

# Hopewell Express

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Eric and Stanley Saperstein, the Artisans of the Valley, hold up woodcuts demonstrating different stages in the relief carving process. The boards were used for a TV show. (Photo by Suzette J. Lucas.)

## Artisans carve a place in the modern world

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In the year 2000, Eric Saperstein looked at his career in software release management, and decided it was time to switch to an industry that would be more in demand in the future. So he joined his father Stanley's wood carving and furniture making business.

"I figured it would be a part-time operation and it ended up

being two full-time jobs," he said.

Stanley founded Artisans of the Valley in 1972 after learning the wood carving trade from master wood carver C.M. Grinnell. He had met Grinnell years before, in a chance encounter at an arts fair. Stanley was already a whittler at the time, and he said Grinnell recognized Stanley's rough, untrained talent.

Grinnell had been hoping to pass his trade down to his own

son, but he was an engineer and not interested in it. But Saperstein was, and became an enthusiastic pupil.

For three years, Grinnell taught him woodcarving, and furniture building for another four.

After that, the elder Saperstein was finally ready to go into business on his own.

He started off with simple projects like bible boxes, and took on  
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Stanley Saperstein works on restoring a 19th-century Hotchkiss gun. (Staff photo by Diccon Hyatt.)

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more and more complex work as his skills grew. By 1977, Grinnell recognized Stanley as a journeyman craftsman, and officially incorporated him into a line of masters and apprentices that went all the way back to when the first Grinnells arrived in North America in 1639. Saperstein became a "master craftsman" in 1979 when he moved to Pennington and a larger wood shop than his previous shop in Ewing.

The home at 103 Corrine Drive, which Stanley built himself, is filled with hand-carved furniture and artifacts. Civil War muskets hang on the wall. (The Civil War is a passion of Stanley's — he is fond of wearing a Union sharpshooter's hat, and wrote a historical novel about Civil War sharpshooters.)

Stanley began training Eric at a young age. He taught Eric the same way Larry taught him — with a no-nonsense approach.

"He was a really tough taskmaster," Stanley said. "He told me my stuff sucked in his terms ... he made me carve things until I could match what he did and he would accept nothing less and I was grateful for that. When he told me something was good, he'd say, 'that's right.' and when he said that, I knew I had accomplished something."

Stanley had another career as a state worker and national guardsman, but had kept up the wood carving trade the whole time.

Now that Eric, 36, is a master craftsman, he has taken the driver's seat and turned the business in a new direction, using his technology skills to market the pair's artisan skills to a worldwide audience.

Just about anything that can be made from wood, the Sapersteins will carve it. Together they make custom-designed furniture and period replica pieces. Eric specializes in huge custom-made tables. He hand-carves them for clients, then delivers them himself because he doesn't trust shipping companies. They are so elaborate and time consuming that in their current shop, he can only make two of them a year. Stanley restores canes and walking sticks, and makes new ones. He's done everything from a caduceus for a doctor, to a snake with real ruby eyes for a gamer.

Stanley, 63, likes to imagine what will happen to his work 50 years from now, when he is gone.

"In 50 years, it will be on the Antiques Roadshow. 'Oh, this was a walking stick made by a prolific walking stick maker in the late 20th century. It's a Saperstein staff. It's worth ten thousand dollars!'"

They also do restoration work, and are currently at work restoring a Hotchkiss gun that was used in a West Virginia miners' riot, and a gigantic wood and leather forge bellows.

For more information about Artisans of the Valley, visit [artisansofthevalley.com](http://artisansofthevalley.com) or call (609) 637-0450. They are also on Facebook.