Making Furniture in Preindustrial America

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The Social Economy of the Preindustrial Joiner

Despite joiners' use of similar tools, technologies, and workspaces, considerable variety prevailed among the furniture made and owned in western Connecticut from 1760 to 1820. There are differences in furniture forms and decoration not only between towns but also within towns. We thus need to identify what determined the artisan's choice of form, technique, or decoration. The specific context in which a joiner worked is crucial to any understanding of these selections and adaptations. A web of social and economic relations determined the joiner's composition, tool selection, techniques, work rhythms, and levels of production, as well as the look of the final product. The craftsman's choices were grounded in a specific set of learning experiences, economic systems, and social norms and obligations. By focusing on how the joiner first learned his trade and then refined or expanded these skills and attitudes, we can begin to analyze the details of the region's social economy.

Acquisition of Skills

Apprenticeship, a very clear example of the social basis for the joiner's trade during the preindustrial period, was the primary method for learning the craft. In the eighteenth century, apprenticeship differed significantly from its present form. Today, a person voluntarily enters into an apprenticeship with a company to learn a specific aspect of the trade. The company pays the apprentice a minimal wage during the learning process and defines the entire relationship with that person in terms of wage rate and working hours. The company essentially cares only about the apprentice's performance on the job and how quickly he or she will pay back the invest-
ment. Room, board, and life outside of work are the apprentice’s own responsibilities.¹

By contrast, preindustrial apprenticeship was fundamentally a social contract in which mutual obligations and expectations bound the two parties. A young lad followed certain prescribed rules of living in return for instruction in a trade. Like the son of a farmer, the apprentice was willing to give up certain personal freedoms and perform specific tasks for a paternal figure with little direct recompense because he expected to become a master himself. The master willingly took the youth into his household and taught him because the apprentice’s commitment permitted the master to increase the variety and scale of operations and maximize opportunities during the master’s peak years of physical activity. Apprenticeship ensured the availability of extra human power for preparatory tasks such as sawing and dressing stock as well as the ability to undertake larger, more logistically complicated tasks such as fabricating large case furniture, paneling interiors, or hauling boards.

Young apprentices also served as a form of human credit. During slack periods in the shop, the master “rented out” his apprentices to others in the community for simple woodworking tasks or even for agricultural labor. In such a case, the youth was not working on his own time but rather as a member of the master’s household. The apprentice’s labor thus built up indebtedness within the community, which the master could draw on as the need arose.

Even apprenticeship selection was based upon the social network. A young craftsman in his twenties took on the sons of neighbors or relatives; a joiner in his thirties turned to his adolescent sons. Those with daughters but no sons often arranged for a daughter to marry an apprentice or a member of another shop, thereby consolidating the trade for the next generation. Once the elder craftsman had set up his children as independent adults, he had less interest in his own production and earning power. At this later point in his career, the joiner became an individual craftsman, helping out in local shops when needed or undertaking light work or repair work.²

The apprenticeship agreement between Lazarus Prindle and Joseph Peck Jr., both of Newtown, sheds light on this training process in a time when life and work were interwoven and work was arranged along household lines. On June 5, 1793, Peck, then fifteen years old and with his father as witness, bound himself to Prindle for a two-year training period. In return for instruction, Peck promised to serve faithfully, keep his master’s secrets, waste none of his master’s goods, avoid unexcused absences, and obey his
master’s lawful commands. In addition, Peck pledged not to commit fornication, contract matrimony, play at dice or other illegal games, haunt taverns or playhouses, or buy or sell anything on his own during the term of his apprenticeship. In short, Peck completely resigned himself to Prindle’s authority.

