March 2019

**Masterpieces of Simplicity: Newport Desks and Chairs, 1740-1780**

Joseph K. Ott
Daniel Snydacker
Deborah Walker

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/newporthistory](https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/newporthistory)

Part of the American Art and Architecture Commons, Furniture Design Commons, and the United States History Commons

**Recommended Citation**
Available at: [https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/newporthistory/vol60/iss208/3](https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/newporthistory/vol60/iss208/3)

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Salve Regina. It has been accepted for inclusion in Newport History by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Salve Regina. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@salve.edu.
MASTERPIECES OF SIMPLICITY:
Newport Desks and Chairs, 1740-1780
by
Joseph K. Ott, Daniel Snydacker, and Deborah Walker

Introduction

This exhibit mounted at the Newport Historical Society from the fall of 1986 to the fall of 1987 answered one question and posed another. It answered the question “What characteristics identify a piece of colonial furniture as having been made in Newport?” By looking at six pieces from the 1740s to the 1780s it identifies the features which, taken together, constitute the signature of a “school” of cabinetmaking. These characteristics range from a reliance on form rather than detail in the design of a piece of Newport furniture, to the special way Newport desks were locked by a wooden bolt. Above all, it is the magnificent simplicity of these works which sets them apart from furniture of other colonial cities.

The question posed by the exhibit is why? Why did Newport cabinetmakers develop this remarkable style? One possible answer is the influence of the Society of Friends, or Quakers, on the craftsmen. The period under examination, however, is one of enormous change in Newport, and one that saw the Quakers dwindle in numbers and influence. The town’s maritime economy was developing at a dizzying pace and Newport was emerging as one of the leading seaports of the Atlantic world. The growing wealth of the merchants meant they could afford finer pieces made out of more expensive woods, such as mahogany and walnut, from anywhere in the Atlantic world. Tastes turned toward England both in furniture and architecture as attested to by the popularity of the Chippendale style and the architect Peter Harrison. The Chippendale style was adapted from designs in books and Harrison’s buildings were copied, by and large, after English buildings.

Joseph K. Ott is the author of The Rhode Island Historical Society: The John Brown House Loan Exhibition of Rhode Island Furniture, (Providence, 1965), past president of the Rhode Island Historical Society, and is currently chairman of the Newport Historical Society Museum Committee. Daniel Snydacker is the Executive Director of the Newport Historical Society. Deborah Walker was curator of the museum at the Newport Historical Society at the time of this exhibit.
Despite these changes, however, the continuities in Newport furniture are much more striking. These extended to the high general quality over the period, specific techniques, as well as stylistic considerations, and much of this was due to the organization of the shops. They were, in reality, family businesses, and the two dominant, but by no means only families in town were the Goddards and the Townsends. These families quickly intertwined through marriage and by the fact that in one family's shops there were often members of the other family working as mastercraftsmen or apprentices. This closeness helped consolidate Newport's styles and keep them distinct.

The organization of the shops around family may have also been one explanation for the continued magnificent simplicity of the furniture they produced. The strong families of the Goddards and the Townsends provided an equally strong link to a time in Newport when simplicity was grounded in faith.
GENEALOGY OF GODDARD CABINETMAKERS

Daniel Goddard (d. 1764)
John I (1723-1785) Sons of Daniel
James (1727-1757)
  Townsend (1750-1790) Sons of John I
  Stephen (1764-1804)
  Thomas (1765-1858)
  John II (1789-1843) Son of Stephen

Daniel Goddard (d. 1764) was the patriarch of the Goddard family of cabinetmakers. A housewright, he was killed while repairing a house.

John Goddard I (1723-1785) was apprenticed to Job Townsend and married his daughter, Hannah. There are only a few known pieces of his which are all in a typical Newport style. There are surviving letters which reveal that he did work for, among others, Moses Brown of Providence. Like many Newports, he suffered from the adverse economic effects of the American Revolution, and when he died, his liabilities exceeded his assets.

James Goddard (1727-1757) married Susanna Townsend. Little else is known of him or his work.

Townsend Goddard (1750-1790). It would appear that Townsend was already an established cabinetmaker by the time his father died, and there are several existing pieces which have been attributed to him. He established a shop on “Town Land” by 1785.

Stephen Goddard (1764-1804). Along with his brother Thomas, Stephen was left the tools and shop by their father.

Thomas Goddard (1765-1858) worked along with his brother in the shop inherited from their father, John I. He married Francis Weaver in 1789, and it appears he followed the later trends in furniture. In his final years he turned to building small boats to make a living.

Stephen Goddard (1786-1853). Little is known about Stephen except that he married Susan Simmons.

