

# John Steele Davis - crafts unique furniture from vine-sculpted hardwood

by Sharon Walls  
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In wild woods, honeysuckle vines twine around young saplings and, as both plants grow, the vines sculpt the growing trees into twisted, ornate natural works of art, each one unique.

John Steele Davis incorporates these ornate designs into unique rustic furniture crafted entirely by hand. “To my knowledge, no one else has built furniture in this style,” said John, who is as unique as his creations.

In addition to the twisted saplings furniture, John crafts antique reproduction chairs and musical instruments from hand harvested timber. He built his own home from salvaged building materials and natural materials found on his property, three acres on a wooded hillside off Hwy 9 South of Oxford. He built his woodworking shop from hay bales and hand-hewn trees that he cut and set in place himself.



“My approach to woodworking is to start with the source, the tree,” said John. “All of my work is as close to nature as possible. I use a lot of trees that are salvaged from storm damage, or cleared for house lots, or would otherwise be wasted.”

John developed his appreciation of nature and man’s place in it growing up on a farm that had been in his family for generations, near Ellard, a rural community west of Bruce in Calhoun County, Mississippi.

“He found lots of woods and hills to explore,” said John’s mother, Dixie Steele Davis. “John had a happy disposition and his adventurous side developed when he began walking.”

John said, “I grew up on the farm that my mama grew up on and my granddaddy and my great-granddaddy grew up on.” Now the farm consists of 400 acres but in John’s greatgrandfather’s day the farm was 640 acres, one square mile. There is not much hardwood timber such as John uses in his woodworking on the old family farm now.

John is the middle child of seven. “He came into the world with a distinctly different personality and looks,” said Dixie Davis. “In contrast to his brothers and sisters, he had long arms and legs with no hair and a very fair skin.”

Now 47 years old, John is about six feet tall and is still thin, with long arms and legs, round blue eyes, and a perpetual grin. He covers his short blond hair with a variety of hats or caps which screen his sensitive skin from the sun.

He is a familiar character around town in his blue 1984 Chevrolet pickup truck with his black lab Buster accompanying him. His furniture is displayed in Square Books, Southside Gallery, and Taylor Arts.

At Square Books, he indulges a passion for reading which he has enjoyed most of his life. An early inspiration was “On Walden Pond” by Henry David Thoreau.

He graduated from Bruce High School in 1973, then toured Europe for about 6 weeks on very little money. He sold classic self-help books for the Southwestern Company for two summers while in Northwest Mississippi Community College, where he finished the Drafting and Design Technology program in 1979.

“I guess I did come to Oxford to go to the University,” John said. “My mother has worked at Ole Miss since 1971.” Dixie Steele Davis is Records Coordinator in the office of the Dean of Pharmacy. “But I didn’t do too good in school,” he continued. “It wasn’t my cup of tea.”

“John has a different outlook,” his mother said. “John has a lot of knowledge and knows a lot about many things.”

John’s brother Andy, a professional forester, calls John “a tree-hugging liberal.” John does not hesitate to make his views clear, whether it is passing around a petition to limit timber companies from cutting trees in national forests at his birthday party at Halloween or whether it is standing in the rain at a peace rally in the Courthouse Square in Oxford on a Saturday, holding a sign that says, “Stop World War W.”

“In America,” he said, “we are one of the greatest countries in the world because we had all these resources. Now the resources are running out. We’re depending on Iraqi oil from the Middle East. We’ve pretty much ransacked the continent of the timber and the furs and the gold, and a lot of people have become fabulously wealthy.

“If you work with nature it is a lot better than trying to bulldoze every thing flat and make money off of it. I feel like all of nature is God’s creation and if you are trying to kill nature you’re working against God. That’s enough preaching for Sunday morning. I haven’t been to church in 20 years. But that’s my philosophy.”

**The house that John built -**

John worked with nature in building his house. Most of the stone for the foundation came from Calhoun County. The brick came from a tenant house on Fudge Town Road that was torn down for the lumber. For framing timber and lumber, he cut trees off his property and hewed out the beams.

“John is a unique individual in that he makes much of what he uses,” said Mark Tew, professor of electrical engineering at Ole Miss and a friend of John’s for almost thirty years. “He built his house and the shop. He made his own tools. He harvests the lumber that he uses in crafting his chairs himself and then splits out the elements of the chairs by hand. If he can make it himself, he often does.”