For his part, Prindle, thirty years old and without a son ready to apprentice, swore to teach and instruct the apprentice in the trade and mystery of a joiner. Furthermore, Prindle provided Peck with lodging, food, and laundry services by treating him as a surrogate son within the household. On completion of his training, Peck would receive a good suit of clothes and take his place as a productive member of the community in good standing.³

The “art, trade, and mystery” of the joiner’s craft encompassed a wide range of attitudes, responsibilities, and activities. In an era before specialization drew lines of distinction between design, workmanship, decoration, and marketing, the rural joiner oversaw and participated in the entire furnituremaking process from conception through sale. The apprentice acquired these values and skills through a process that combined observation and imitation. Because of the casual interaction that took place in the small shop, a boy could see the decisions, actions, and results of the master or of any other craftsmen who worked there. In this manner the apprentice internalized his master’s approaches and techniques. Less consciously the apprentice also adopted certain attitudes about working wood. From a broad range of possibilities, the apprentice therefore learned and practiced the solutions favored and used by his master. In a time of human power and relatively low technology, a reliance on internalized solutions to structural problems, systematic and habitual motions, and familiar sequences helped to ensure efficient, satisfactory work. This workmanship of habit made craftwork economically viable. As a result, reflexive actions acquired and developed during training became an integral part of the joiner’s chest of tools. These conventions serve as diagnostic features that help to group surviving furniture and identify it as the work of a particular shop tradition.⁴

A joiner’s later experiences supplemented the basic technical foundation acquired during his time as an apprentice. His performance, however, was not entirely confined to mere replication of his master’s work. Rather, working within a dynamic tradition of furnituremaking, he selectively gathered ideas about new techniques or approaches from the products of other shops in the same town or nearby, from observations made during travel, or from the challenge of replicating imported furniture, meeting a client’s demands, or repairing a piece of furniture made in another shop.⁵ These new ideas,
inevitable in a New England society far more mobile than has been per­ceived, were grafted onto existing structural habits or reinterpreted through local standards of performance and design.

In Stratford, for example, two shops dominated the local furniture mar­ket: Brewster Dayton’s and that of the Hubbell family. Dayton (working in Stratford c. 1762–96) was born across Long Island Sound in Brookhaven, New York, and apprenticed with an English-trained immigrant joiner in Stratford. His early experiences exposed him to the Anglo-Dutch work of Long Island joiners and the vernacular Georgian work of his master. Ebenezer Hubbell (1726–1812), master of the Hubbell shop in the last half of the eighteenth century, probably trained with his father Josiah, a joiner who helped to build the side galleries for the town’s meetinghouse in 1715. Ebenezer’s training thus took place entirely within Stratford.

Case furniture that is documented or attributed to the Dayton and Hub­bell shops reveals a specific set of Stratford features: carved feet with square pads, central toes flanked by two smaller toes on each side, and a tightly curved crooked leg; deeply carved shells in the lower drawers of desks and chests; blocks of wood nailed to the inside surface of these drawer fronts to provide extra depth for the shell carving; and extensive use of wooden trunnels rather than iron nails to secure drawer bottoms, moldings, and drawer supports. The work of each shop, however, is distinctive in its individual workmanship and forms. Slight differences in decorative work also distinguish the two shops: Dayton’s carved feet feature a central spade­shaped toe and are blockier than the Hubbell’s more modeled feet; Day­ton’s legs are slightly taller and therefore less sinuous; Dayton’s shells are rather flat with simple ribs while Hubbell’s are deeper with more undulat­ing ribs; and Dayton’s base moldings tend to be thicker than the more complex cymas by Hubbell. Dayton also developed certain conventions for his construction: He often smoothed the inside surfaces of a carcass side with a toothing plane, added a butterfly key to strengthen the glued butt joint of a carcass side consisting of two boards, and chamfered the top edges of his drawer sides and backs. None of these features are found on furniture from the Hubbell shop. Clearly, contemporaries in the same town could draw from different training to develop a related language with distinct dialects.6

