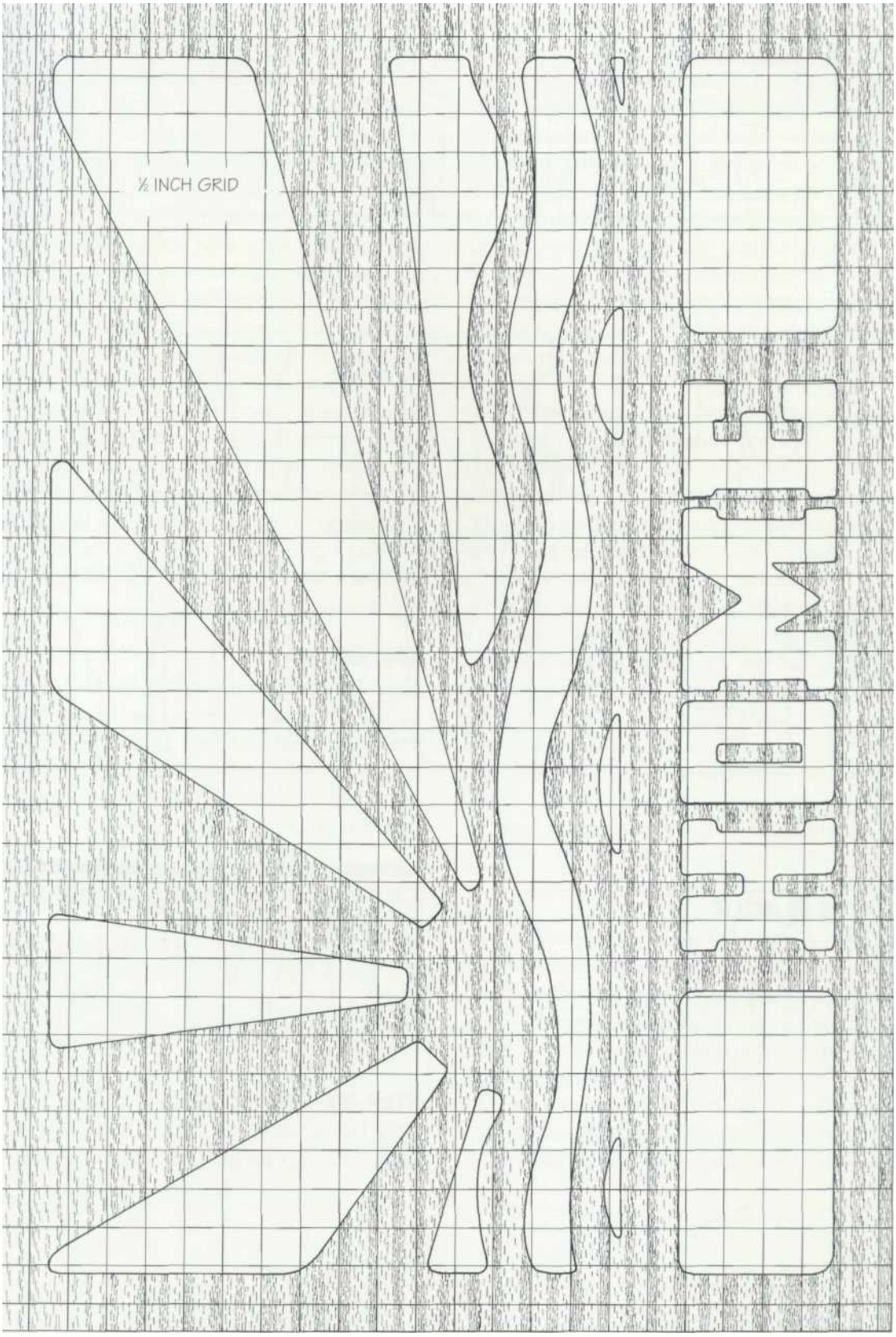
Raised Letter Address Plaque

hen we first got married, one of the joys and pleasures was having our own home. Some of the first things we did when we moved into our infinitesimally minute cottage were to paint the front door bright red and design an address plaque. The red door didn't go down too well, but the plaque was a huge success! The neighbors admired it, the mailman said it added a touch of class—in fact the whole street made comments. So, if you want to make someone a unique gift, one that will beautify their home—be it ever so humble a house, cottage, bungalow, farm, ranch or riverboat—then a fretted address plaque is a great idea.



