



— Photos by Ryan Howard

## A fine fall farmers market

Left: Sharon Johnson of Minnesota Fresh Farms helps a customer during the Oct. 2 Lexington Farmers Market. Right: Customers browsed through many vegetables, fruits and gourds during the farmers market, the last in the city this year.

# Consultant helps preserve homes

by Kristine Goodrich

**NORTHEAST METRO** — A local “history geek” helps owners of old homes complete historically accurate restorations.

Mark Johnston has a small consulting business that provides expertise on making

alterations that are appropriate to the age and style of a home. He most commonly gives advice on paint colors and restoring or replicating millwork, specializing in the styles of the mid-1800s through the early 1900s.

The Vadnais Heights resident also makes furniture

using old-fashioned tools and methods and volunteers demonstrating the craft in a park museum of late 19th century life in Minnesota.

Johnston calls his business Historic Design Consulting LLC and he consults for people across the country via photos and elec-

tronic communications.

He lives in a 1980s split-level himself but always has been captivated by the history of architecture and wood crafts, he said. Johnston earned bachelor's and master's degrees in history, but he has worked in unrelated fields, currently at a millwork wholesale company.

After occasionally helping acquaintances on home restorations over the years, he launched his side business in 2007. His only regret, he said, was not starting it sooner.

The largest portion of his business is helping homeowners select exterior paint colors that were common for the architectural style of their home at the time the home was built. Victorian-style homes, which usually featured multiple colors, are a frequent consult. After seeing photos of the home's features, Johnston said he usually provides a few color scheme options for clients to choose from that are historically accurate and highlight the home's best features.

In addition to paint, Johnston also is an expert in doors, windows, molding and other millwork. Whenever plausible, he rec-



— Submitted photo

Mark Johnston builds a piece of furniture using antique tools and techniques at The Landing history park.

ommends repair rather than replacement. “It often can be saved with just a little work,” he said. “It’s usually less work than you think.”

Replacements usually are as conspicuous as bad plastic surgery, according to Johnston. Steel doors and vinyl windows in old homes especially make him cringe.

Many clients are owners of old homes that were long ago remodeled and who are now hoping to replicate its original features. Johnston provides custom designs based on his best guess as to what it might have looked like.

Like paint color, he usually provides a few suggested options until a design is found that is both historically accurate and appealing to the homeowner. He typically charges a flat fee per assignment, not by the hour.

Old catalogs and paint sample chips are Johnston's primary source of inspiration. Instead of online reproductions, Johnston collects originals.

While he's searching antique stores, Johnston also is on the lookout for antique carpentry tools. Inheriting his grandfather's tools led to hobbies of tool collecting and making furniture. After studying the history of furniture making, he now makes his furniture using only old tools and techniques.

He volunteers often at The Landing heritage park in Shakopee, which features buildings, furnishings, re-enactors and special events taking visitors back to the life of Minnesota's frontier settlers. Johnston is a costume-clad re-enactor in the wood shop demonstrating furniture making to visitors. Many of the pieces he makes are used in the park's other historic buildings.

“I've always been fascinated by how things are made,” he said. “I'm just a history geek through and through.”

— Kristine Goodrich is editor of the Vadnais Heights Press.

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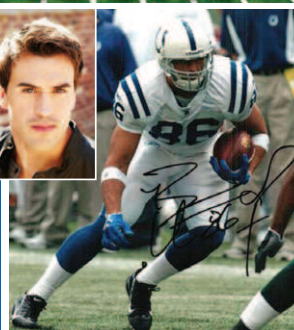
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