A similar relationship is evident in the work of Bates How of Canaan and Reuben Beeman of Kent. Signed work by these joiners bears a strong resemblance: squat carved ball-and-claw feet, extensive reliance on rope carving along base moldings and quarter-columns, similar dovetailing of
drawers, and backboards dovetailed to the back edges of the carcass sides. In spite of these shared idiosyncrasies, there are noticeable differences. How's signed chest features extensive use of screws to attach the moldings and quarter-columns and an abundance of knotty, second-grade white pine boards. Beeman's work does not rely on screws and scrap pine and has a distinctive drawer detail: the sides taper toward the upper edge, thereby permitting more material where the groove for the bottom drawers is run. The variations between the How and Beeman shops suggest that craftsmen with different training, revealed in their particular structural logic and conventions, could respond to the market in similar ways, especially in regard to decoration, in the hill towns of northwestern Connecticut.

Rhythms of Work

Under apprenticeship, young joiners learned to organize their tasks and rhythms in accordance with local custom. A master subtly schooled his apprentice in local economic cycles, labor conventions, and sources of materials and credit. Although most rural New England communities followed some sort of mixed agricultural economy, the mixture varied based on the town's location, time of founding, size, and social structure, and on local materials. From the time of the earliest settlements, making chests, chairs, and tables was one facet of the agricultural cycle and fit neatly with the responsibilities of animal and grain husbandry and fishing.

In the older coastal communities of western Connecticut, stretching from Milford to Norwalk, limited coastal trade made imported products and materials available. Several Stratford storekeepers imported chairs made by Edward Larkin of Charlestown, Massachusetts, in the 1740s and 1750s, and the 1763 probate inventory of Captain Joseph Squier of Fairfield lists “6 Chairs boston make.” Inventory references also make clear the increased availability of black walnut from the Middle Atlantic and southern regions and mahogany from the West Indies during the second half of the eighteenth century. Although Captain John Brooks of Stratford, who conducted trade with the Caribbean in the 1770s and 1780s, shipped six chairs made by Henry Beardslee to St. Croix in 1785, joiners' work along the Long Island Sound was not as dependent upon maritime and shipbuilding rhythms as in maritime centers such as Marblehead, Massachusetts. Coastal trade was only a small part of an economy based on agriculture, animals, fishing, and small shop craftwork. Lewis Burritt (1772–1839), an accomplished joiner
who made inlaid mahogany case furniture, also participated in the varied Stratford economy of the 1790s and early 1800s. Besides making furniture, he hayed and pulled flax, made and mended oyster rakes, and made hat blocks and farming tools.  

Shop joiners in the recently settled lands of western Connecticut also organized their work in accordance with local agricultural rhythms. Widespread local use of such tools as axes, saws, broadaxes, and the like enabled the professional joiner to draw on a number of neighbors during the slack farming months of December, January, and February to fell, score, sled, split, and saw the locally available cherry, maple, yellow poplar, oak, and white pine. Winter was the ideal time for such activity: farmers had more free time and eagerly accepted such occasional work, the wood cut best at that time, and logs were easily sleded on the snowy ground.

Most preparation and assembly of furniture took place between harvest and spring planting. Joiners could count on uninterrupted time, so the workmanship of habit and the setup of lathes or bench clamps in the small shops could be used to efficient advantage. One task was the production of great quantities of turned chair parts when the lathe was set up and slightly green wood was available. Case furniture could be produced throughout the year, but the work seems to have been concentrated in two periods of heightened activity: February to April and August to November. The first period followed the cutting of new wood and allowed the joiner to work the wood while it was slightly green, an advantage in turning and in some types of carving. The second period was when the farmer clientele were able to calculate their harvest yield and therefore gauge what they could afford to spend on furniture.

The seasonal rhythms and local economies affected the types of furniture produced. Turned chairs often were produced and exported by urban craftsmen such as Edward Larkin, but they also were the ideal chair type to be produced in a rural-based mixed agricultural community. There always was a market for chairs—they tended to get knocked about a fair amount, were more affordable than more complicated furniture forms, possessed visual flair, and enjoyed greater demand because of changing social customs. In addition they were easier to design and make than case furniture. Owing to practical considerations such as seat height and other dimensions, the maker worked in a more circumscribed habitual manner when making chairs and tables than when making storage furniture. Standard dimensions provided the general parameters of design. Variations tended to be in de-
gree rather than in kind and often were concentrated in the appearance of the legs and back.

