

# A Simple Approach to Paneled Wainscot

Built on a bench and finished with stock moldings, these panels don't lose any points for style

BY GARY STRIEGLER

I've done wainscot lots of different ways, and each job has its own balance of cost, complexity, and final appearance. But one of my favorite methods is to build a pocket-screw-joined frame on my workbench or sawhorses, fasten plywood to the back and panel molding to the front, and then install the whole thing in prebuilt sections. I like this system because it's fast but doesn't sacrifice final appearance for that speed. Plus, when installed over wavy walls, these big sections can help create a flat run.

Although this room started with bare walls—which makes it easier to plan the many layers of trim necessary to

tie everything together nicely—wainscot can easily be added to an already-trimmed room, too. The important thing is to spend time planning how the various pieces of trim will work together. Do this and you'll be rewarded with work that looks like it was meant to be there.

Gary Striegler is a finish carpenter in Fayetteville, Ark. Photos by Antonio Panetta.



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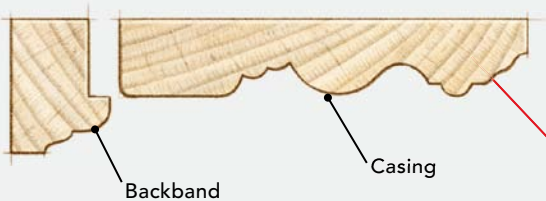
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## IT ALL STARTS AT THE OPENINGS

Whether you're working in a new room or doing a trim makeover to an existing space, wainscot always starts at the same place: the windows and doors.

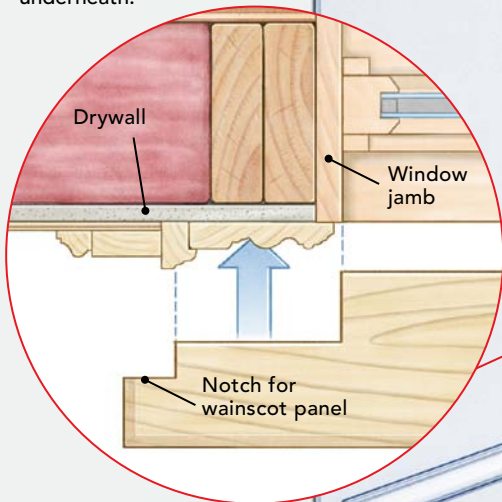
### Build up casing at windows and doors

Casing must be built up with a backband to accommodate the thickness of the layered wainscot trim.



### An oversize stool

The stool has to be wide enough to cover the casing and backband, and deep enough to cap the panel underneath.



### Back-bevel for tight miters

The trick to tight miters is to bevel the back edges of each piece with a sharp block plane. This helps the show face of the trim to come together without gaps. Just be sure to leave enough material at the inside corner of the miter so that when it's assembled you can't see a beveled gap.



### Quick and clean

A jigsaw is one way to notch a window stool, but I prefer to use a tablesaw and a miter saw. Made carefully, a stopped cut on a tablesaw and a tilted cut on a miter saw are the best combination of speed and accuracy.

