

A Greenwood Revolution Legacy: Jennie Alexander, 1930-2018

by Peter Follansbee



Figure 1. John Alexander (later known as Jennie Alexander) in Baltimore in 1978 at the shaving horse.

I don't know what year I got married. It's OK, neither does my wife. We both have to do some computations mixed in with life events: "Let's see, the kids were born in 2005..." But one thing I know for certain: I built my first actual piece of furniture in late 1978. That's the year that *Make a Chair from a Tree* by John Alexander was first published by Taunton Press.

Alexander (who for her last ten years identified as Jennie Alexander, and whom I called JA) died in July of this year at age 87. We first met in 1980 at Drew and Louise Langsner's Country Workshops, the school for green woodworking in western North Carolina. That was Alexander's second class there, the school was pretty new, and things were rustic at best. Over the course of the 1980s I was a regular at the Langsner's, and became very close to Alexander. It is not an overstatement in any way to say that my entire career stems from work I did with JA.

Alexander's trajectory was punctuated by a great many friendships. The chair book, known forever as MACFAT, is the culmination of note-keeping as JA fumbled her way around the process of learning how to make ladderback chairs. As she then noted, "there weren't many stick chairmakers in my neighborhood." But Alexander's background in several fields – engineering and the law, specifically – helped unravel the chairmaking process until it became understandable.

Alexander consumed anything in print on chairmaking, woodworking tools, and equipment and furniture history, all while making chair after chair. As she went, she filled notebook after notebook while learning what worked and what didn't. Eventually the notebooks took form as MACFAT, but it didn't stop there by any means. Starting in 1979, JA taught the chairmaking as a week-long workshop. That's when Alexander's learning took



Figure 2. Alexander's signature chair.

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Figure 3. A detail of the lower slat and the pegs that hold it in place.

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off. The chairs and the processes got better and better through teaching.

Alexander's livelihood was the law; chairmaking was an avocation. "I'm an informed amateur," was her proud declaration. For someone who made chairs for more than forty years, there weren't that many of them, but there were scads of notebooks, letters, test joints, and theories. All throughout her long career, JA was testing ideas, thinking about how this or that joint would work, and why, which tool to use, and is there an easier/cheaper substitute?

Through her friendship with Charles Hummel in the Early American Industries Association, JA got an education in museum studies, primarily at Winterthur Museum. Working alongside Hummel, Benno Forman, Robert Trent, and Robert St. George, JA studied period furniture in great detail, especially the post-and-rung chairs and joined oak furniture.

As I look back now on JA's work, it really was about two versions of the mortise and tenon. The main work was on the chair version, a mortise bored with modern bits in a brace, and a tenon produced at first by turning, shortly after by shaving. A major achievement was her collaboration with Bruce Hoadley to better understand the wet/dry round mortise and tenon. Together they ar-

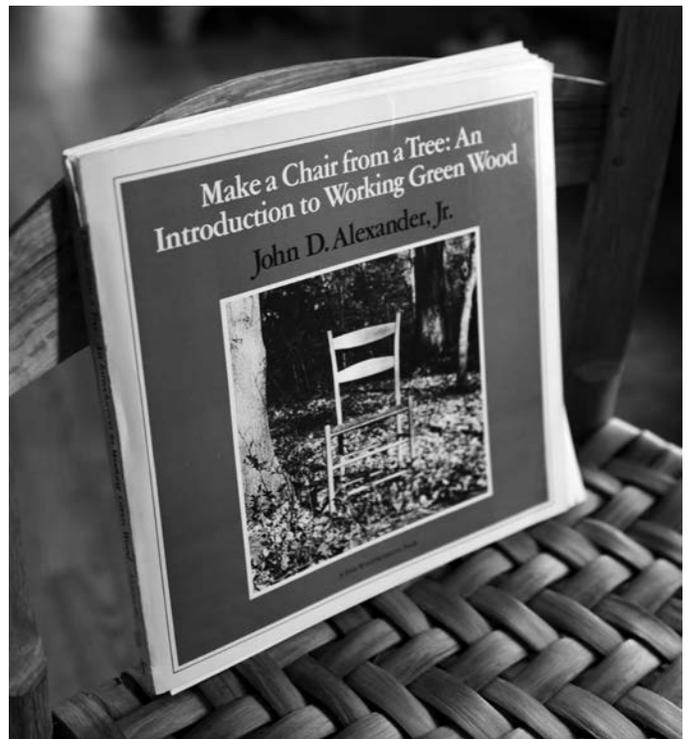


Figure 4. A first edition of Make a Chair from a Tree, published in 1978 by the Taunton Press.

PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER SCHWARZ



Figure 5. Alexander in the shop in around 2007, pounding rungs in place on a chair.
 PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

rived at ideal moisture contents for the two components and Alexander studied this in detail for the next 40 years.

The other version is the rectilinear mortise and tenon used in joined furniture. This drawbored joint is where Alexander got me involved, and together we delved into that subject for twenty years. I made a career out of it, and in 2012 we published our book on the introduction to joinery, *Make a Joint Stool from a Tree* (Lost Art Press).

But chairmaking kept pulling JA back. In her last years, her health precluded any shop work, but she kept tinkering with the ideas, working in that time on a revised edition of MACFAT. She kept in constant contact with all her scattered chairmaking and tool-enthusiast friends right up until the end. Always scheming to streamline the process, re-design some minute part of the chair, or question for the millionth time how the wet/dry joint holds, chairmaking truly kept her alive for the last couple of years.

Alexander used to say that if she didn't write the chair book, someone else would have. "It was in the wind..." was the expression. Nonsense, I say. That book could only have been JA, and she put it in the wind, where it carried very well. To this day.

Author

Peter Follansbee is a woodworker and furniture scholar who specializes in 17th-century style work, a long-time friend and collaborator of Alexander's, and co-author with her of *Make a Joint Stool from a Tree* (Lost Art Press). He is also helping Larry Barrett and Christopher Schwarz complete the third edition of MACFAT, due out in 2019 (Lost Art Press).



Figure 6. Alexander in back of her Baltimore home, with several of her chairs, in 2014.

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