John built his first antique reproduction Windsor chairs in the first two months of 1996 from pictures he found in a book. The first one, a continuous arm chair, took the whole month of January to build, and he gave it to a friend. In February, he built two more Windsors. He sold one and kept one.

The third Sunday in February, 1996, his shop burned to the ground along with all of his tools and the third chair.

### **The Hay Bale Shop**

A year later, John built another shop on the same site using hay bales and plaster. Because the original shop burned, he was interested in building materials that would be more flame resistant. Once it is plastered, hay bale construction is virtually fire-proof.

Beginning on a concrete base, bales of hay were stacked like bricks with concrete mortar. When the concrete dried, the hay bales were plastered with a mix of concrete and white sand. The plaster dried to a light color and appealing texture.

“I traded a chair with one of my friends Kevin Robinson for enough timber to build the roof and I had an old light pole that I put in the center,” John said. “I made the beams out of pine I cut and hauled myself.”

John’s shop is one of the first hay bale structures in North Mississippi. Since then there have been a couple of more including Mark Tew and Linda Bolton’s house and a barn at the Dancing Goats Farm. Tew was one of the friends who helped build the hay bale shop.

“We were looking at different methods of alternative construction,” Tew said. “There was some concern that the hay bales, which contain nutrients since they are used to feed animals, would be prone to decay and would attract insects. But they held up well.”

His success was one reason Tew and Bolton decided on straw bale construction for their own house, choosing straw bales because straw has no nutrients. Even termites won’t eat it.

### **A back injury leads to new ways of working**

In September 1997, John injured his back which made it difficult for him to work in the same way he had before.

“This injury led me to new ways of doing things and other projects that were not so hard for me to do with an aching back,” said John.



He worked on smaller projects such as musical instruments including banjos, a violin, a couple of dulcimers, and a baroque guitar.

The baroque guitar, which was designed and made for Warren Steel, a musicologist at the University of Mississippi, was a historically correct reproduction of guitars that were popular in Europe about 300 years ago. It was made from cherry and beau d’arc and it has 10 strings in pairs of courses like a 12-string guitar today.

John started making his signature chairs with vine twisted saplings for legs, stretchers, and other parts in 1998. The rustic furniture using the natural designs did not require splitting out small pieces from trees and turning them with the lathe or finishing them with the draw knife so they were less stressful for his back.

“I was walking in the woods on my granddaddy’s farm,” he explained. “I had been thinking about making rustic furniture and I saw this stick that the beavers had gnawed the bark off of and it was twisted. I got to thinking that that would make a good chair part. And I got to looking in the woods, and I got to seeing these different shapes with different twists and tapers to them. I thought this would make good legs and arm posts. I got to having fun making chairs like that.”



Tew has two of John’s chairs, a Windsor antique reproduction chair that John made in 1997 and a twisted sapling settee Tew got for a Christmas present for his wife.

“The wonderful thing about these chairs is that they start with John walking in the woods,” Tew said. “He takes the wood and splits out the spindles for the back. He turns the legs

on his lathe. It is entirely hand made and none of it commercially produced. For the twisted wood settee, some of the twisted wood came off our land.”

In October 2001, John was accepted into the Craftsman’s Guild of Mississippi. In December of that year, he had his first showing in the Chimneyville Arts & Crafts show in Jackson, Mississippi. In the Gum Tree Festival in Tupelo, Mississippi, in April 2002, John took second place for a fan back arm chair using twisted wood.

In the future John plans to further develop his designs into other types of furniture, including mirror frames, picture frames, beds, drop leaf tables, all incorporating these twisted saplings with used lumber and native walnut, cherry, oak, birch, beau d’arc, and other Mississippi hardwoods obtained locally.

“A lot of the real pretty twisted saplings I find are already dead,” John said. “I guess they got choked by the honey suckle and vines that twisted them. I don’t buy wood that comes from forests that have been clear cut.”

Even the seats for the chairs that Davis makes are hand hewn. The seat is the central piece which connects the legs, armposts, spindles and back posts. The holes in the seat are drilled to a conical taper for the legs and the joints are wedged. Some of the other joints are pegged with hardwood pegs. Curved parts are steam bent using home made tools.

Davis said, “I use most of the same techniques that were used by the Windsor chair makers of the late 1700s, only I use a few electric tools. Many of those chairs are still around today.”

“As far as I know, no one on earth has made furniture like mine. I make my pieces directly from the tree. It just seems more natural.”



“My mother told me one time to  
let John be John,” Dixie Davis said,  
“which was probably good advice since  
that was all that I could do.”

