Workmanship of Habit: The Furniture of Newtown

While manuscript sources such as probate inventories and account books permit the study of patterns of distribution, usage, and patronage, actual artifacts also provide essential evidence about the context of furniture production and usage. Rigorous analysis of surviving furniture from Newtown and Woodbury proves invaluable for a number of reasons. The artifacts provide a different type of evidence, which corroborates or even elaborates upon the data presented in the previous chapter. Attention to technical and decorative details often reveals qualitative differences concealed by general inventory terms like black chair or cherry table. Artifactual analysis and comparison also help to investigate craftsmen’s behavior. Structural and decorative features of a surviving piece of furniture provide essential information about the training, habits, and values of its maker. Rather than judging each surviving object merely on its aesthetics or historical associations, one needs to analyze a body of furniture in a collective, comparative manner. Examination of a significant object pool, with items linked by common place of origin, reveals the workings of past minds and serves as a graphic index of cultural continuity and change.

Furniture production in Newtown and Woodbury was related in several respects. The shared topographical features provided each town with the same raw materials for furniture. Particularly common in contemporary sources and surviving artifacts are cherry (Prunus serotina), yellow poplar (Liriodendron tulipifera), which was referred to as whitewood in the period, and red oak (Quercus rubra). For the better case furniture and tables, joiners of both communities used cherry and occasionally sugar maple (Acer saccharum) for the exterior wood. A combination of yellow poplar, red oak, white pine (Pinus strobus), or even post oak (Quercus stellata) was favored for the less visible interior structure. As late as the early nineteenth century, red
oak remained a popular choice for drawer linings. Cherry was used for the more expensive chairs, but maple, yellow poplar, and ash (*Fraxinus americana*) were used for the less expensive turned chairs and for Windsor chairs. Joiners throughout the region turned legs and front rounds or stretchers from maple; sawed out and modeled crest rails, banisters, and shoe rails from yellow poplar; and rent and shaved side rounds and slats out of ash. Painted yellow poplar and white pine storage forms and tables served utilitarian needs. Imported walnut (*Juglans nigra*) and mahogany (*Swietenia mahogani*), which were less common than the locally available woods, were used only in the most fashionable furniture and enjoyed greater popularity in Woodbury than in Newtown.

Although the species of trees in Newtown and Woodbury were similar, the quality of the wood often differed. In Newtown, surviving examples indicate that joiners used good grades of yellow poplar, red oak, and white pine for drawer linings, interior structural elements, and backboards of case furniture. An even grain and a lack of defects characterize the look of these woods. Similarly the cherry or maple used as the primary, or exterior, wood is rarely marred by the contrast between heartwood and sapwood; color and grain are uniform. In contrast, much of the white pine and oak found in Woodbury furniture is knotty and rough, and the cherry exterior wood often contains both heartwood and sapwood.