Rural joiners, who had the winter months free, could produce considerable quantities of turned chairs. They set up their lathes and turned parts efficiently and quickly by using a strike pole, or marking stick, to lay out the sections of turned elements and by maximizing the rhythm of their turning tools and lathe. They could rive out large quantities of wood for the slats or use a template to cut out the banisters and crest rails. It was thus possible and advantageous to stockpile certain parts such as rounds, posts, and slats. Several jobs, like bottoming and painting, could be subcontracted to others within the community. Joiners in western Connecticut often delegated such irregular work to young joiners who were just establishing themselves, older joiners in the twilight of their careers, or other members of the community. Subcontracting was not simply a means of reducing price but also of distributing work during the slack months, providing work for aging craftsmen, drawing tighter the web of local exchange, and allowing a craftsman to organize his work so as to focus on furnituremaking during the winter months and other opportune times.11

Turned chair production was not a specialized task but rather was standard output for a largely local market. Because of the speed of producing chairs and the use of local labor and materials, craftsmen could also make case furniture in the winter months. Unlike chairs, case furniture was a complex, open-ended product: Per capita ownership of case furniture in comparison with the sets of chairs listed in accounts and inventories indicates that there was relatively limited demand for large storage forms. Most households had several pieces of storage furniture, but consistently there were many more chairs and tables. There were also a great number of options for form, size, and configuration of drawers and compartments. Finally, large drawered or doored furniture required a lot of material and labor. Limited demand and the high cost of labor contributed to certain patterns of production in rural shops. A plentiful supply of butted and nailed chests—easily assembled from boards sawed at the local sawmill—has survived, but so has a variety of joined case furniture such as high chests, dressing tables, and chests of drawers.12

The number of complex storage forms listed in written documents and the evidence of the many surviving examples suggest that western Connecticut joiners employed various strategies to produce case furniture efficiently. Foremost was their reliance on local sawmills to provide boards with
desired dimensions, thereby precluding the need to resaw or plane the boards to usable thicknesses. In Newtown and Woodbury, surviving artifacts reveal the joiners’ use of blanks, which required only light planing before use. Some boards that were used for drawer linings or backboards still retain their water-powered-saw marks. In Newtown, most cherry boards were sawn ¾-inch thick, and yellow poplar and oak, ½-inch thick. In Woodbury, cherry tended to be ¾-inch thick; yellow poplar, ½- or ¾-inch; oak, ½-inch; and white pine, ¾-inch. With boards delivered in the proper thickness, a joiner could readily lay out and cut joints. Preparations also were made easy by jigs such as a marking gauge to mark mortise and tenon joints and a bevel gauge to lay out consistent pins and tails for dovetails. Workmanship of habit made cutting tenons or dovetails proceed quickly. We tend to romanticize the cutting of dovetails, but joiners of this period could perform like machines in turning out these items.13

Probate inventories indicate widespread ownership of templates and patterns. Although many scholars believe that template use was an urban phenomenon typical of large-scale production, patterns also proved worthwhile in a rural shop with infrequent or seasonal production. Using templates to lay out crooked legs, bracket feet, and skirt profiles saved considerable time and, combined with the mental templates of rote structural work, enabled the small-shop joiner to make a desk in about a week and a half and a case of drawers in about three weeks. 14

The organizational structure of the joiner’s shop was critical to its successful operation. Written records identify two coexisting approaches to furniture production in western Connecticut during the last half of the eighteenth century: the family-based shop and the individual shop. In the family shop, a master craftsman took on neighbors or kin and then his own sons, as they matured, to staff his shop. These shops were part of a household economy that included improved land for crops and pasturage for animals. Acreage varied, but usually there were one to five acres of improved land and five to thirty acres of unimproved land. The historical evidence of such family dynasties as the Durands of Milford, the Hubbells and Beardslees of Stratford, and the Prindles and Fabriques of Newtown attest to the success of this approach.

