

By Tom Ratzloff

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Russell Buskirk is at the scene of a crime.

An antique crime.

The victim is a rare 18th-century Charleston linen press/personal secretary that has been damaged by overaggressive restoration. His job is to use the latest in scientific forensics, combined with exhaustive historical research and exacting craftsmanship, to resurrect this treasure to its former glory.

“It’s challenging,” Buskirk said of his current project. “This is a very important piece because it is very unusual in that the linen press contains a personal secretary, too. It’s a unique form and a kind of rosetta stone that can help unlock more secrets about Charleston furniture.”

Although he has emerged as one of the preeminent Charleston antique furniture restorers and scholars, the lean, blond 51-year-old is refreshingly unprepossessed. On weekends, you can find him enjoying the Lowcountry’s natural beauty and recreational opportunities. Since moving here from West Virginia 20 years ago, he has become an expert surf kayaker and was recently named to the U.S. East Coast Surf Kayak Team that will compete at the world championships in Costa Rica in October.

“I sometimes pinch myself to make sure I’m not dreaming,” Buskirk said. “My life has gone in directions that I never anticipated.”

A trained professional photographer from White Sulphur Springs, W. Va., he migrated to Charleston in 1985 and worked for two years at a local photography studio. He switched careers in 1987 after answering a classified ad from an antique furniture restorer.

“I was already a pretty decent carpenter. I knew about mortise-and-tenon construction and dovetail joints and was excited about the opportunity to learn more skills,” Buskirk said.

A quick study, he rose through the ranks to become shop manager and an inlay specialist while working on major restorations of historic Charleston furniture.

Buskirk founded his own business, Russell Buskirk Restorations, in Charleston in 1994. Since then, his status as master inlay specialist and restorer has become recognized nationally. He received the 2001 Samuel Gaillard Stony Craftsmanship Award and he has become a sought-after lecturer and expert for museums and antiques venues such as the prestigious Winter Antique Show in New York City.

For example, his scholarly bent was on full display last year at the Charleston Antiques Symposium when he delivered a lecture entitled “North to Charleston – South to Jamaica: An Examination of Early Materials in Trade.”

As he tries to resurrect the damaged private secretary/linen press, Buskirk has an important ally: Susan Buck of Charleston’s historic Drayton Hall plantation. A nationally renowned conservator, she specializes in the analysis of painted and finished surfaces on wooden furniture and architectural materials.

Buck uses cross-section microscopy analysis and other cutting-edge technological techniques to reveal details obscured by old finishes.

“We will share this information with Arlen Heginbotham, who is associate conservator at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and discuss recommended conservation treatments,” Buskirk said. “By identifying the different layers of the finish, it is possible to devise treatments that will remove only the added layers. Under ideal conditions, the old intact finish layers would only be cleaned and left undisturbed.”

He said these conservation techniques could reveal details obscured by old finishes. Great care must be taken to preserve and protect intact old finish layers as they verify the history of the piece and add to its value.

“With these methods, historians are now regarding furniture just as much a document as a written record,” Buskirk said. “Reading the physical history of furniture is like looking at an historical document.”

He shares his expertise with students at the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) in Winston-Salem, NC. A member of its 2005 advisory board, Buskirk teaches classes in furniture evaluation, woods and inlay techniques. His photography skills still serve him well, too, as he documents his inlay techniques and the various stages of his restoration projects.

One of Buskirk’s most notable restoration projects was a c.1730-40 desk built by William Carwithen, an English cabinetmaker. It is the oldest signed piece of Charleston furniture. He feels a special kinship with Carwithen, who was an accomplished craftsman who also valued the pursuit of knowledge.

“At the end of his life, he was the longest-serving librarian of the Charleston Library Society,” Buskirk said. “It would be gratifying to follow his rise to scholarship.”