This evidence indicates that Newtown joiners had access to and valued the best-quality primary and secondary woods. Several explanations could account for this supply: sawmills carefully sawed around the log, constantly rotating it, and thereby removed the greatest number of better-grade boards and kept the knotty defects in the central portion; Newtown inhabitants maintained carefully harvested wood lots as part of the mixed agricultural economy; or the community internalized an allocation system in which the best lumber used in furnituremaking was designated for the local joiners, while lesser quality lumber was earmarked for other purposes such as framing or fuel. The lower grades of woods in Woodbury furniture could be attributed to greater use of “through and through sawing,” a more efficient way of ripping boards from logs that produces lumber of varying quality; and careless harvesting practices, in which farmers cleared wood lots to allow more pasturage for animal husbandry. There was also no systematic local allocation of wood; instead, the Woodbury joiner found himself restricted to local woods of widely varying quality and to lumber purchased from surrounding areas that still maintained good stands of the necessary cabinet-making woods.¹
Coastal Connecticut cabinetmaking traditions also linked the furniture made in Newtown and Woodbury, for craftsmen such as Timothy Jordan and Samuel Curtiss of Stratford and Alexander Bryan and David Miles of Milford moved to Newtown and Woodbury in the mid eighteenth century. They introduced elements of the coastal traditions into the two inland towns' styles of construction and decoration. As a result it can be hard initially to distinguish between furniture made in the different communities of the Housatonic Valley. The confusion resulting from this shared heritage can be seen most clearly in the common turned vocabulary (both the shape and placement of turned elements such as balusters or rings) of the posts and front rounds, or stretchers, of fiddleback and crookedback chairs and the widespread use of scrolled knees and carved fans on case furniture. In Stratford, Newtown, and Woodbury, joiners occasionally executed a similar decorative scroll on the outside edges of crooked legs and often carved a distinctive fan, characterized by concave, spoon-handled ribs, on the lower central drawer of a case of drawers or dressing table. The movement of joiners between Newtown and Woodbury also contributed to similarities in the towns' furniture. Members of the Fabrique and Booth families worked in both towns, and Abner Judson was born in Newtown, trained in Woodbury, and returned to Newtown to work. As a result of this mobility, joiners in one town were aware of design, techniques, and workmanship in the other.²

In spite of these similarities, subtle constructional and decorative differences help to distinguish Newtown furniture from Woodbury furniture. These differences became more noticeable toward the end of the eighteenth century. After 1760 Newtown continued to selectively blend the coastal furniture traditions of its earlier joiners. The compatibility of the original coastal traditions, limited immigration of new craftsmen, and training of local youths resulted in a relative homogenization of furniture production. Stability in the craft structure restricted sustained challenges to the available shops. Differences between Newtown shops became very subtle by the end of the eighteenth century as a distinctive Newtown style of traditional forms and restrained decoration evolved. However, one should not view this as totally derivative or static material culture. Even though Newtown joiners drew on existing technical and stylistic ideas, they reordered and combined these parts in a variety of new ways. Occasionally they adapted new features to their conservative forms or added elaborate decoration. Analysis of Newtown's turned chair production, comparison of similar case furniture made in three shops (which researchers have not yet been
able to identify), and examination of several other examples of locally made furniture help us to understand Newtown’s traditional culture.

**Chairs**

The chairs in figures 7 through 14 illustrate some of the most popular chair types produced in Newtown between 1770 and 1810. Consumers of the eighteenth century, like those of the present, chose from various products on the basis of cost and stylishness. Ebenezer Booth IV (1743–1790) was one Newtown joiner who offered a variety of chairs to meet the townspeople’s differing demands. His inventory included, in order of increasing cost, “plain,” “round top,” “horn,” and “fiddleback” chairs. Although it has been impossible to determine what a horn chair looked like, the other three chair types specified in Booth’s estate can be identified.

The illustrated plain chair (see fig. 7) embodies simple design and decoration and ease of manufacture. The bowed profile of the back slats and the ball-and-reel finial at the top of each rear post are the only decorative details on this very chaste chair. Its method of construction contributes to its modest appearance: slats sawn from yellow poplar boards, visible elements of the frame easily produced on a lathe, rounds and seat lists shaped with a drawknife and inserted into holes drilled in the four posts, and flag seat quickly woven over the lists. The ease of construction and lack of time-consuming decorative work made this chair available at the lowest price.

The term for the common chair underwent several changes during the period of this study. The modifying term for this type of chair changed from surface description to formal trait to functional delimitation. From 1760 until about 1790 these chairs were referred to as white chairs, indicating an unfinished or unpainted surface. The 1777 inventory of Ebenezer Johnson, which listed “8 white plain chairs 10/,” foreshadowed a terminological shift that was completed by the century’s end. In 1790 these common chairs, valued between one and two shillings each, began to be called plain chairs or kitchen chairs. The latter term became predominant in the early nineteenth century.

