

Conover plant makes sofa for Obama family

By [Larry Clark](#) | Hickory Daily Record

Doug Jones is focused as he wraps the sturdy wood frame with fabric. He's making a sofa for Barack and Michelle Obama.

Jones has a long way to go and a short time to get there. The order came into Vanguard Furniture late Tuesday. It's Thursday morning, and the sofa must be on its way to Washington, D.C., in just a few hours.

Today, the sofa will go to the White House.

"This sofa is built totally from scratch," said Steve Gaddy, manager of Vanguard's upholstery division. "We built the frame from the ground up. We'll ship it right after lunch," Gaddy said Thursday, "the fastest way possible."

The order came from Anthropologie, a high-end retail company that's accessorizing the White House residence for the soon-to-be president and first lady.

The Philadelphia-based company has a store in Washington. The store's Web site lists full-sized sofas with prices from \$2,898 to \$4,400.

Vanguard is making a smaller piece, a settee.

"Anthropologie is one of our best customers," said Diane Hubbard, marketing manager for Vanguard. "We make all their furniture."

The piece Barack and Michelle Obama chose is a reproduction of an antique on display in the Washington shop.

The Obamas selected the fabric and the color of the buttons on the seat and back of the sofa. They're different colors.

The Battersea settee is for their daughters, and it must have a little fun sewn in.

"They chose one of the most time-consuming pieces we make," Gaddy said.

All of Vanguard's furniture is custom-made. Stores that sell Vanguard get the specifications from the customer and place the order.

"It's personalized furniture," Hubbard said.

Turnaround from order to delivery is usually about 30 days.

"This is not ordinary," Gaddy said about the rush order for the White House.

"We made an exception for President Obama," interjected Dixon Mitchell, company president.

He's checking on progress. On time, he's assured.

All the while, Jones is busy placing padding just so, smoothing the linen fabric and punctuating his movements with the rat-a-tat-tat of his staple gun.

He's a master upholsterer, a 27-year employee at Vanguard. Jones says little, smiles often.

"I enjoy what I do," he said. "Been here forever. It makes a big difference to be able to do what you like to do."

The seat is done. Jones pushes long, thick needles through the back of the sofa. They're threaded with stout yarn to tie down the buttons. The yarn, of course, matches the fabric.

Jones doesn't waste motion, and he doesn't stop moving.

"I'll have something in the White House," he smiles without breaking his focus.

The shop is a beehive of activity with the hum of the air handlers and staccato of the air-driven staplers keeping a steady, if uneven, beat.

The workers know the importance of the sofa, but they have their own specialties to produce.

"We're busy," Gaddy said. "We're working." Recent years haven't been kind to the furniture industry.

Thursday, however, saw assorted sizes of sofas and chairs, some with woven fabric, some with leather, being framed up and covered.

"Everybody's excited about having a piece in the White House," Gaddy said.

"It's our first one," Mitchell said.

He's been with Vanguard eight years, but furniture is a family tradition spanning generations. "Furniture is natural" for Mitchell.

He's pleased with the way things are going and echoes Gaddy's observation about the sofa's construction.

"It takes four-and-a-half to five hours to upholster a piece like this," Mitchell said. "That's after the frame is finished."

Jones never lets up, deftly placing the big needles with the skill of an acupuncture expert.

Gaddy and Mitchell watch with approval.

"We're honored to do this," Mitchell said. "There are many items coming from all over to Anthropologie and other suppliers for the White House.

"The orders mean producing and shipping faster than normal, redoing your schedule. But everybody wants to beat the deadlines. This is special.

"The remarkable thing, the important thing about all this," Mitchell said of the effort to get everything ready before the new First Family moves in, "is the respect for the office of the president to make things happen."

Jones allows himself a grin. It's a Vanguard sofa that's going to the White House, but his handiwork is what

everyone will see.