it's fine with them to have a different wood or something slightly off-scale. And in a lot of ways, that's actually more authentic. I had one customer once who noticed that one leg wasn't quite the same size as the others and was kind of shocked. I told him I was glad he noticed that, and told him that the next time we were on a museum tour I'd show him the

and run with it, because there really is a market for that. My line of furniture is living proof that there are niche markets everywhere."

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*When not writing or working in his shop, he can often be found portraying a Union corporal at a local Civil War reenactment.*

and the right place, and I even had to set the alarm off twice to get to him."

He'd ultimately like to make a few copies of each piece to use in an old smokehouse he and Margaret are converting to a specialty room as part of a bed and breakfast. The décor will be like stepping back in time for the room; it will be lit only by candles. Cress says that there's a chance he might

offer them for sale as part of the Logan Creek line, but that it's only a slim chance.

"I really think it needs to be somebody whose passion is into reproducing artifacts from the slave era, maybe somebody where it's in their heritage, somebody who can be on fire for it," he says. "That's not necessarily me. I'll definitely make some but it's not my drive to do that. I wish someone would step forward