With the terminological change, the chair experienced a stylistic evolution during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The earlier examples featured thin posts, each embellished with a baluster, or vase-shaped decorative turning, on the rear posts and crisply executed ball-and-reel finials. The nineteenth-century version had shorter, heavier plain posts
and finials with softer turnings. Although the chair in figure 7 has undecorated posts, its sharply turned finials and the height and relative thinness of its posts suggests a date of manufacture in the late eighteenth century. This stylistic transformation of plain/kitchen chairs in Newtown paralleled a similar process in Milford and may have begun there because of the Milford origin of several Newtown families, particularly the joiners Alexander Bryan and James Briscoe Jr. Many of the techniques and styles introduced by Bryan and Briscoe became part of the Newtown joiners’ stock of ideas.  

The “round top” or “round back” chair, first listed in the 1776 inventory of Moses Platt, was a moderately priced chair that never gained the same popularity as the plain/kitchen chair or the later fiddleback chair. The round-top chair (see fig. 8) was the rural joiner’s response to expensive joined chairs in the early Georgian style (1720–40), what collectors of antiques commonly call the Queen Anne. Georgian chairs were distinguished by yoke-shaped crest rails, short and broad backs, baluster-shaped banisters, sawn-out rear legs with ogee, or S-shaped, profiles, sawn-out crooked front legs with claw or round feet, joined seat frames, and carved decoration. To make this new type of chair, the craftsman sawed the parts from expensive woods such as walnut or mahogany; shaped the parts with a drawknife, rasp, and scraper; and joined them with mortises and tenons. Turning, if used at all, was confined to shaping the round feet and making rounds, which were not common on chairs of this type.

Newtown joiners became aware of the new Georgian style through their own and their clients’ exposure to it, possibly during a trip to Danbury, Fairfield, New Haven, or some other larger town. The appearance of the urban chair, however, conflicted with the traditional concept of a chair in Newtown. Therefore the Newtown joiner sought to reproduce the feeling of this fashion within the locally accepted idiom, which demonstrated a preference for chairs with turned frames and flag seats. He was technically capable of producing a version of the early Georgian joined chair, but instead assessed the new type in light of his accustomed practice of turning parts. He employed a combination of turned and joined construction, updating the highly visible upper-back area with a smoothly modeled yoke-shaped crest rail, baluster-shaped banister, and rounded rear posts. These posts resembled the rounded stiles on some early Georgian chairs rather than posts on turned chairs. To balance this new fashion with the old style, he preserved the stretcher system, turned decoration, turned vertical posts, flag seat, and verticality of the older chair types. Extensive use of turned construction also permitted fast and easy manufacture. The round-top chair
was a fairly inexpensive seating form that conformed to traditional expectations but also incorporated elements of newer taste.8

The round-top chair in figure 8 provides evidence of Newtown joiners’ origins and attests to the persistence of certain cultural ideas in the inwardly focused community. The turned intermediate spindles, running from the rear post to the front leg just under the arms, and the simple decoration of the rear posts (a long column surmounting a flattened ball) can be seen on contemporary chairs from Milford and Stratford. Joiners trained in these communities, such as Alexander Bryan and Benjamin Latten, could have introduced these features, or Newtown families with relatives still in Milford or Stratford may have desired furniture similar to that of their cousins. Other details link this round-top chair with earlier turned chairs from Norwalk, Fairfield, and New York. The rounded profile and molded upper surface of the arms’ handgrips and the barrel-shaped turned elements on the front posts (where the intermediate spindles tenon into the front post) suggest the influence of a Norwalk-area chairmaking tradition. Several crown chairs with histories of ownership in Norwalk families exhibit the prototypes of such features. The baluster turnings on the front round and the ring turnings of the front posts resemble those on a slat-back chair attributed to Ozias Buddington of Fairfield. Aspects of the front round also reflect the influence of York chairs made in New York. The rounds of those urban chairs featured bulging baluster termini at each end and a tripartite central element that consisted of a thin central ring flanked on either side by a well-articulated reel. The Newtown craftsman drew individual elements from these four different traditions and combined them in his own way.9