For other joiners, continuing in the community was not desirable or possible. Drawn by the promise of a newly developing area or pushed out of a stagnant or overcrowded center, some joiners lacked the means or connections to purchase sufficient land to establish their own mixed agricultural–craft household. Many bought or rented small lots of one acre or less. To
compensate for their lack of productive land, such craftsmen were under more pressure to make a living from their services. They thus concentrated more on craftwork and irregular handyman work. The instability of their lifestyles meant that their families often lasted less than a generation in a town and then moved along.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Social Aspects of Composition}

With the exception of shops in commercial centers such as Boston and Newport, furniture production in eighteenth-century New England was essentially a face-to-face negotiation between the joiner and his customers. The customer purchased a piece already assembled or specified an assembly of features. In the latter case the patron had a more active role in the craftsman-client relationship, but the joiner still selected the form, decoration, and trim from his repertoire or through his own understanding of the desired style. The artisan controlled the “nature of work”—the physical knowledge of materials and techniques and its application—whereas the community controlled the “context of work.” A joiner allocated his time and skills among the members of the community as he saw fit, while the community constantly judged his performance and bestowed him with a reputation. It was therefore important for the craftsman to understand and respond to the community. After all, the local clientele ultimately determined the success of a single joiner or the viability of several joiners.\textsuperscript{16}

Apprenticeship introduced boys to the role of the joiner within that particular community and directly exposed them to the town’s opinions and expectations of the master and his shop. Schooled in social as well as technical skills and conventions, the young artisan developed a personal expression that blended empirical craft techniques and local aesthetics. A joiner’s cultural acumen and market judgment allowed him to practice a dynamic craft, but this dynamism was dependent on his patrons. Just as a kit of tools and learned techniques shaped the craftsman’s range of possibilities, so did the needs, aspirations, and expectations of his clientele.\textsuperscript{17}

Owing to the social basis of the craft, most joiners found it easiest to remain in the town in which they were trained. Established accounts with neighbors or relatives and familiarity with the available labor and materials certainly gave such a joiner an edge. A less tangible advantage was his internalization of local aesthetics. Within a familiar context of work, he continued to apply learned attitudes and techniques for design and fabrica-
tion. His training conditioned him to recognize that particular community's needs and provided him with the skills currently in demand. If techniques were introduced by a newly arrived craftsman, the locally trained joiner would perceive these options from a viewpoint similar to that of the majority of his customers. Work performed in such a context tended to be traditional but not unchanging and can be characterized as cumulatively adaptive.

On the other hand, a joiner trained in one community but active in another often had different experiences. Some clients may have sought his work as different or the latest fashion, but his learned techniques and the customers' demands did not always align so neatly. To continue his trade, such a joiner had to be willing to alter his internalized approaches, especially with respect to decoration and forms. He had to embrace and elaborate on chosen techniques rather than rely on learned methods. To survive he incorporated different techniques seen in work by other craftsmen, paid more attention to new forms produced elsewhere, or gave greater weight to his customers' requests. If he worked in a community with joiners trained in a number of different traditions, he had many techniques from which to draw.¹⁸

To understand the social context of furnituremaking, it is essential to reconstruct the social and economic structure of the community over time and identify the joiners' backgrounds. Particular attention should be paid to periods of dynamic growth or internal stasis and to turning points in these trends. For example, the prosperous coastal town of Stratford experienced considerable cultural flux during the 1710s and 1720s: the Anglican church established its first Connecticut parish there; several teachers at Yale College who converted to Anglicanism in 1722 had close ties with the community; there was trade with Boston merchants and with Anglo-Dutch traders on Long Island; and two immigrant English joiners, Thomas Salmon and Samuel French, settled in the town. French and Salmon introduced a British vernacular tradition that blended with Boston and New York work to become a distinctive Stratford Georgian style. This style became the standard for much of the century as an Anglican–Old Light coalition established cultural hegemony in the 1740s.¹⁹

