

rees possess a quality of permanence both while they live and after they succumb to death. Their roots grasp the ground with such conviction that moving them requires an act of nature or mechanical means. Their density rivals stone as they mature and bear witness to several centuries of ecological and societal change, recording the effects of these events within the layers of their flesh. At the conclusion of their mortal lives, they live again as raw material for the spaces we dwell in and the heirlooms we treasure. Capers Cauthen, owner and founder of Landrum Tables, appreciates the virtues expressed by these arboreal wonders, and he leverages their qualities to the fullest measure while building fine furniture from—and giving new life to—their wood.

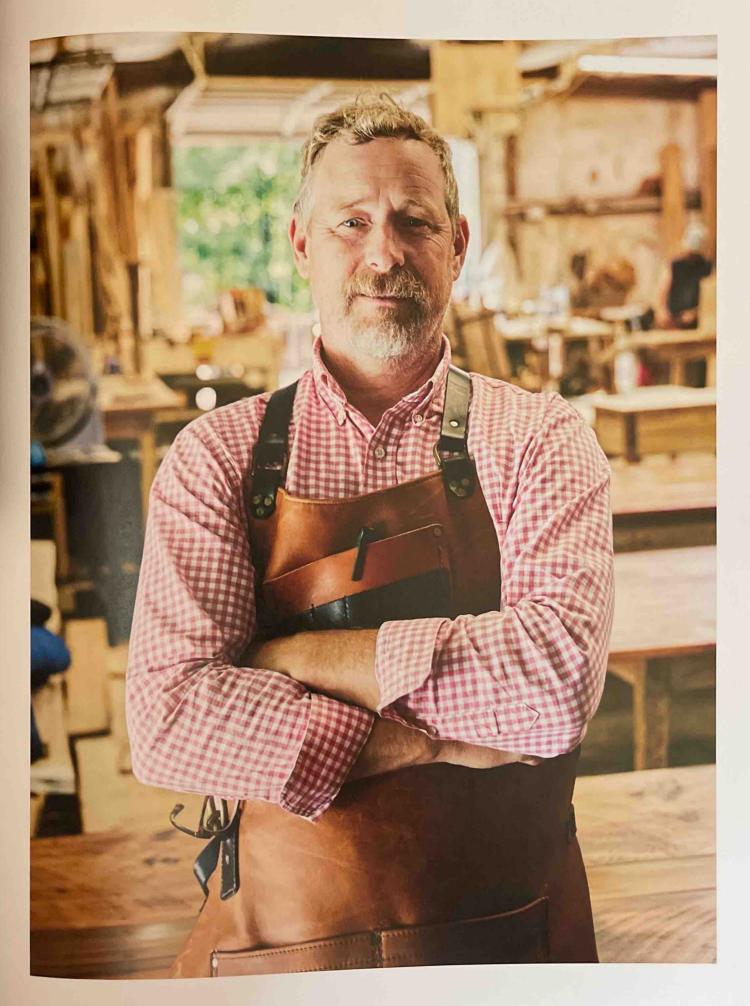
An oldies station blared "Johnny B. Goode" as background noise behind the walls of Landrum Tables, offering a Chuck Berry interlude to the cacophony of whirring sanders and shrieking power saws. A powerful aroma of varnish tinged with sawdust wafted from the bay doors, and upon walking through a side entrance, I saw a double row of workstations with artisans focused on cutting, sanding, fitting, and finishing home furnishings. Cauthen worked discreetly at one of these stations on a chest of drawers. But despite his best efforts at blending in, the polish of his persona—that of a man possessed with both a love of physical

labor and an appreciation for refinement—shined through the layers of lacquer and sawdust covering his leather apron. He introduced himself as I approached, and together we walked over to the station of one of his protégés for a quality-control check on a dining room table. He took up a circular sander then ran it across the table's top despite a coat of finish having been applied. Above the rhythmic vibrations of the sander, Cauthen explained how imperfections in the finish showed up as tiny white dots and proceeded to point some of them out, which before then had been indiscernible to my eye. "Most places are using spray booths these days, but we're not into that here. The finish on all our pieces is applied by hand, and, as a consequence, we have several quality-control checks before it leaves our shop. And I personally apply the final coat." Once Cauthen roughed up the first coat, he spoke with his team a moment before motioning us over for a tour.

He led us to a shed behind the warehouse where stacks of reclaimed wood were collated according to their size and origin—and it is the origin of the wood used in pieces by

# FINISHING AN UNFINISHED HISTORY

Craftsmen at Landrum Tables bring new lustere to reassmbled artifacts of Charleston's great history.





