

# A Family Tradition Crafted in Wilson

Today, three generations of the Stephenson family run a company that creates architectural details for fine homes and institutions.

The strong scent of wood fills the shop at Stephenson Millwork Company in Wilson, where craftspeople create custom-designed architectural millwork. The aroma links the past with the present for Lee Stephenson, grandson of the company's founder, Russell Stephenson.

"On holidays as a child, I would come to the shop with Granddad," Lee recalls. "I have so many great memories of walking through here back then. All this—the rich smell, the machinery, the windows, the doors—speaks of my granddad's passion for this business."



PHOTOGRAPHS: J. SAVAGE GIBSON



Although the elder Stephenson shared his love of the family company with his grandson, Lee traveled a circuitous route, literally and figuratively, before joining the business in 1994.

## Taking a Detour

Growing up, Lee lived with his family in Raleigh where his father, Russ, chose a career in banking instead of following *his* father's lead in the millwork company. Lee labored a few summers at Stephenson's, but, at the time, he admits, "It was still a mystery to me. I didn't know much about this business." ▶

**above:** (from left) Russ, Lee, and Russell Stephenson (founder of the 56-year-old company), work to maintain the high standards of quality craftsmanship that their customers expect.

**right:** Experienced craftspeople at Stephenson Millwork Company produce a wide range of customized architectural millwork, including windows and doors.

**far right:** The company's custom products enhance the interiors and exteriors of fine homes such as this.



Before graduating from Wake Forest, Lee approached his grandfather about starting a career with the company. "I expected him to jump out of his chair with excitement," Lee says. "Instead, he said 'No, you need to make your own way first.'"

Stunned, Lee left Wilson that day disappointed. "Looking back, I know it was the best advice he could have given me," he concedes.



## STEPHENSON MILLWORK COMPANY'S BEGINNINGS

In 1945, Russell Stephenson left his father's lumber business for another type of woodwork. He built a 3,200-square-foot cinder block building in a cow pasture and started making kitchen cabinets with seven employees. Today, Stephenson Millwork Company operates in 90,000 square feet of manufacturing space. Most of the customized work dresses up residences and North Carolina institutions, such as Exploris in Raleigh, Duke Children's Hospital in Durham, and the UNC Center for Dramatic Art in Chapel Hill.

The young Stephenson worked for a large international corporation in Georgia before moving to Florida where he gained more professional experience. In the back of his mind, Lee says, he always considered how the family company could one day fit into his life.

"I knew that if I was to succeed in this business I'd need as much time as possible to be with and learn from my granddad," Lee says.

This time, the Stephenson patriarch welcomed the wiser, more experienced Lee to the business.

"I had cut my teeth on the good, the bad, and the ugly of the working world," Lee says. "When I came back, I had something to offer, to bring to the table—something in addition to the family name."

### Changing Places

Shortly after Lee joined Stephenson Millwork as a vice president, his grandmother suffered a series of strokes. This led the three generations of Stephensons to devise a plan for the future. Russell became chairman of the board. Russ, Lee's dad, took early retirement at the bank and joined the company as president and CEO; and Lee, age 32, continued as vice president.

"This business is very different from banking," says Russ, who welcomed the change to a more creative environment. "I feel blessed to have started a new career at my age."

### Looking Ahead

Today, Lee and his father strive to continue the company traditions set forth by its founder. Over the years, Russell built a strong relationship with customers as well as with employees. Of the 110 people working at Stephenson, more than a third have been there for more than 20 years. These experienced craftspeople pass on their knowledge of woodworking to younger workers.

"They take a lot of pride in what they do," Lee says. "Having this group of long-term employees is so important to us. The knowledge that they have is not in a manual, and it's

not on the help screen of a computer.

"My favorite quote from my granddad came from his dad," Lee says. "'If you pay attention to quality, quantity will follow.' That's how

we plan to grow." SARA ASKEW JONES

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