



## John Hindman: Red River Restorations and Fine Woodworking

**W**oodworker John Hindman sowed the seeds for his business, Red River Restorations and Fine Woodworking 10 years ago. He walked around his Hyde Park neighborhood stuffing handmade fliers into residents' mailboxes advertising that he could fix or make wooden screens for their historic homes. A neighbor hired him that day, and his projects grew from there.

Hindman founded Red River Restorations and Fine Woodworking ([www.redriverrestorations.com](http://www.redriverrestorations.com)) in 2003. The company's headquarters, a 1935 bungalow and garage apartment on Red River Street that is a restoration work-in-progress, also serves as home for him and his son, Jack.

He and his crew of four have not only helped restore many historic windows in private homes and commercial buildings around Austin, they've tackled several high-profile projects including the Comal County Courthouse in New Braunfels, Kyle's historic train depot, Pemberton Castle, Laguna Gloria and the French Legation Museum.

Hindman said he loves teaching workshops about the restoration of wooden windows. Some of you may have attended his last workshop for Preservation Austin this past February. His next one, also hosted by Preservation

Austin, will be held on July 27th. Look for it on Preservation Austin's event page of their website, [www.preservationaustin.org/events](http://www.preservationaustin.org/events).

### When did you first get involved in woodworking, and how were you drawn to this field?

Out of college I tried different careers. I worked with troubled kids for five years in child protective services and juvenile justice in Iowa, Maryland and Texas. Then I worked in technology for eight years. Neither career was the right fit. I enjoyed and learned a lot from those experiences – business, sales, management and people skills – life skills. But I was always working on things on the side – making rocking chairs, restoring houses, framing houses, pouring foundations, figuring out how to make things or figuring out how they used to be made by craftsmen. I was really passionate about my side projects and would happily spend all my spare time on them. My day job got to be unbearable. I knew what I wanted to do, so I quit my job and never looked back. I had restored two 1930s buildings – a bungalow and garage apartment – and in the process had to figure out how to handle certain common problems: what to do about the original doors, old wood windows, wood screens, layers of lead paint and many other issues. I love quality and that's what they did in the

1930s and earlier. They made houses and their parts (even if neglected) to last 100 years or more. There was no way I was going to replace my windows, doors or siding. With the windows, I had to figure out either how to restore them or make them – or a combination. And I wanted them to work well and be reasonably efficient, which all led to woodworking.

A lot of my skills and knowledge have come from connecting with people, sharing ideas and things learned, watching YouTube or just figuring it out. And fortunately some very, very talented people have come to work with me who have tremendous woodworking and engineering skills.

### What do you enjoy most about your work?

I love history and I love working with people who are passionate. These old houses and buildings have a lot of history and stories, and almost every day I get to hear them – the energy and excitement is contagious. Plus, I love working with my hands and figuring things out and knowing that what I am working on will last and preserve something to pass on to the next generation.

One of my favorite recent projects was in Wimberley – the “Zach House” also called the “Wimberley-Hughes House.” It was built in 1870, I believe, by Zach Wimberley for his new wife. They were living with his parents and she demanded he build her a house (as he had promised) or she was leaving – and he did. He built her a small, one-room house. We were privileged to restore all of the original windows and make them functional. It's

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wonderful to know the story and history behind the project if possible. It gives richness to the work.

### What are you and your crew working on now?

We don't take every job that comes our way, just the ones that seem to be the right fit for what we do. This summer, among multiple residential jobs, we're doing some work at Camp Mabry on the old Works Progress Administration buildings' windows built in the 1930s-'40s.

### Three years ago you bought your great-grandfather's farm house in Hornick, Iowa, and you've been spending some of your free time there restoring it. Why take on such a long-distance project?

My great-grandfather moved there with his wife in 1880, bought 160 acres to farm, built a one-room house, had 11 kids and helped settle the area. He was also justice of the peace, served on the school board, was in the Masons, etc. In 1912-13 he built the farm house with his sons and his extended family.

I think his life and accomplishments are an amazing story worth passing on, and the house is part of that story. It's a tangible part of my personal history and American history, an heirloom. It deserves to be saved and restored to its original state. When you really consider what the pioneers did and accomplished, it is an awesome story. I want my children to know this story and to teach them what hard-working, determined people are capable of.

### What can homeowners do to help preserve and extend the life of their wooden windows, and why shouldn't they just replace them with



Red River Restorations crew: M. Woollven, John Hindman, Jacob Barnes, Cullen Inmon and Chase Bekarian

### modern ones?

What the windows usually need is maintenance and service (ropes or sash cord, paint, weather stripping, interior storm windows, hardware – love!) and they will work well, and just sparkle in the sunlight. The most important thing you can do is keep them painted and clean. If you have an old home with wood windows, but aren't ready to tackle restoration, at a minimum stabilize them so that when you are ready to work on them in two years or 35 years you will have something to work with. If there is rot in some of the sills or in part of the sash, that can be treated so it doesn't get any worse.

I've heard people say if you rip out the old windows and put in new ones, the house loses part of its soul. The windows are usually a major feature on any building and if you put in vinyl, or metal modern windows with double-pane glass and metal solar screens the building completely changes in its appearance inside and out. The original windows usually have beautiful old wavy glass and the sashes, frames and trim are made

with a very high quality wood that is rare today.

### Why are historic preservation and restoration important to you?

You can make wood windows and doors just like they did 100 years ago. It takes time, but there's a good feeling, a pride, in making something you know will last a long time and quality is at the heart of it. What I see in most of society and business today is profit, not pride, not quality. Those seem to be secondary in many cases. And I believe people miss those qualities that were so fundamental 100 years ago.

I think it's important not to romanticize the past. They had challenges and problems we can't even imagine today. We now have advanced medicine, technology and wealth. But there are important cultural and character traits that we are losing or have lost as our society evolves. Maybe in some way, old buildings with all their character and history allow us to connect with the past and those aspects we value while also providing some grounding in the world of massive change we now live in. ★