John Goddard II (1789-1843), had a shop on the corner of Bridge and Second Street. He made furniture in the style of Hepplewhite and Sheraton.
GENEALOGY OF TOWNSEND CABINETMAKERS

Solomon Townsend (1660-1716)

Job, Sr. (1699-1765)
Christopher (1701-1773)
Job, Jr. (1726-1778)
Edmund (1736-1811)
John (1732-1809)
Jonathan (1745-1772)

Sons of Solomon
Sons of Job
Sons of Christopher

Job Townsend (1699-1765). Job and his brother Christopher were the “elders” of the Townsend-Goddard group. He had his shop on Easton’s Point (Quaker-owned lands) and he himself was a Quaker. There is a high chest of drawers in the collection of the Newport Historical Society which has been attributed to Job Townsend by provenance, family tradition, and because it has so many typically Newport characteristics.

Christopher Townsend (1701-1773) worked alongside his brother in another shop on Easton’s Point. There are several pieces in the Queen Anne style with his signature.

Job Townsend, Jr. (1726-1818). His account books, owned by the Newport Historical Society, reveal a great deal about the work going on in a cabinetmaker’s shop. It is interesting to note he made a number of pieces for Matthew Cozzens, whose desk and bookcase is illustrated below. The account book also reveals that Job, Jr. also did some work with his brother Edmund.

Edmund Townsend (1736-1811). There is much less surviving documentation about the life and work of Edmund than for his brother, Job, Jr. Nevertheless, there is a superbly carved block front knee-hole desk made by him in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

John Townsend (1732-1809). There are several pieces of furniture with the label or signature of John Townsend, and they are all outstanding pieces of craftsmanship and design. John Goddard I was this John Townsend’s cousin by marriage, and apprenticed with Job Townsend, Sr. It is reasonable to assume that both John Townsend and John Goddard, who were roughly the same age, worked closely together exchanging ideas and techniques to perfect the Newport style.

Jonathan Townsend (1745-1772) There is a mention in his father’s will of a desk made by “my son Jonathan” but little else to document his life.
CHARACTERISTICS OF NEWPORT FURNITURE

Attributing a piece of colonial American furniture to either a particular region, city or craftsman is a very difficult proposition. In Newport, most colonial cabinetmakers did not identify their pieces at all. Therefore “signed” pieces of Newport are extremely rare. Aiding in the task of attribution is the fact that pieces can be assigned to individual cabinetmakers through comparison to the few existing signed or labelled pieces. Furthermore, as illustrated in the William Ellery desk in this exhibit, the provenance of a piece can also help in attributing it to a maker or a city. Because stylistic influence between the colonies was relatively slow, certain idiosyncracies developed and continued in the design of furniture in each colony. The more of these characteristics from one city which appear in a piece, the more certain the attribution. The following is a list of characteristics which signal the fact that a piece belongs to Newport.

WORKMANSHP. The quality of workmanship in interior and exterior construction among the best makers in Newport was unusually high.

BLOCKING. Blocking was one of three methods used by cabinetmakers to break the flat facade of case pieces. It utilized a center sunken portion with a concave shell flanked on either side by a raised blocked panel often surmounted by a convex shell. Other methods used were serpentine and oxbow treatments.

WOODS. Newport furniture makers used the finest mahogany in their furniture, usually that from San Domingo along with American walnut. Chestnut, pine, poplar—even cedar and mahogany were secondary woods. The use of chestnut is one of the most reliable ways of identifying a Newport piece.

DOVETAILING. The triangular dovetails that were used to join pieces of wood at right angles are precise and fine in Newport.

DRAWERS. The sides and bottoms of drawers are unusually thin. The tops of the drawer sides are slightly rounded or flat.
LOCKS. The top drawers of desks are sometimes locked with a wooden bolt which can be reached from a sliding well.

PEDIMENTS. Pediments made in Newport were usually arched and “closed” by a wooden panel behind the center finial. Bonnets usually ran the full depth of bookcases and high cases of drawers, or “highboys,” featured raised panels to integrate the curved lines of the bonnet to the straight lines of the bookcase or drawers beneath.

FINIALS. The finials have distinctive flutes and spiral turnings and are usually not carved on the back.

STRETCHERS. Flat stretchers on chairs were thicker than those used in other colonies and of a certain profile. Turned stretchers were sturdy and sensible. Stretchers were used far longer in Newport than elsewhere.

FEET. Newport pad feet were large, thick, with a shoe underneath to prevent wear to the foot itself and joined the leg at the outer edge of the pad. Claw and ball feet were often webless and, rarely (and uniquely in the colonies) had talons standing free of the ball. There are several types of claw and ball feet identified with Newport. In bracket feet the profile tapers toward the bottom.

