



NO BUS STOPPING ANY TIME

146
JOHN GRASS
WOOD TURNING CO.
MFRS. OF
WOOD POLES
ROLLERS HANDLES
MALLETS MAULS
LIGNUM VITAE BLOCKS

CLOSED

We Will Be Closed
The Following Days
Thurs - April 13
Fri - April 14
Sat - April 15
Sun - April 16
Wed - April 19
Thurs - April 20

TRAP OLDE CITY SHACK

216 246 9999
216 226 5304



Workshop *of the* World

The John Grass Wood Turning Company Story

Walter P. Palmer, Jr.

THE JOHN GRASS WOOD TURNING COMPANY is one of the oldest commercial hand-wood turning shops in America. The family company was opened in 1863 and was operated by members of the Grass family until 1911, when it was sold to the grandfather of the current owner, Lou Bower III. Until recently, Bower operated the present shop in much the same way as it had been run for the past 93 years – with electric motors that belt drive a series of line shafts that engage the machines and individual lathes along the long lathe bed.

Today, the John Grass Wood Turning Company is a silent shell of what it once was – an efficiently run wood turning operation located on North 2nd Street in the Old City District of downtown Philadelphia. The building is run down, and is in desperate need of repair. Its doors are closed...its machines are silent. There are no wood turners coming to work each day – production has come to a halt. This, however, is not the end of the story.

To fully appreciate what business life was like in Philadelphia in the 1860's, we need to step back for a moment. During the nineteenth century, Philadelphia had earned the

title "Workshop of the World." On North 2nd Street alone, there were many individual shops and small factories making all the needs of the day. A partial list includes a brass clock factory, machine shop, spice mill, tin factory, shoe factory, malt house, confectionary factory, shovel factory, tin & sheet iron factory, linseed oil factory, tobacco factory, and a hat factory.

A number of immigrants were attracted to the vicinity of North 2nd Street by the possibility of employment and better life styles. With little or no capital to purchase land, these immigrants became tenants in the housing near their workplaces. As a German immigrant, John Grass came to the United States in 1853 at the age of 15. He began his apprenticeship as a wood turner, and established his wood turning business in the North 2nd Street neighborhood in 1863. He had just married the year before. The country was embroiled in a horrible civil war with Abraham Lincoln as President. Little did young John Grass know that his small wood turning company in Old City Philadelphia would survive for over 140 years in the same vicinity.

The company began turning banner poles, rolling pins, night sticks, balusters, crash

sticks, and a whole host of domestic objects. As the company grew, they took on more and more custom work. It wasn't long before the reputation of this firm spread far

The John Grass Wood Turning Co. is well on its way to receiving a second life. When complete it will provide a wonderful opportunity for thousands of individuals to view and appreciate what life was like in Philadelphia during this historic period.

and wide. By 1911, the company was in high gear and the John Grass Wood Turning Company became a corporate entity with the Bower family becoming part owners. In



Source - Wood Turning Center Archives

1916, the company moved to the present location on North 2nd Street. The current owner is the third generation wood turner, Louis Bower III, with his wife Marcia Bower

The building today contains the same lathes, saws, planers, benches, and tools that were in use as early as 1870. Perhaps the most striking thing about the shop is the overhead line shaft system and the leather belts that drive every machine. Originally powered by a steam engine in the basement, this antique system is still in use, powered now by a large electric motor. The line shafts and belt drives personalize this unique operation as much as the artifacts of wood turnings completed for many customers over the years. Many of the area's leading architects took their commissions for custom turnings to the John Grass shop. Even replacement balusters for Independence Hall and Christ Church were turned by Lou Bower in the John Grass shop.

In 1989, Albert LeCoff, Executive Director of the Wood Turning Center in Philadelphia,



Source - Wood Turning Center Archives

Top: Heavy-duty cast iron woodworking machines that were used as early as 1870 are still in place today.

Bottom: The overhead line shaft system and leather belts still can provide the power to drive every machine at the John Grass shop.

obtained a grant to get the historic significance of the John Grass shop documented. A volunteer team of historical architects, led by John Bowie of Bowie Associates, documented every machine and every phase of the shop's operations on measured drawings, to Historic American engineering Record (HAER) standards. When Lou Bower decided to cease operations in 2005, the future of this unique company came into question. Would the wrecking ball demolish this piece of history with all of its past accomplishments being lost forever, or could it somehow be saved and preserved as a historic treasure to share with the public?

The answer came from a likely source – The Wood Turning Center, currently located at 5th and Vine Streets in Philadelphia. A nonprofit, the Center promotes an understanding and appreciation of wood art, especially wood turning, and conducts many activities to feature and recognize contemporary wood artists. The Center also provides education opportunities and a place for woodworkers and collectors of wood art

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to exchange interests and knowledge on an international scale. Included are gallery spaces to display wood art, a research library that contains over 25,000 documents, a permanent collection of over 1000 objects, and a small museum shop to feature additional art work.

Albert LeCoff, himself a wood turner, realized early on that saving the John Grass Wood Turning Company was a perfect opportunity for his organization to undertake, and a way to combine the presentation of history and contemporary art made from wood. LeCoff's vision is for the WTC to acquire and restore the John Grass building and its tools and equipment to their original condition; and reopen the facility so that

visitors and students alike can view firsthand an authentic working commercial wood shop out of Philadelphia's past. The Center would relocate its current programs to the John Grass building at 146 N. 2nd Street, and manage the historic shop. Such a facility would preserve and present in an authentic setting both the history and the future of contemporary wood turned art. The restored John Grass building and the new home of the Wood Turning Center would be a very special addition to Philadelphia's Old City District, the home of historic sites and contemporary galleries.



Source - Wood Turning Center Archives

of the belts powering the machines, smell the wood shavings, and touch the actual tools and products that were produced.

Imagine this – John Grass was born in 1838 in Bavaria. He came to the United States and built a successful commercial wood turning business. Today, 170 years later, the John Grass Wood Turning Company can be brought back to life. This effort requires lots of assistance and vision – but it can be done.

Funding for the project will come from a variety of sources: government and corporate grants, and contributions from private

Left: Lou Bower III at the bench turning one of the many specialty pieces that were produced by the John Grass Wood Turning Company.

Below: The original office where John Grass handled orders and billings for his shop still exists in the front of the building.



Source - Wood Turning Center Archives

The WTC Board of Directors has voted to move ahead with this preservation initiative, and has formed an energetic Task Force, chaired by Alan Keiser, a prominent Center City attorney. The John Grass Wood Turning Company is well on its way to receiving a second life in combination with the Wood Turning Center. John Grass is not a virtual experience – it's the real thing. The Task Force has hired the architectural firm of MGA Partners to develop a master plan for the development. When complete, the site will provide a wonderful opportunity for thousands of individuals to view and appreciate what life was like in Philadelphia during the "Workshop of the World" era. Visitors will see the shop, hear the flapping

individuals. Already several grants have been secured and several grants are in the development phase. The Wood Turning Center is especially grateful for the very generous support of \$50,000 that has been received from the Metropolitan Regional Council of Carpenters in Philadelphia. A major fund-raising event is being planned for June to support this vision. For further details, contact Albert LeCoff at 215-923-8000 or albert@woodturningcenter.org. ■

Walter P. Palmer, Jr. is the Senior Labor Advisor of the General Building Contractors Association. Palmer also serves on the John Grass Task Force of the Wood Turning Center.