

## To the Art, Trade and Mystery

*With this Luminary, MESDA initiates a column featuring one of the many fine artisans and craftspeople who work with the museum on a consulting basis. Working behind the scenes, they restore, repair, and conserve objects and furnishings in the collection. To maintain the highest degree of authenticity, they use skills and techniques that have all but disappeared. These talented people are among the museum's most valuable resources, and we are happy to acknowledge their contributions.*

### Ned Hipp, Renegade Restorer

Ned Hipp of Bethania, North Carolina, doesn't see eye-to-eye with all furniture conservators. That hasn't deterred collectors, dealers, and museums from drawing on his expertise as a furniture restorer specializing in early American furniture, and he has worked with Old Salem and MESDA for twenty-four years. Completely self-taught, he mastered the craft by studying the history of the furniture and the technology that produced it.

When Ned was fifteen, he began to collect and restore antique guns. A few years later he became interested in early furniture as well; he began to collect furniture and teach himself about furniture and restoration processes. Gradually, in addition to working full time as a tool-and-die maker, first with General Electric and later in his own shop, he began to restore furniture and guns for collectors all over the country. When Frank Horton suggested in 1972 that he move to North Carolina, he decided to devote himself full-time to furniture restoration, a big step. He moved from Newberry, South Carolina, to an old house and workshop in Bethania, a town about eight miles northwest of Winston-Salem that was settled by the Moravians in 1757. He has since filled his house with American and English furniture, originals and reproductions he has made, from his favorite period, roughly the first century of colonization to 1740.

Some of the projects Ned has tackled for MESDA over the years have been formidable. Probably the most challenging was a c. 1800 Charleston breakfront that Frank and Brad Rausch-enberg found in a chicken house in Richmond in 1977. The origi-



nal drawers and desk compartment had been removed to form cupboards, and doors had been attached to the openings, altering the appearance of the piece and causing considerable damage. Using a similar breakfront as a prototype, Ned rebuilt the missing drawers, reconstructed the secretary compartment, and restored the piece to its original condition.

The breakfront, now in the Governor's Mansion in Columbia, South Carolina, illustrates Ned's philosophy of making repairs and restoration work as invisible as possible: "Either leave the piece alone or do the best job you can." Although this practice runs counter to the approach followed by many conservators today, he feels strongly that repairing a piece in a way that emulates the original maker's work is a sign of high-quality restoration. He uses both modern and traditional tools—some of which he makes

himself—and traditional finishing materials, avoiding glues and modern bonding materials.

In addition to doing work for MESDA, Ned has worked with the Governor's Mansion in Columbia on other projects, with the Mint Museum in Charlotte, and with collectors and dealers from all over the country. He recently restored the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century furnishings of an eighteenth-century tavern in Concord, Massachusetts, that is undergoing restoration.

How does a self-taught amateur become recognized as an outstanding furniture restorer? High standards in everything he undertakes are essential, as is "being born with the ability to see things that others will never see," no matter what their training. When asked how to describe himself, whether as furniture restorer or conservator, Ned chuckled. "How about 'Renegade'?"