# It is the origin of the wood used in pieces by Landrum Tables that lies at the heart of everything they produce.

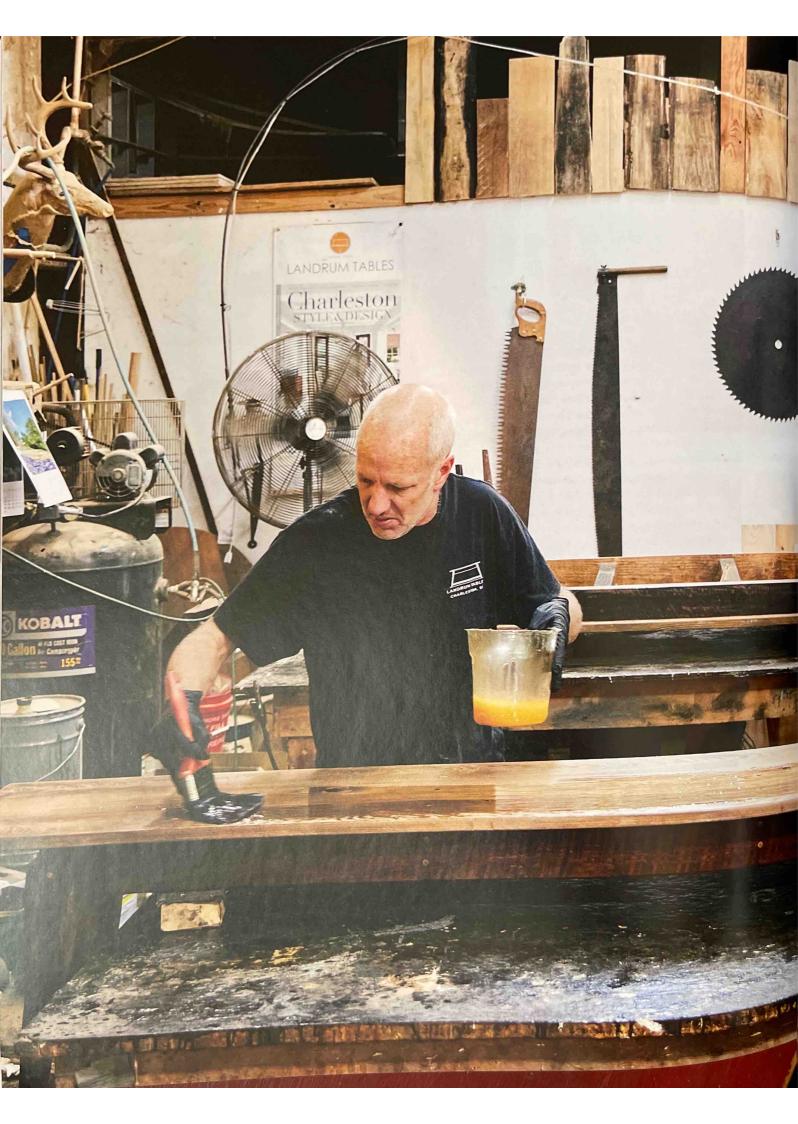
Landrum Tables that lies at the heart of everything they produce. "One of the most common questions I get from clients is whether the wood is from Charleston, South Carolina, or not. And the answer is absolutely. Without exception," Cauthen said emphatically before adding, "I don't have the time or resources to retrieve wood from other places. Everyone has sentimental wood, and if they were to send it to me, I could consider using it. But we have plenty of beautiful material to work with around here." Cauthen sources discarded wood and materials from Charleston's extensive number of home and commercial renovation sites that have historical significance, and he often finds lumber with as much or more soundness than anything available from a modern mill. Each plank in the piles he showed us told the story of Charleston and its people through blemishes that were burned or bored into its grain. After pulling nails and other bits of metal from them, they become the primary wood in the furniture made by Cauthen and his artisans. The nailsmany of them forged by hand centuries ago-and other metal refuse removed from the wood often become accents such as drawer pulls or handles. "Nothing is arbitrarily put into the trash around here. We're throwing away our history when we do that." For the secondary wood, Cauthen relies on lumber from naturally felled trees found within the greater Charleston area. This gives custom-furniture clients specific and unique details about both the primary and secondary wood used in their pieces, and they can customize how much or how little of the wood's character they desire in the finish work. Regarding the limits of what Landrum Tables can produce, Cauthen leaves that up to the client and their imagination. "We can build it so long as it's made of wood. The largest piece we've ever made was a 20-foot by 5-foot conference table for a boardroom, and our smallest pieces have probably been custom cutting boards. And if it's something we've never made before, we name the piece after the client who first thought of it."

## UNCONVENTIONAL TO TRADITIONAL

Sourcing unique materials leads to traditional pieces with an uncommon aesthetic.