Stratford's selective conservatism affected clients and makers alike. Inventory references after 1750 to new fashionable and expensive furniture forms, such as sideboards, breakfast tables, and easy chairs, signified the availability of these products and an awareness of them. These forms appeared infrequently in household inventories, however. People of all in-
come levels did own substantial quantities of furniture, but they favored traditional forms. They purchased expensive case furniture, particularly cases of drawers, dressing tables, and desks, and large quantities of chairs, especially turned and crookedback chairs. For much of the last half of the century, the conservatism even influenced younger households, which acquired traditional furniture. During the first decade of the nineteenth century the joiner Lewis Burritt made several inlaid mahogany tables—decorative features and materials typical of the neoclassical style—but he still satisfied the traditional demands. He made chests, cherry chests of drawers or desks, and even fiddleback and York chairs; these chairs had been fashionable forms in the 1740s. 20

Brewster Dayton, who trained with an English joiner and had access to many sophisticated forms and techniques, restricted his performance in Stratford. Much of his work had its roots in a vocabulary established before 1750. The proportions, tympanums, and crowns of two signed cases of drawers from 1784 resemble those found on Long Island examples of the 1740s. To this Anglo-Dutch work, Dayton blended the carved feet and scrolled knees introduced by his master. Dayton's probate inventory and various account book references also indicate that he made slat-back, fiddleback, and crookedback chairs, all of which are based on traditional chair forms. Even his furniture's primary woods, which include sycamore as well as subgrade cherry heartwood, reflect his reliance on local networks. The artifactual evidence points to the selective conservatism of the local clientele. 21

The Hubbell shop evidently enjoyed a slightly greater latitude. Whereas the surviving Dayton work features only pad or carved versions of feet for case furniture, the Hubbells offered a variety: pad feet, bracket feet, carved feet, and ball-and-claw feet. The Hubbell shop is also distinguished by a greater variety of primary woods. Of all the identifiable Stratford shops, it is the only one in the last half of the century to use walnut and mahogany. Ebenezer Hubbell's brother-in-law Captain John Brooks, a merchant who was the "principal inhabitant of Stratford," provided the Hubbell shop with access to these imported woods. The handling of the ball-and-claw foot also suggests an external influence—the Hubbell feet closely resemble the squat plumpness of Philadelphia work. A set of joiner's chairs that might have been made in the Hubbell shop also manifest the influence of Philadelphia furniture. Chairs of this type were listed in John Brooks's probate inventory of 1777, which included "New furniture at Hubbells"—"1 Case Black Walnut Draws £8.10.0, 6 Cringle Back do Chairs @ 20/ £6, 1 great
Chair £1.5.0." Although the Hubbell shop could make high-style case furniture and joiner's chairs, the bulk of their work was executed in a simpler fashion. Most surviving chairs that relate to the single set of joiner's chairs are fiddleback and crookedback versions.²²

Contrasting with the stylistic cohesion of Stratford was the stylistic frenzy of the New London County region between 1770 and 1800. In eastern Connecticut, an entrepreneurial merchant class orchestrated a vast export trade of beef and pork for the West Indies market. Reliant on elaborate credit connections with colonial and British merchants and constantly vulnerable to local and extralocal economic changes, these traders suffered from status anxiety. Through military supply contracts and privateering profits, the regional elite amassed significant fortunes during the Revolution. After the conflict, they sought to display their rank in their furnishings: joined chairs and elaborately conceived and decorated case furniture. Within a fairly closed community, they competed with one another, a competition aided by the diversity of joiners active in the region. Joiners who had trained in Philadelphia or Boston, and even an English prisoner of war captured during the Revolution, offered a rich variety of possible techniques and conventions. Exposure to New York and Newport furniture also provided ingredients for a stew of chosen traditions that was constantly remixed in towns such as Colchester, Norwich, or New London.²³