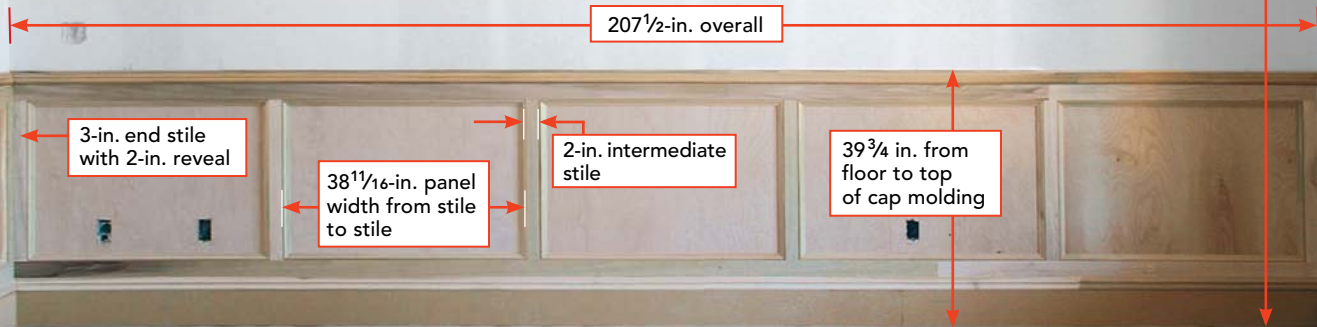
## PLAN IT ON THE WALL



The height of the paneling is partially driven by the ceiling height of the room—between 30 in. to 40 in. from the floor is common—and then adjusted to ensure that the rails and stiles will have appropriate reveals on all sides once the baseboard and cap molding have been installed.

Once the vertical positioning has been determined and marked with a chalkline, you can better establish the proportions of the horizontal layout. I find that an odd number of panels is most pleasing to the eye, and I avoid making panels that are taller than they are wide. Here's how to find the panel width.

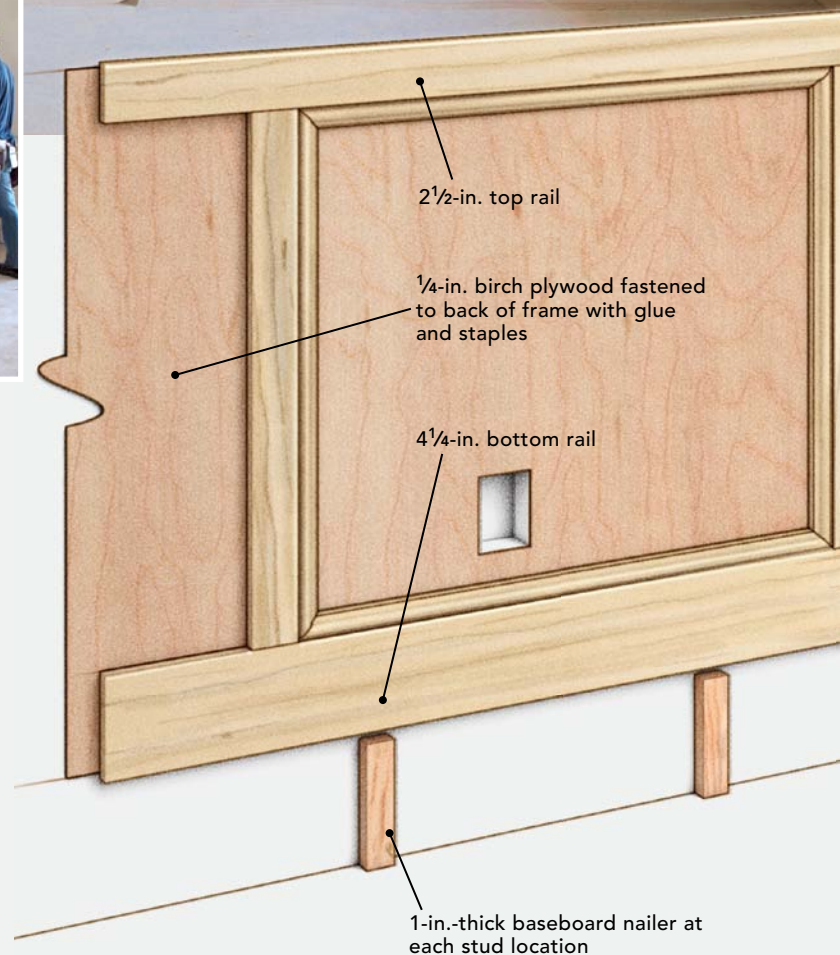
Overall width of room (207½ in.) – Combined width of stiles (14 in.) ÷ Desired number of panels (5) = Panel width (38⅛ in.)