THOUGHTS ON DESIGN

Of all the projects in the book, the name board is perhaps both the easiest and the most complex. I say this because, while the fretting techniques are truly easy—**just** about as simple and direct as can be—the design is something again. The problem is, of course, how to achieve a good visual effect—meaning a balance between the solid wood and the pierced areas—while at the same time getting the message across and achieving a structure that is sound. For example, it's no good at all having a design that is so complex that it needs to be viewed closeup with a magnifying glass, or a house name that is more an epic saga than one or two words. Also, the shape of the pierced areas needs to be carefully thought through so that the imagery is rounded and easy to cut. You don't want lots of spiky, sharp-angled imagery that is almost impossible to cut.

We are not suggesting that you necessarily use the sunburst image and the word "Home." After all, it would be more than a little bit strange if you, your neighbors and all our readers had identical boards. What we have in mind is that you use our imagery as an inspirational guide. In fact, you can use just about any imagery that takes your fancy—birds, horses, cattle, mountains, trees or whatever. The chief design problem is being able to link the name and the imagery so that the total message gets across. Let's say, for example, that you are giving this board to your grandmother who lives by the sea in a cottage called "Harbor View." You might well have a galleon riding the waves, or seashells, or a crab, or an anchor, or gulls, or a steamer, or whatever sea-salt-and-briny imagery that suits. And your great aunt—the one who lives in the mountains—could have a plaque with peaks, or bears, or **fir** trees. So let your imagination run wild!

MAKING THE PLAQUE

First things first, you need to decide on the wood. I say this because in many ways the choice of the wood is essential to the design. While the wood must withstand the wind and the rain and be relatively easy to work, it must also be fitting for the task. For example, while oak is a good choice for our plaque which is to remain unpainted and mounted on a cottage near the sea, if you live in a pine forest or you plan to have the board painted, then you might as well use an inexpensive wood like pine.

When you have chosen your wood, and once you have achieved what you consider is a good design—with the spelling of the name double-checked—trace off the design, press transfer the imagery through to the wood, and shade in the areas of waste that need to be cut away. This done, take your drill and run pilot holes through the shaded areas. How you fret out the waste areas depends on your particular tool kit. I used an electric scroll saw, but you could just as well use a coping saw, a bow saw or even a large fretsaw.

No matter your choice of tool, the procedure is much the same. Make the pilot holes. Unhitch the saw blade and enter it through the hole. Refit the blade and adjust the tension. Then variously move and maneuver both the workpiece and the saw, so as to run the line of cut to the waste side of the drawn line.

When you have fretted out the design and used the graded sandpapers to rub the rough edges to a smooth finish, cut out the base board and bring it to a good finish. Use waterproof glue to bond the two boards together.

Finally, having first protected the wood with oil, paint or whatever seems appropriate, it's time to present the board as a gift. And if you really want to make it special, you could offer to mount the board on the wall, gate, post or other appropriate place.