Samuel Loomis of Colchester (1748–1814), who apprenticed with the Philadelphia-trained Benjamin Burnham, blended elements from many regional traditions and added extra shells, multiplied moldings, and developed new carved decoration to produce elaborate variations for clients who were closely related by familial or business ties. In southeastern Connecticut, the size of case furniture and any carved, molded detail on it were most highly valued. Felix Huntington of Norwich (1749–1822) developed a line of plain joiner's chairs made of rich, dense imported mahogany and upholstered by his brother Jonathan. Huntington drew his designs from imported English and Boston examples, but eliminated expensive carved details in order to provide a more affordable alternative to the carved Boston chairs. For seating, the number, upholstery, and type of wood seemed paramount to clients.

Even though permanence and learned techniques often resulted in traditional but evolving styles, and mobility and chosen techniques often resulted in rapid stylistic change, we need to be careful not to suggest simple polarities. All furniture blends the familiar and the new; what is different is the proportion of each and where change is permitted. Similarly
we should be careful in studying Connecticut not to automatically draw a distinction between the traditional, Old Light western part of the colony and the cosmopolitan, New Light eastern section. Analysis of specific craftsmen-community relationships is essential to understand the nuances of differences in social economy.

The Cultural Significance of Joiners

In eighteenth-century rural New England, a world characterized by increasing population density, flourishing coastal trade, and chronic agricultural underemployment, a craft skill such as furnituremaking served an increasingly important function. Possession of craft skills had always been an integral part of estate settlement strategies, but certain trends in the eighteenth century endowed it with new importance. The expanding population, shrinking supply of unsettled land, increasing quantity and quality of English products, and rising accumulation and consumption of household goods shifted the balance of craftwork and farming. Whereas earlier craft by-employment was subordinate to agriculture, by the end of the eighteenth century craft activity was primary. As many household farms became smaller and the increased population demanded and produced more goods, the transmission of craft skills gained stature. Whether in a stagnant or dynamic rural area, furnituremakers personified the adaptive resiliency that became a fundamental trait of the New England character in the late eighteenth century. Making furniture embodied the prevalent values of the period: the familial priority of permanence and stability and the pragmatic need to conduct some entrepreneurial activity with the external market.24

Many New Englanders placed particular emphasis on stability. By the mid eighteenth century, subdivision of family lands throughout several generations had taxed the limited land resources and was creating impractically sized farms. To preserve stability, agrarian families sought to keep their children on the family land or within a community of kin. Fathers provided sons with craft training, thereby enabling them to earn a living with a smaller plot of arable land. Part-time artisan work thus provided the means to subdivide family lands further while maintaining economic viability and preserving the family identity in town. Combining craftwork and farming allowed a particular family to balance numbers and resources and to strengthen ties within the community. Craft shops produced needed goods
for the expanding population and drew on the services of other community members.25

In families with several generations of woodworkers, joiner's skills provided both a livelihood and a legacy. Craft skills and tools, like land for sons of farmers and furnishings for their daughters, became another form of "property" that could be transmitted through the family network. Like real and personal estate, skills and tools allowed the succeeding generation to establish its own productive household unit while maintaining cross-generational rights and responsibilities. The success of this artisan strategy can be seen in the families who produced several generations of joiners within each town: the Durands in Milford, Hubbells in Stratford, and Prindles in Newtown.26

Other New Englanders placed slightly less emphasis on geographic permanence. If pressure for land continued unabated, the father could acquire land in a nearby town or on the frontier. Then the father assisted his son's migration by deeding him the land. Sons with joiner's skills probably found such relocation easier. Demand for joiner's work permitted some sons to establish themselves in a nearby community, close to kin support. For instance, John Fabrique, a Newtown cordwainer, provided two sons with woodworking skills. David and Bartimeus Fabrique were then able to practice the house joiner's trade in Newtown and the adjacent communities of Derby, Southbury, Woodbury, Roxbury, and New Milford. Other families provided a number of house and shop joiners who formed a regional network of related woodworkers. Among the many examples of such families in western Connecticut were the Beardslees, Prindles, and Booths.27