Beginning in the 1780s, round-top chairs appeared infrequently in Newtown inventories, and fiddleback chairs (see figs. 9–14) became the most common chair form. Fiddleback and round-top chairs shared the same turned structural system derived from several coastal chairmaking traditions, but differed in their crest rails. The fiddleback had only a vestige of the yoke shape at its center between sweeping sides with squared-off ears curving up and back. The sweeping shape of the crest rail originated in English furniture in the style of William Kent during the 1740s and was adapted to American furniture in the 1750s. The fiddleback was thus a slightly more fashionable turned chair in the 1780s, and its popularity coincided with a time of gradually increasing furniture value in Newtown (see chart 3).10

Close examination of fiddlebacks with histories of ownership by New-
town families and comparison with related chairs without definite provenance reveal the existence of at least four groups of chairs, each of which probably represents a different shop tradition. Within each group, the joiner had several options for particular features such as the rear posts or the termini at the top of the rear posts. Comparison of the feet, front rounds, front posts, splat profile, rear post, and termini of the rear post indicates that the front stretcher and the handling of the baluster shape on the front and rear posts are the most important distinctions between shops.  

One shop produced a simplified fiddleback with minimal turned decoration (see fig. 9). The use of two front rounds rather than one, simple ring turnings on the front posts, and a “turnerly” seat construction, in which the front posts continue up through the seating plane, link the chair type to the plain/kitchen chair tradition. The type is distinguished from plain/kitchen chairs by a fiddleback crest rail, baluster-shaped banister, or splat, very simplified baluster turnings on the front rounds, and turned rear posts with two baluster-shaped elements of different lengths, the lower one of which features crisp, well-defined rings at the base and the top. The joiner did not, however, turn any sort of decorative termini at the top of the rear posts, as found on figures 10 through 12. The seat construction and the abridgment of the turned decoration on the rear posts allowed the craftsman to make this type of chair more quickly than the other fiddlebacks discussed below. Its simplicity demonstrates why certain fiddlebacks had a slightly lower value than most others in inventories or account books.  

A fiddleback (see fig. 10) originally owned by a member of the Blackman family incorporates several features that made it more “joinerly” and more expensive. To endow the seat with the appearance of a joined seat, the craftsman shaped the front seat list to include a square block at each end. He then tenoned the front posts into the undersides of the blocks and the side seat lists into the rear edges of the blocks. This practice resulted in a single-plane seat, which was not disrupted by protruding front posts. The substitution of a single, more decoratively turned front round for two simple front rounds was another way in which the joiner distinguished this type of fiddleback from plain chairs and added decoration. The turnings of the rear post feature thinner baluster shapes and softer rings than those on figure 9, but both types resemble the posts on crown and painted chairs from Milford. While the front rounds of figure 9 resemble those on Milford chairs, the turnings of the front round in figure 10—long, baluster-shaped termini with ring transitions to the coffin-shaped balusters, which flank a central element consisting of a thick, reeded disk between reels—echo those
found on examples from Norwalk and suggest a second shop tradition.\textsuperscript{13}

A joiner in a third shop produced very similar fiddlebacks distinguished by a different front round, in which the central element was a single reel, and a different handling of turning gouges. He favored robust transitions between turned elements, turning a flaring reel at the top of the attenuated rear post baluster to provide a lively flow into the baluster terminus or turning crisp tapered rings at the bases of the balusters. The chair in figure 11 descended in the Stiles family of Southbury, but its overall form, crest rail, splat, and turnings closely follow Newtown conventions and relate to a number of other local examples. A craftsman working in a fourth shop favored conical-shaped termini rather than baluster-shaped stops on the front rounds and baluster-and-cone turnings rather than double-baluster turnings at the top of the front legs; a chair that passed down in the Beers family illustrates the turning vocabulary of this Newtown shop (see fig. 12). The lack of a ring under the baluster on the front post, the consistent use of a ring on the back post just above the seat plane, and a distinctive terminus at the top of the rear post, consisting of a small reel with a large baluster above it, are also distinguishing features of chairs produced in this shop.