SPECIAL TIP

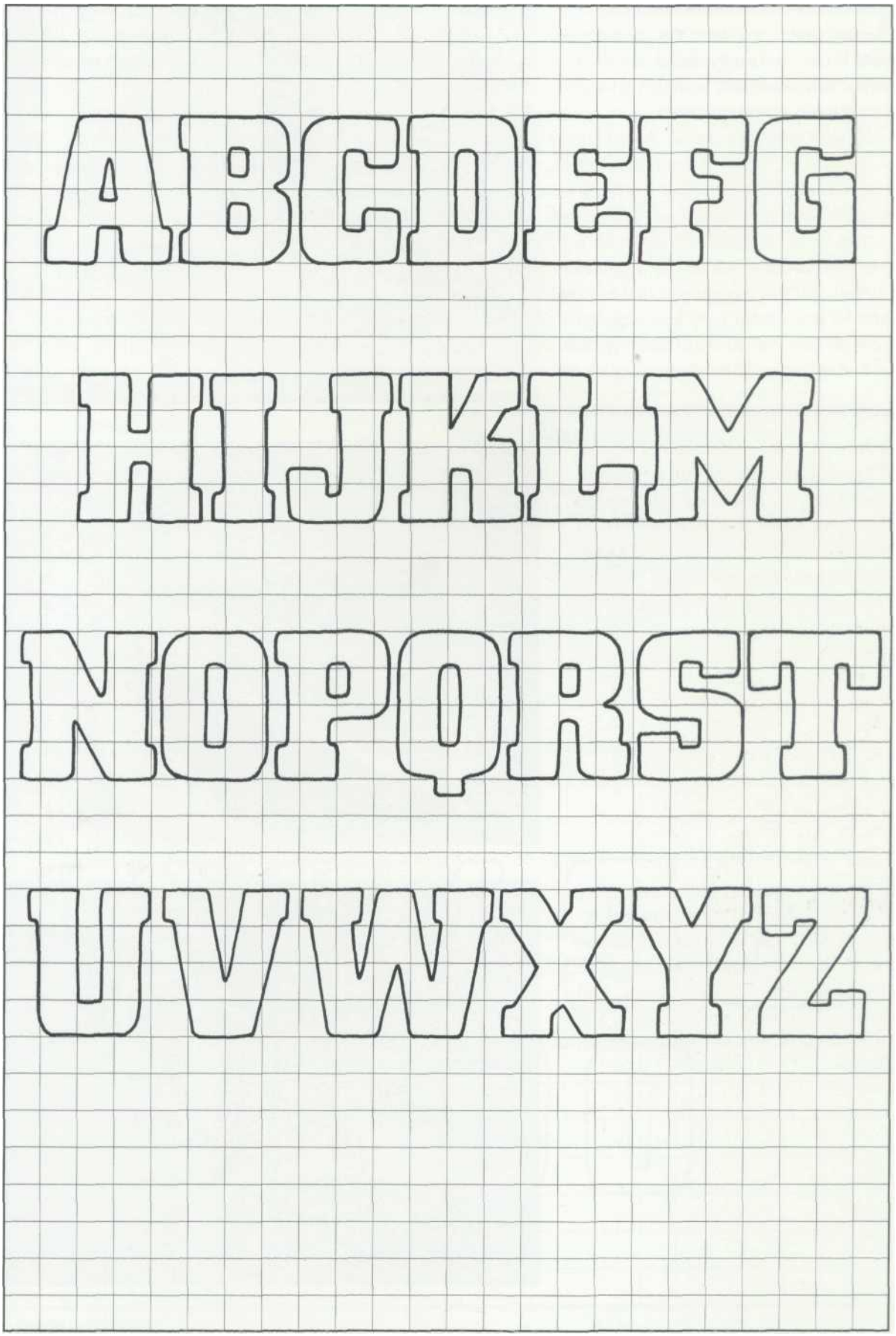
If you are going to mount the board directly on a wall, say beside the front door, it's best to use brass or bronze screws and have the board distanced from the wall by an inch or so. That way, when the ram runs down the wall and dribbles behind the board, there is space enough for a good flow of drying air.

MATERIALS LIST

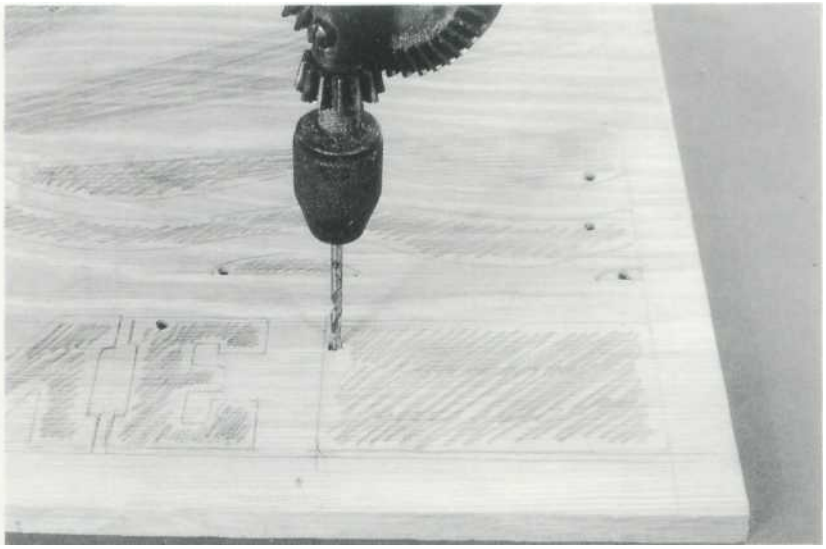
A Front pierced board (1)	½″×11¾″×18″—we used oak
B Base board (1)	½″ to ¾″×11¾″×18″