Those who moved farther away often moved with other kin or people from the same town. Such joiners preserved the group's cultural identity by providing familiar products. Like the English joiner who emigrated to New England in the 1630s, the rural Connecticut joiner who moved north or west in the early nineteenth century created physical and psychological comfort for others in a new environment. Lemuel Porter, a Waterbury joiner, moved west to Tallmedge in the Western Reserve in 1818 and built a church and several houses that re-created the appearance of Litchfield, Connecticut.28

Craft skills could be used in more innovative ways. Instead of being pushed into the joiner's trade by familial pressures, some sons were pulled into it. The growing population fostered a growing need for furniture, and such structural shifts gradually and unevenly affected cultural values. Some sons of farmers took advantage of available opportunities. Lacking the strength of family tradition, farmers' sons like Arcillus Hamlin may have
been less tied to tradition and therefore more innovative in their work. Hamlin, the son of a Sharon farmer, worked as a joiner in Newtown. His 1827 inventory listed many items that were unique or rare for Newtown joiners: trunks, sheets of veneer, and bureaus. Such free agent joiners were also more willing to migrate as individuals. William H. Peabody, born in Norwich, worked for a few years in Stratford, sold his shop and moved to Woodbury, worked in Woodbury for twelve years, and then returned to Stratford. Joiners like Hamlin and Peabody may have perceived their skills as a marketable commodity for an individual rather than as an adaptive strategy for family continuity and identity.29

Woodworkers' sons who inherited skills and tools sometimes made different uses of these traditions as economic patterns changed and altered their attitudes. Justin Hobart Jr., the son of a Fairfield shop joiner, received his father's home and shop in 1797 but preferred to seek his fortune as a journeyman cabinetmaker in New York City. His entrepreneurial attitude was expressed in several letters to his sister Mary. In some of the early letters from 1797, Hobart reported constant work and good earnings. Within three years, however, he lamented: “I dont think that I shall work Journey work any longer their is no profit in it I dont Earn but Just Enough to pay my Expenses and I believe I can doe that in the Country. . . . I have work on hand that will take me about 6 weeks to finish and then I intend to quit working Journey work for a Spell . . . if their is going to Bee so many traders in Fairfield it will Doe for me to Carry on the Cabinet Business their they Cant get that away from me.” Nevertheless, Hobart remained in New York a while longer, for in 1804 he took on John Jackson as an apprentice.30

Silas Cheney, a member of another woodworking family from Manchester, Connecticut, moved to Litchfield in 1799, probably with the intent to exploit the growing economy in northwestern Connecticut. He established a rural manufactory for the production of furniture, employing several journeymen and apprentices at one time and drawing on woodworkers in nearby Connecticut and Massachusetts towns for outwork. A Lenox, Massachusetts, woodworking shop, West & Hatch, provided Cheney with parts for kitchen and Windsor chairs. One of Cheney's journeymen, Lambert Hitchcock, went on to refine some of these practices in the large-scale production of turned, flag-seated fancy chairs.31

In the eighteenth century, similarities in technical repertoires, tool ownership, and shop layout linked the joiners of western Connecticut. However, these artisans made different uses of the same processes and equipment according to the traditions in which they were trained and the context of
their mature work. By identifying the diagnostic details of craft traditions, it is possible to follow the flow and confluence of ideas and people over the New England landscape. Changes in consumption patterns or production rhythms often coincided with shifting commercial relations and increased involvement with external markets. Documentary evidence of craftsmen and communities, used in conjunction with artifactual evidence, offers explanations why different towns supported both different types of joiners and contrasting taste for furniture in the late eighteenth century.