Several fiddleback chairs combine features of two shops. One chair (see fig. 13), originally owned by Solomon Glover (1750–1842), combines baluster-shaped termini on the front round (seen on figs. 10 and 11) and baluster-and-cone turnings on the front post (seen on fig. 12). The rear posts illustrate the second type of back post found on Newtown fiddlebacks: a long column mounted on a thick, flattened ball. The same back post can be found on Stratford examples from the last two decades of the eighteenth century; however, the Newtown joiner eliminated the termini at the top of the back post and used the typical Newtown crest rail rather than a Stratford crest.\textsuperscript{14} The survival of sufficient numbers of fiddleback chairs to identify specific shop traditions and the existence of several examples that combine elements from different shops suggest that Newtown joiners either drew easily from each other’s repertoire to offer slight variations of a commonly understood form or freely exchanged surplus parts, made in efficient batches according to the rhythms of yeomen-craftsmen, as other neighboring craftsmen needed them. The common understanding of fiddleback chairs drawn from coastal turning traditions and preserved by the artisanal continuity of Newtown and the shared sense of economic role within the mixed agricultural economy combined to defuse a competitive spirit and contribute to a mutuality of interests.

Great fiddlebacks are more difficult to assign to specific shop traditions,
but they still provide invaluable information about furnituremaking in Newtown. A great fiddleback with rockers (see fig. 14) documents that joiners who made fiddlebacks in the nineteenth century continued to draw from the same repertoire of parts. The maker preserved the traditional fiddleback form, particularly the crest, turned structure, and front round, but endowed it with a newer feeling by lightening the decoration and thinning the structural members (the front round is noticeably thinner in comparison to the front rounds on earlier fiddlebacks). Such alterations reflect the influence of the neoclassical style. Rather than use a new type of arm, the maker searched through his repertoire for an old form compatible with the neoclassical feeling and chose arms just like those on figure 8.15

The constant, unaltered characteristics of the illustrated Newtown fiddlebacks—painted turned frame, flag seat, and specific type of crest rail and front round—constituted the essential definition of the Newtown fiddleback chair. Within these parameters there was room for considerable diversity. Newtown joiners continued to draw from a familiar collection of older coastal and New York chairmaking traditions to vary the turnings and arms. The structural consistency, persistence of older details, and accommodation of only the general feel of the neoclassical style document the relatively unchallenged homogenization of several Newtown joiners' shops.

Even the more fashionable crookedback chair, which appeared very infrequently in Newtown inventories, reflects the existence of a selective conservatism that drew upon coastal material culture. A Newtown crookedback chair (see fig. 15) is linked to the fiddleback tradition through its front round, which is identical to that on the fiddleback in figure 12. The crest rail, banister, and rear stiles on this example are plain interpretations of a Stratford crookedback made in the middle of the eighteenth century. Unlike his Stratford counterpart, the Newtown joiner did not run a decorative molding along the lower edge of the shoe rail, and he employed a more traditional substructure. The use of double, decoratively turned side rounds rather than single sawn-out stretchers and uncarved feet suggest the influence of Newtown's preference for turned structure and plain decoration. Even on one of the most fashionable chair types in Newtown, qualities of traditional form, uniform structure, and plain decoration predominate.16

Newtown seating furniture manifests the influence of the workmanship of habit. The relationships among the illustrated chairs document turning's consistency over two or three generations. The chairs also draw attention to the interdependence of technology and demand. In some respects the means of production for turned chairs perpetuated the dominance of those
Fig. 7. Plain chair, Newtown, 1770–1800. Maple, yellow poplar; overall height (OH): 38\(\frac{1}{4}\)", seat height (SH): 15", seat width (SW): 17", seat depth (SD): 12". Plain chairs with two or three slats were the most common inexpensive chair form throughout the Housatonic Valley region. Simple turned construction and limited decoration made them extremely affordable utilitarian chairs. In the early nineteenth century they were often referred to as kitchen chairs, suggesting that they were used in domestic workspace rather than social space. Collection of Newtown Historical Society; photograph courtesy of Mattatuck Museum.