STEP-BY-STEP STAGES

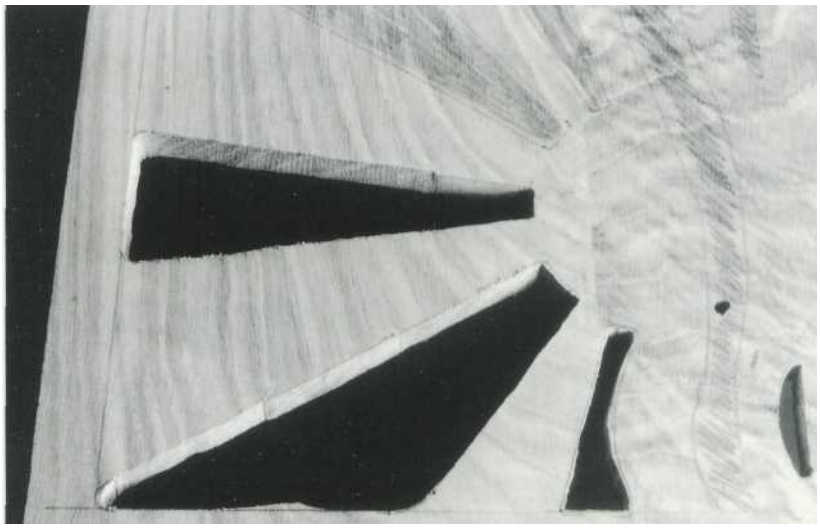
1 Having settled on a good, easy-to-work style of lettering, spend time drawing the letters up to size.



2 Run small pilot holes through the areas that need to be cut away. Be mindful if you are using a hand saw, that as some blades have pin fixings, you will have to choose a larger bit size.



3 As you can see, I had a bit of trouble keeping the line of cut on course. The problem was that the blade needed changing, the wood was amazingly tough and stringy, and I needed a rest. The only good thing you can say is that the bad cuts occur well to the waste side of the drawn line.



4 If you find that the workpiece doesn't want to move smoothly, then it's a good idea to rub a wax candle over both the surface of the cutting table and the underside of the workpiece. And don't be stingy with the blades. If the blade looks saggy or burns the wood, then change it!

FRETTED **LETTERS IN RELIEF**

If your workshop is anything like mine, you are forever wondering what you can do with the offcuts. Well, there we were fretting out the letter shapes when one of the kids next door, Michelle Edwards, asked me if she could have the "M" and "E" waste cutouts from the word "HOME," so that she could stick them on her bedroom door. And so it was that the idea came to us that we could design a house board that used the cutouts rather than the holes, if you see what I mean.

PROCEDURE

First, you need to draw the letter and/or number forms up to size—ours are 1 1/2″ high—and trace them off. Arrange the tracing on the 1/4" wood so that the grain runs from side to side through the letters. Pencil press transfer the traced lines through to the wood.

As for the fretting out procedure, it's much the same as already described (see page 80), only easier. If you think about it, you will see that you only have to run the pilot holes through the enclosed forms—like the O and A—and you don't have to worry about saving the ground around the letters. All you do is run the line of cut in from the edge of the wood, travel around the letter and then move on to the next form.

Once you have beveled off the edges of the ground board, then comes the tricky task of setting out the various guidelines. I use the word *tricky* advisedly, because if the spacing between the letters is wrong, or the baseline on which the letters sit is crooked, or whatever, then the whole thing will be messed-up. The best procedure is to work the spacing out on tracing paper, and then use a square and straight edge to very carefully mark the base board with all the guidelines.

When you are happy with the guidelines and the spacing, smear the back of the letters with the PVA glue and dab them down on a piece of scrap wood to remove the excess. Then position them on the board and press down firmly. With all the letters/numbers in place, stand back to check the alignment and then leave them be until the glue has set. Finally, drill the four fixing holes and give the whole works a generous coat of yacht/spar varnish.