## BUILD IT ON THE BENCH



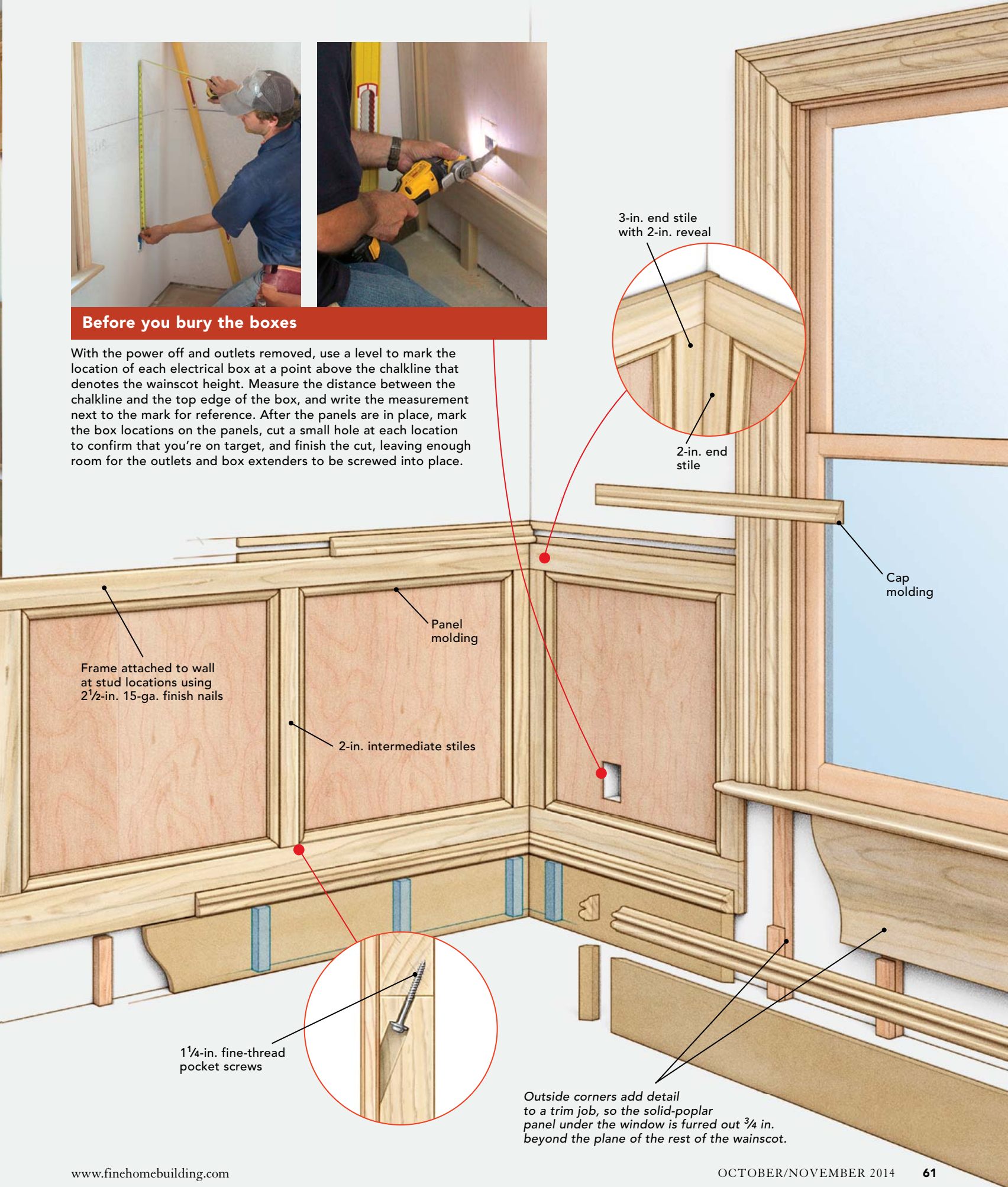
I typically see carpenters build the frame of paneled wainscot right on the wall, or build the frame and fasten it to the wall without the panel molding attached. There aren't many benefits to building paneled wainscot piece by piece, right on the wall. It's harder to get good joints in the wainscot frame this way, and you'll spend more time working on your knees as you measure, adjust, fit, and fasten all of the panel molding. I prefer to build as much of the wainscot as possible on a worktable or on sawhorses, where I can work comfortably. Only after I assemble the frame, add a plywood backer, and install the panel molding do I fasten the whole assembly into place on the wall.