Fig. 8. Great round-top chair, Newtown, 1760–1790. Maple, yellow poplar, and ash; OH:44", SH:16\(\frac{1}{2}\)", SW:23", SD:15\(\frac{1}{4}\)". The round-top chair was a turnerly adaptation of the fashionable joiner’s chairs made in the early Georgian style. Round-top chairs never gained great popularity in Newtown, having been superseded by the fiddleback form in the 1770s, but some of their features can be seen on later fiddlebacks. For example, the turned front round of this example closely resembles that on figure 13; the arms, those on figure 14. Collection of Newtown Historical Society; photograph courtesy of Mattatuck Museum.
Fig. 9. Top left: Fiddleback chair, Newtown, 1780–1800. Maple, yellow poplar, and ash; OH: 40½" (bottom 1¼" of front feet added), SH: 17", SW: 19", SD: 13½". The seat and substructure identify this fiddleback as a simple, inexpensive version, only slightly more stylish than a plain chair. Privately owned.

Fig. 10. Top right: Fiddleback chair, Newtown, 1770–1790. Maple, yellow poplar, and ash; OH: 40½", SH: 17", SW: 20¾", SD: 13". In contrast to figure 9, this chair manifests a greater concern with fashion within the parameters of the turned chair tradition. Blocks at the end of the front lists give the flag seat the appearance of an upholstered cushion seat in a joiner’s chair (in this example, tapestry fabric is nailed over the flag seat), while the turned decoration at the top and bottom of the front posts provide the visual interest of a joiner’s chair’s rounded knee and pad foot. Collection of Newtown Historical Society.

Fig. 11. Bottom left: Fiddleback chair, Newtown, 1780–1800. Maple, yellow poplar, and ash; OH: 38¾", SH: 15¾", SW: 20", SD: 13¾". The maker of this chair was an exuberant turner, whose flair with the turning gouge is quite recognizable. The seat’s deterioration (the jute webbing is a later addition) permits a closer look at how the front list was shaped integrally between the two blocks at its ends. Privately owned.

Fig. 12. Bottom right: Fiddleback chair, Newtown, 1770–1790. Maple, yellow poplar, and ash; OH: 40½", SH: 16¾", SW: 19¾"; SD: 13¼". The joiner who made this and similar chairs employed conical-shaped termini at the ends of the front post and front round. Privately owned; photograph courtesy of Chipstone Foundation.
Fig. 13. Fiddleback chair, Newtown, 1780–1800. Maple, yellow poplar, and ash; OH:40½", SH:15½", SW:17¼", SD:13". This particular fiddleback is unusual for its combination of conical-shaped termini on the front posts and baluster-shaped termini on the front round. The blend suggests that craftsmen might have borrowed ideas from each other or exchanged products as particular needs arose. Privately owned.

Fig. 14. Great fiddleback rocking chair, Newtown, 1800–1820. Maple, yellow poplar, and ash; OH:39½", SH:13½", SW:22½", SD:16". The rocking chair form, not common until the early nineteenth century, and the thinness of the front round on this example suggest that Newtown joiners adapted the fiddleback to new forms and lighter elements in the early nineteenth century. Privately owned; photograph courtesy of Mattatuck Museum.
Fig. 15. Crookedback chair, Newtown, 1790–1810. Maple, yellow poplar, and ash; measurements unavailable. The uncarved feet, double side rounds, and lack of incised or molded decoration on the shoe rail, rear stiles, or crest rail of this rare Newtown form document the conservative style of craftsmen there. The use of different woods means that the black paint on the chair is original. The plain decoration and painted surface of the Newtown example contrast with the more joinerly appearance and resin-finished cherry of the Woodbury examples in figures 34–36. Privately owned.
Fig. 16. Desk, Newtown, 1760–1780. Cherry and yellow poplar; height (H): 35 ¼", width (W): 36", depth (D): 19". The integral construction—the skirt, sides, and back are tenoned into the upper sections of the legs—makes this form unusual. Throughout New England at the time, most desks resembled chest of drawers with four full-width drawers surmounted by a desk interior with slant-front writing surface. Privately owned; photograph courtesy of Chipstone Foundation.