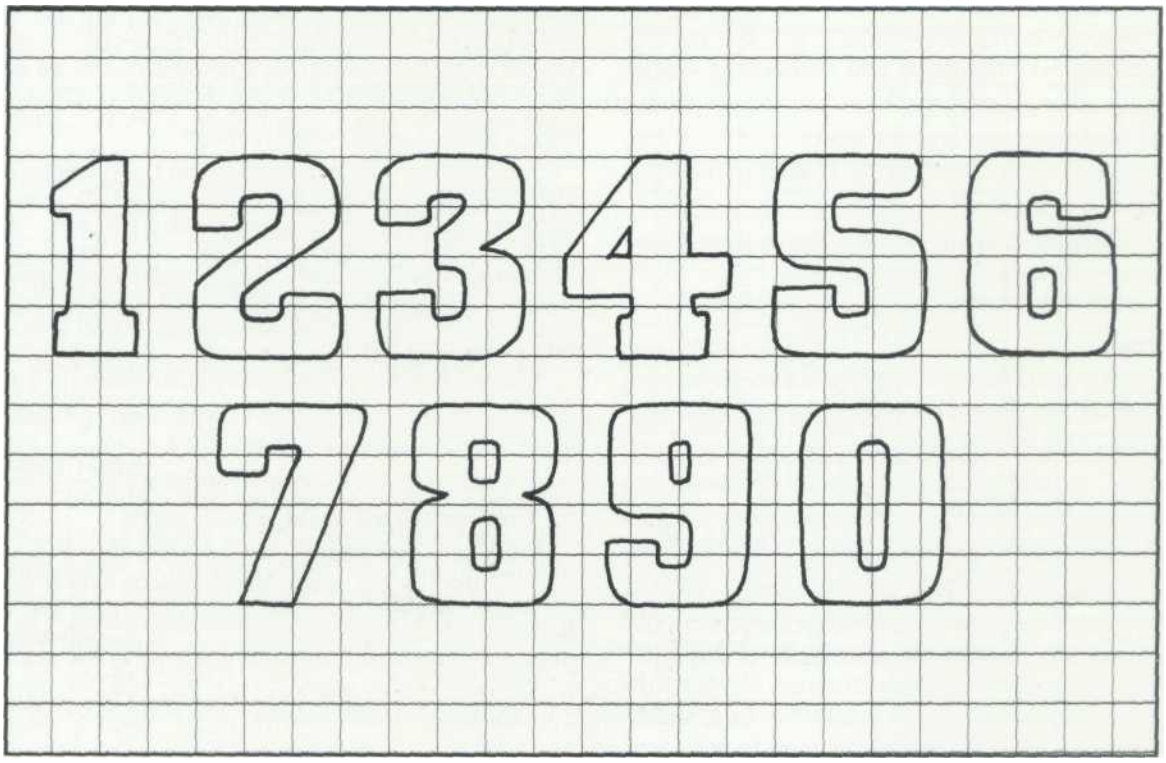
MATERIALS LIST: OPTION

A Board (1) prepared 7/8″×4″ piece of American oak at a length to suit the name of your house