**Before you bury the boxes**

With the power off and outlets removed, use a level to mark the location of each electrical box at a point above the chalkline that denotes the wainscot height. Measure the distance between the chalkline and the top edge of the box, and write the measurement next to the mark for reference. After the panels are in place, mark the box locations on the panels, cut a small hole at each location to confirm that you're on target, and finish the cut, leaving enough room for the outlets and box extenders to be screwed into place.



3-in. end stile with 2-in. reveal

2-in. end stile

Cap molding

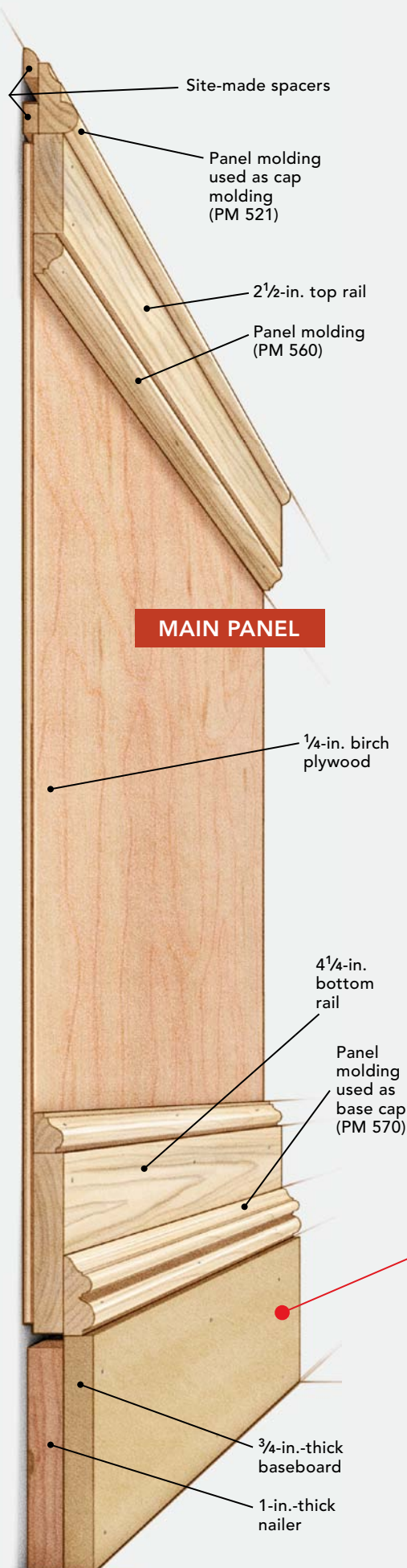
Panel molding

2-in. intermediate stiles

Frame attached to wall at stud locations using 2 1/2-in. 15-ga. finish nails

1 1/4-in. fine-thread pocket screws

Outside corners add detail to a trim job, so the solid-poplar panel under the window is furred out 3/4 in. beyond the plane of the rest of the wainscot.



## TRIM FINISHES THE JOB

Trim isn't just for aesthetics; it's also for concealing transitions between pieces of wood. On this installation, I used a variety of profiles from White River Hardwoods ([whiteriver.com](http://whiteriver.com)), which are identified in the drawing at left. Trim profiles are largely a matter of personal taste and scale, but you may have trouble finding a stock cap for this particular wainscot method. A lot of carpenters like to use a bolection molding—a rabbeted molding that laps over the edge of the wainscot—but it's not easy to find one that will work with 1-in.-thick wainscot. Instead, I use a hefty piece of panel molding furred out from the wall with a routed piece of poplar and a hidden spacer to create a custom cap.



### Baseboard from shelving

For the flat portion of the two-piece baseboard, the author likes to rip ¾-in.-thick MDF shelving stock into 5-in. pieces. The material is inexpensive and takes paint well, plus its 12-ft. lengths are easy to handle.