We proceeded to the showroom where gun racks, benches, and fly-rod holders waited for pickup alongside larger commercial pieces. Several of Charleston's most popular restaurants and venues feature pieces by Landrum Tables, allowing Cauthen and his artisans to push the envelope when coming up with unique designs to suit their needs. Of all the furnishings made by Landrum Tables, their signature console table—the piece upon which the business was built—offers a distinguished profile to a wide variety of decorative motifs given its elegance, simplicity, and timelessness. "Of everything we've made here, the console table is still my favorite. They're still allowing me to tell the story of Charleston in a tangible way, and building them never gets old."

Cauthen showed us to his office, and despite his aversion to idleness, took a seat at his desk to discuss the genesis of Landrum Tables. When asked about how he came to learn the trade of woodworking, he replied, "Just about every young man with able hands learned how to work with wood in the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo." But long before the devastating storm altered Charleston's cityscape, Cauthen was rooted in its culture and history through his father, Henry F. Cauthen, Jr., who dealt in antiques and served as executive director of the Preservation Society of Charleston for over 30 years. "My father was always drawing my attention to the beauty of Charleston and its architectural designs. We have almost three centuries of style present in one city, which is rare on this continent. He also taught me how the furnishings in these places matched the buildings. As the nation and the city grew wealthier, both the buildings and their furnishings grew more ornate. A large part of our nation's story is told in the form of these buildings."

Cauthen found solid footing in the flooring business for almost a decade while running an antique booth as a side hustle, but the Great Recession forced him to sell his flooring business and rely on dealing in antiques. Though the economy had slowed to a crawl, a limited number of renovation projects at historic homes and buildings were still being completed, and Cauthen watched as the new owners of these places threw away planks of wood without any appreciation for its value. "I couldn't believe people were throwing out this wood to rot in some landfill. It made me sick to see it." He designed and built his first table by drawing inspiration from his extensive knowledge of antique furnishings and the significance of the wood he was using. Capers placed the table in his booth priced at a point worth his labor, and it disappeared within a week. He built two more for his booth and they too vanished. Then he received a phone call from one of Charleston's premier interior designers. "She asked me, 'Where are

### OILS AND IMAGES

The studio bears the bones of Charleston's history as well as the artistic aspirations of the craftsmen.



you getting these tables from? I bought the last three and can't find them anywhere else.' I told her that I made them, and she said, 'I need 16 more for a hunting lodge,' and that was my first order." Word spread in the following months and years, and as the economy recovered, Cauthen grew along with it and created Landrum Tables, using his middle name as the moniker for his new business venture.

Landrum Tables now has two showrooms-in Charleston and Greenville, South Carolina—featuring various samples of their pieces and employing several artisans and apprentices to keep up with demand. True to his roots, Cauthen invests time in the community by serving on the Program Advisory Board of the College for Building Arts in Charleston, as well as participating in Lowcountry Local First, the Exchange Club of Charleston, and several other civic organizations. "I've had a lot of local support to build this business, and I love giving back to this place that's given me so much." Regarding the apprenticeship program, Cauthen expects more from them than being a "go-for" or grunt; he aims to form a well-rounded artisan able to appreciate every facet of the craft. "There's no set time frame of apprenticeship. Once you've shown me that you're no longer an apprentice, the training ends and so does the hourly wage. You're no longer punching my time clock, and I'm not holding your hand. The arrangement becomes: I owe you money for completing that piece of furniture. You've got to

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let them become their own maker, because we're not a furniture factory cranking out product. We make things as perfect as we can all by hand with antique wood. And it's the craft—that perfect imperfection—that we're offering our clients along with a piece of Charleston's history."

Cauthen stood up and showed us their cutting boards made from sycamore and pecan trees toppled by natural causes, then took us to a small storage space filled with antiques he plans to sell as time permits. Oil paintings of piney savannas, mountain brooks in Appalachia, and duck blinds in Arkansas adorned the walls of this space. When asked who painted them, Cauthen replied that he took up painting the sporting-life landscapes he loves as a hobby—as if the artistry of his furniture didn't satiate his need for creativity. He also has an ear for music and plays gigs at local venues, evidenced by a collection of instruments gathered in the corner of his storage space. "I had a scholarship to the College of Charleston as a classical guitar major and didn't finish my final semester because I launched a commercial fishing business. The laws changed in the '90s and shut us down, but those are still some of my fondest memories. I just love being out in the world. I just can't sit still."

On that note, we returned to his workstation, back to the chest of drawers and working with a scraper he used to expose fresh grain beneath the wood's tarnished surface. Elvis Presley belted out "Return to Sender" under the whir of sanders and saws. And Cauthen's work at Landrum Tables—a labor of love that conserves natural resources and preserves history—continued uninterrupted by our intrusion.

### NAILED IT!

Removing some of the history of the wood is essential to preparing it for its next life, though parts of that history remain with the wood forever.