B Board (1) 1/4″-thick piece of American oak—enough for all your letters

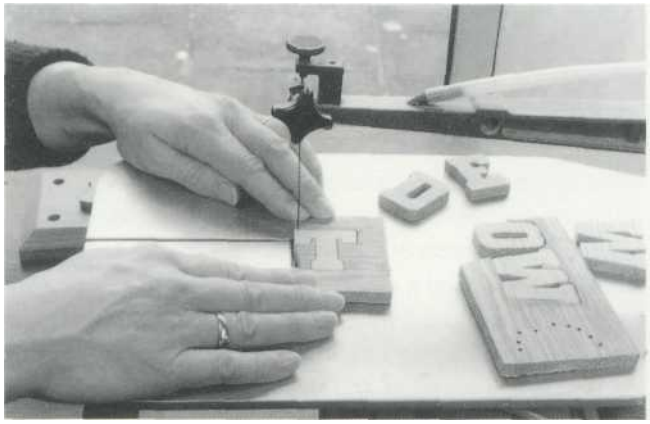
C Exterior PVA glue

D Yacht varnish

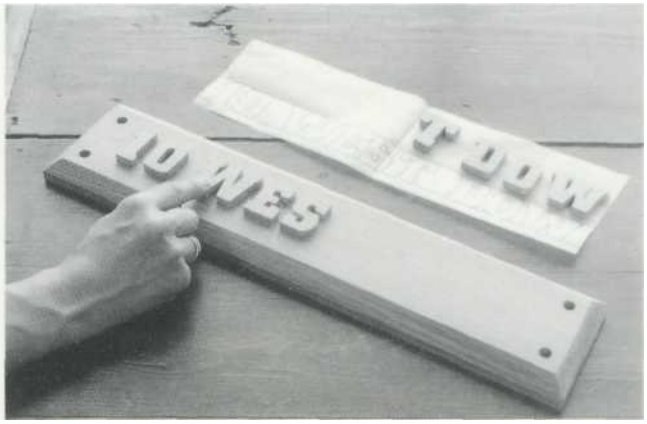


NUMBER PATTERNS

STEP-BY-STEP STAGES



1 Press transfer the various letters and numbers through to the 1/4"-thick wood. Shade in the waste so that there is no doubting the line of cut. Then fret out the letters and numbers on the scroll saw. Work at a very steady, easy pace, all the while making sure that the line of cut is fractionally to the waste side of the drawn line.



2 Check and double-check the spacing. Label the back of each letter "glue side," and then very carefully glue them in place. Do your best **to** avoid using so much glue that it oozes out.

DESIGNING AND TRANSFERRING

One of the chief difficulties for many woodworking beginners is that they make mistakes when it comes to designing and transferring. They make the first mistake when they draw the designs up to size, and the second when they transfer the designs through to the wood. The pity of it is that, by the very nature of things, the designing and transferring mistakes occur in the early stages. What invariably happens is that the beginners get so frustrated with the techniques of designing and transferring—what with using the wrong paper and with pencil lead getting smeared all over the paper and the wood—that they give up on the project before they ever get around to the wondrously exciting woodwork.

If you are having difficulties, then the following tips will help you sort out your problems.

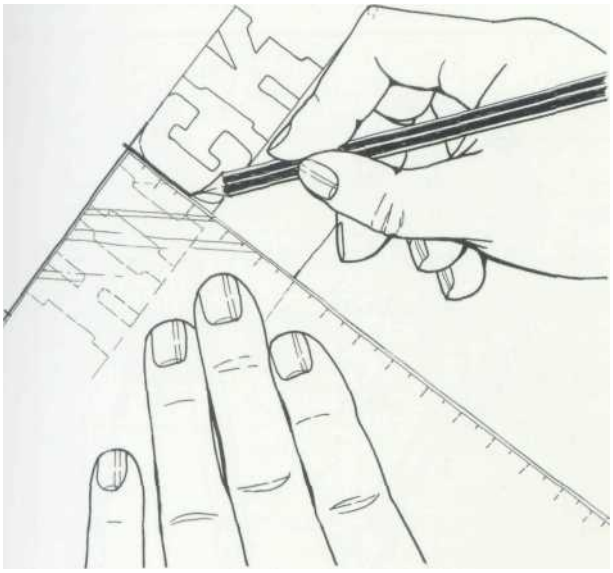
Designing

Designing is the procedure of working out the structure, pattern and form of a project by making various drawings, taking photographs and making models or prototypes. For example, with this address plaque the lettering needed a lot of thought. The problem was that while I personally prefer what might be described as classic Greek and Roman letter forms—with serifs and thick and thin strokes—it was pretty plain to see that such a style would be totally unsuitable in terms of wood and fretsaw work. So we searched around in books until we came up with a strong, bold letter style, one that looked as if it might lend itself to being fretted out with a scroll saw. Then we modified the style slightly so that all the little angles became curves. We used a ruler and square to draw the letters to size on thin layout paper, and then, using tracing paper with ruled guidelines and a square, we played around with the spacing of the letters until the word looked right. Be warned that you must always use a square **in** all lettering projects. If you don't, you will finish up with a badly spaced, wobbly mess!

We did much the same thing with the sunburst design. Having settled on the idea of the sunburst, we drew the elements of the design on scraps of layout paper. We fiddled around with the placing and the size and then drew up a master design on white illustration board. Then we took a final tracing.