Fig. 17. Dressing table, Newtown, 1760–1780. Cherry, yellow poplar, and red oak; H:32½"; W:30½", D:20½". Dressing tables (or lowboys, as they are commonly called today) were a common form in Newtown during the last half of the eighteenth century. Newtown dressing tables are noticeably taller and wider than Boston and Massachusetts examples. Privately owned.
Fig. 18. Case of drawers, Newtown, 1770–1790. Cherry, yellow poplar, and red oak; measurements unavailable. This plain, flat-top case of drawers is an example of the most common form of large storage furniture in Newtown and was usually placed in a chamber or bedroom. A flat-top case of drawers cost less than the more complexly constructed crown case of drawers, but the handling of the scroll and the quality of the interior joinery suggest that the maker of this and several related examples was an accomplished craftsman who responded to local needs and expectations. Privately owned.
Fig. 19. Dressing table, Newtown, 1770–1790. Cherry and yellow poplar; H:30 ½”, W:30”, D:18”. In making this plain dressing table, the joiner even eliminated the scroll on the knee that he had included on the case of drawers in figure 18. A number of other plain Newtown versions have been located. Privately owned; photograph courtesy of Mattatuck Museum.
Fig. 20. Crown case of drawers, Newtown, 1769. Cherry, yellow poplar, and red oak; H:84½", W:40", D:19". Made for the daughter of a successful shopkeeper in town, this unusual case of drawers chronicles the decorative repertoire of the same Newtown shop that made figure 18. The carving of the ball-and-claw feet and "snakeskin" carving of the knees suggest a connection to high-style work in New York City, but the piercing and carving in the pilasters and the chain-like carving on the tympanum of the upper section are rarely seen on such forms. Collection of Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford.
Fig. 21. Dressing table, Newtown, 1770–1790. Cherry, yellow poplar, red oak, birch, and red pine; H:31”, W:31⅝”, D:19”. Made in the same shop as the plain version in figure 19, this elaborately carved dressing table provides additional evidence of the maker’s decorative capabilities. Courtesy of Historic Deerfield, Inc.; photography by Helga Photo Studio.
Fig. 22. Fall leaf table, Newtown, 1770–1790. Cherry and yellow poplar; measurements unavailable. The crooked legs and carved ball-and-claw feet suggest that this table was made in the same shop as figures 18–21. Such a table was used primarily for dining, but with its leaves down could be moved about the house for general use. Privately owned.
Fig. 23. Dressing table, Newtown, 1790–1810. Cherry, red oak, and white pine; H:31⅜", W:32¼", D:18¾". Although distinctive constructional practices distinguish this dressing table from those in figures 19 and 21, it nevertheless retains the large size and general appearance of other Newtown examples. Yale University Art Gallery, Mabel Brady Garvan Collection.
Fig. 24. Case of drawers, Newtown, 1790–1810. Cherry and yellow poplar; H:90½", W:41½", D:20¼". Even though the composition and construction of this case of drawers links it firmly to a Newtown shop, several of its decorative elements—contrasting fans, fluted pilasters in the upper section, and treatment of the plinth—resemble Woodbury features. Privately owned.
Fig. 25. Table with one drawer, Newtown, 1780–1810. Cherry and yellow poplar; H:27"; W:35 ¼"; D:24". Turned frame tables remained popular in Newtown into the early nineteenth century, but they were sometimes made more formal by the use of cherry and the addition of a drawer or two. Privately owned.