DETAILS. Newport furniture had uniquely shaped shells, both on case pieces and on chairs. Knee carvings were shallow, well centered on the knees and never continued up to the edge of the seat rails. Stop fluting on straight surfaces was a favorite design tool. Rear legs of chairs were chamfered to modify the sharp edges and lighten the leg profile. Shallow drawers with concave fronts over the pigeon holes in desks are also unique to Newport.
This fall-front desk belonged to William Ellery of Newport, one of the two signers of the Declaration of Independence for Rhode Island. The provenance of this piece is very strong for it stayed in the Ellery family until it was given to the Historical Society, and it points to the Goddard family as probable makers. William Ellery’s son, George Wanton Ellery, married one of Thomas Goddard’s daughters, and Mrs. Hammett, from whose estate the desk came to the Society, was Ellery’s great granddaughter. The desk exhibits various characteristics which follow the general Newport style. An interior wooden bolt locks the top drawer and is seen on other local desks. The drawers are of cedar, which is resistant to decay and insects, and the sides of the drawers have rounded top edges. Chestnut is used in the lower drawers and also indicates a Newport origin. The interior is blocked with concave shells in arches and raised panels on either side which create alternating light and shadow areas for a decorative effect famous in Newport cabinetmaking.

Gift from the estate of William Hammett
ACC. NO. 32.1
This desk has been improperly refinished by excessive sanding, and the surface is too shiny. However, it does exhibit the fine craftsmanship and refined detail for which Newport furniture is so famous. The overall design is typical of the type made for export to southern states and the West Indies, and one that the average family could afford. Inside the well, the cyma-curved dividers between the pigeon holes, add simple detail to a modest desk. On top of the desk is fine dovetailing and below there are tapered ogee-bracket feet; both trademarks of Newport furniture style.

Gift from the estate of Ruth B. Franklin

DESK
MAPLE, CHESTNUT, PINE
C. 1780-1800
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND
CHAIR
MAHOGANY, MAPLE SEAT
C. 1760-1780
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

This side chair belongs to a set of 24 once owned by the Hazard family of Newport. One back post has been poorly repaired and the original red moreen wool seat has faded from overexposure to light. The chair embodies several features which are evidence of the wealth and commerce that was a part of Newport prior to the Revolution. The chair is made of a very dense and heavy (and therefore expensive) mahogany. The webless ball and claw foot is a trademark of Newport furniture design, as are the shells on the crest rails and the knees. By way of contrast, the shells on New York knees were more elongated during this period. The chair backs, or splats, and curved back posts, or stiles, are typical of a design that depended on well-balanced contours a signature of Newport furniture.

Gift of Mrs. J.P. Stevens
ACC. NO. 77.5
LOW CHAIR
WALNUT, MAPLE SEAT
C. 1745
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

This chair has been attributed to Thomas Davenport of Little Compton when he was working in Newport. The design of the chair is distinctively Newport with bold legs and large pad feet that connect with the leg at the outer edges. The yoke crest rail is a shape often associated with Newport furniture design. Low chairs often referred to as “ladies’ chairs” or “slipper chairs” (both later terms) are distinguished from side chairs by the height of the seat. The seat on a typical low chair is only about 14” high and the standard side chair approximately 17”. While traditionally used to sit in while putting on shoes, they are very comfortable to relax in with the legs stretched out.

Anonymous loan.

https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/newporthistory/vol60/iss208/3
EASY CHAIR
MAHOGANY, UNKNOWN SECONDARY WOOD
C. 1760-1780
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

Though the craftsman who constructed this chair is unknown, it exhibits several features which suggest it originated in a Newport shop. The smooth flow of line around the contours and absence of fussy details reflect the total reliance on shape and form, "...a quality of unpretentious sophistication, so typical of the Newport Quakers." The cabriole legs with "C" scrolls and pad feet relate to English and Irish design and reveal the close ties that colonial Newport had with England. These designs were modified by local craftsmen to become distinctively American. The chamfered rear legs modify the sharp edges and lighten the leg profile. The rare cyma-curved flat stretchers were thicker than those from other colonies and distinctively shaped.

From the Old State House, Newport, Rhode Island
ACC. NO. 81.2.1
DESK AND BOOKCASE
MAHOGANY (PRIMARY AND SECONDARY WOOD),
POPLAR
C. 1750-1780
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

This desk and bookcase was originally owned by Newport merchant Matthew Cozzens. Entries in the Job Townsend, Jr. account book, on display in this exhibit, show that the younger Townsend made a number of pieces for Matthew Cozzens, including a “Mohogoney” desk. It is reasonable to assume that this desk and bookcase, too, was made in the same shop. Later it was owned by William Cole Cozzens, Mayor of Newport and Governor of Rhode Island. It came to the Society through the estate of James Gould Cozzens. It has several features which suggest it was made by a Newport cabinetmaker. Inside the desk are cyma-curved dividers with a distinctive Newport profile and the interior of the desk is blocked with carved shells. Typical of Newport “Secretaries,” (to use a 19th century term) is the arched pediment closed by a wood panel behind the center finial and the raised panels on the pediment to integrate the curved lines of the bonnet with the straight lines of the doors. In other colonies bonnets did not usually run the full depth of the bookcase; however on this bookcase and other Newport examples, full bonnets are standard.

Gift from the estate of James Gould Cozzens
http://digitalcommons.salve.edu/newporthistory/vol60/iss208/3