It sounds a bit complicated, but the whole idea of working in this way is that all the many roughs, ideas, alternatives, variations, scribbles and sketches are worked out on the relatively inexpensive layout paper, before they are ever transferred to the quality paper.

We take a tracing from the master drawing so that we can use the tracing in the workshop—where it generally gets creased, damaged and used to destruction. The master drawings, however, are stored safely away for next time.



DESIGN TOOLS

***A set square** is an essential piece of drawing equipment. It's best to **gel** the see-through type so you can see what's going on under the square.*

Paper, Illustration Board, Layout and Tracing Paper

We use layout paper for the initial scribbles and sketches, good-quality glazed white illustration board for drawing out the master designs, and best-grade tracing paper for the transferring. It's not that we are fussy or faddish, and it's certainly not that we can afford to splash our money around. It's just that over the years we have learned that using the choice papers generally gets the job done faster and with fewer mistakes. Certainly you might think that we could use a flimsy-grade tracing paper for transferring, but again, experience has taught us that using a cheap-grade paper is a bad bet. It tears easily, it bleeds when used with ink and it doesn't take kindly to being scratched and scraped. And the same could be said about the pencils, the illustration board and all the other designing materials—the best is cheapest in the end! All that said, you can cut costs by visiting a printer and buying offcuts and ends of rolls/packs.

Masking Tape

We use an all-purpose paper, low-tack sticky tape to secure the card and tracing paper to the drawing board, and the tracing paper to the wood. We never use transparent tape simply because it is too sticky and damages both the paper and the wood.

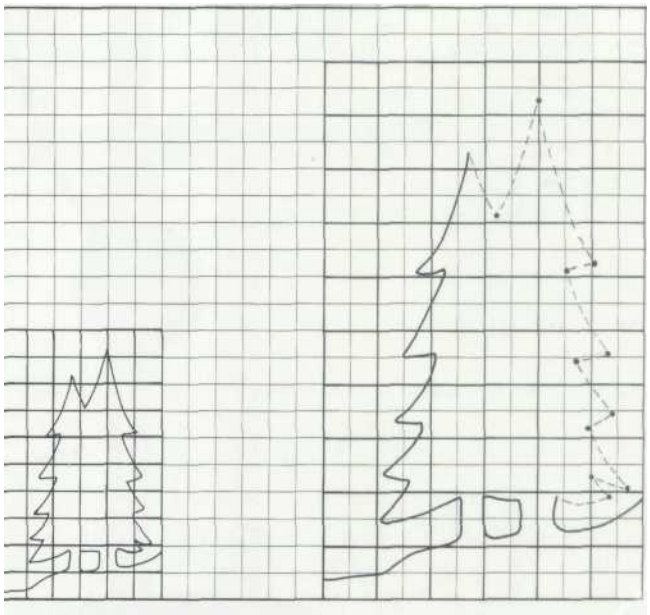
Gridded Working Drawings

A scaled square grid can be placed over a working drawing so that the object illustrated can be reduced or enlarged simply by changing the size of the grid. For example, if the grid is described as a "1" grid" or "one grid square to 1"" and the object is 6" long, and you want to finish up with an item 12" long, then all you do is double the scale and read each square off as being 2". And, of course, when you come to drawing the design up to size, you simply draw up a grid of the suggested size and transfer the contents of each square in the design through to your drawn grid.

Tracing and Pencil-Press Transferring

I usually describe the procedure of taking a tracing from the master design and then transferring the design through to the surface of the wood as "pencil-press transferring."

The procedure is: Work up the design on layout paper, make the master drawing with a hard pencil and take a tracing with a hard pencil. Next, pencil in the back of the tracing with a soft 2B pencil. Turn the tracing right side up, fix it to the wood with tabs of masking tape, and then rework the traced lines with a hard pencil or ball-point pen. This done, remove the tracing and rework the transferred lines on the wood. Finally, spray the surface of the wood with artist's fixative to prevent the pencil from smudging.



TRANSFERRING SCALED DRAWINGS

*Having drawn a grid over the original design and another grid at a scale to suit—in this case 1 wanted to double up, so it is twice the size—then all you do is painstakingly transfer the contents of **each** square.*