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Fig. 26. Desk, Newtown, 1790–1810. Cherry and white pine; H:40½", W:36", D:18½". This simple desk typifies the timeless furniture produced and purchased in Newtown in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Neither the shape of the bracket feet nor that of the brackets for the pigeonholes in the desk interior can be assigned a narrow date range of popularity or fashion. Privately owned.

Fig. 27. Desk, Newtown, 1790–1810. Cherry, yellow poplar, white pine; H:42½", W:39 ½", D:17 ¼". Although the maker of this desk had many recent techniques at his command, he used them to build a plain, traditional form. Privately owned; photograph courtesy of Mattatuck Museum.
forms. Stockpiling seasoned rounds and lists and the turning of quantities of posts meant that many structural details were prepared far ahead of demand and were thus relatively free from the immediate caprice of fashion. Although such production rhythms limited experimentation and fostered slow change over time, certain consumer preferences must have continued to call for and legitimize these traditional techniques. In short, workmanship of habit was causally linked with consumption by habit. As old forms remained in demand, old methods continued to be applicable.

Case Furniture and Tables

Newtown case furniture and tables, identifiable through histories of ownership and constructional details, encompassed a relatively limited number of forms. What was preferred in the 1750s remained fashionable in Newtown into the early nineteenth century. Plain chests, chests with drawers, cases of drawers, and dressing tables appeared frequently in inventories throughout the entire period of this study. Desks appeared in inventories after 1772. Most people in Newtown were satisfied with the limited number of forms and did not acquire new ones as early as did their Woodbury counterparts. The work of three related Newtown shops and several other pieces of Newtown furniture demonstrate this preference.

The products of a Newtown joiner working in the 1760s demonstrate the proficiency of the town’s furnituremakers and the conservative base of their few learned traditions. The desk in figure 16 was owned by the same Beers family that owned the fiddleback in figure 12. The desk on crooked legs had limited popularity in preindustrial New England. Unlike desks with four drawers underneath the writing surface, few desks on long crooked legs have survived and most have origins in southwestern Connecticut. However, the Newtown desk manifests an entirely different structural conception than that of a contemporary example made in Fairfield. The latter is a desk on a crooked leg frame, in which the upper section was dovetailed together and set on top of a base formed by tenoning the back, sides, front rail, and skirt into the legs. Its two-part construction resembles that of a case of drawers and would have required more time to construct than the Newtown example, which was built as an integral unit, more like a dressing table. The Newtown maker tenoned the back, sides, and front rail and skirt into the extended leg posts. The desk had closer links to the joined tables and case furniture with turned legs made in the early eighteenth century
than to the dovetailed carcasses of the later eighteenth century. However, these qualities do not reflect the maker's backwardness or incompetence, but may be attributed to a conscious, innovative approach to a new need based on familiar composition or to the influence of Anglo-Dutch work in the Long Island basin. The form itself, the flow of the legs, and the slight scrolls at the edge of the knees indicate an accomplished joiner aware of fashion. Yet he limited decoration to the knees, the sawn-out profiles on the skirt, and the brackets above the pigeonholes.17

Identical legs (except without the knee scroll) and drawer construction link the dressing table in figure 17 to the same Newtown shop. The outline of the legs and shaping of the knees and feet suggest use of the same template to cut out the legs and a consistent approach to shaping the leg blank, using a lathe to define the underside of the foot and a spoke shave, files, and gouges to shape the ankle and knees. To fit together the parts of the drawers, the joiner laid out the pins and tails in a consistent fashion and then dovetailed the yellow poplar sides to the cherry drawer front and the yellow poplar back to the sides (see fig. 5). Decorative and constructional features link the dressing table to Stratford examples from the mid eighteenth century and further demonstrate the coastal towns's influence on Newtown furniture. The plastic feeling of the undulating ribs of the small carved fan can be found on case furniture from Stratford. Like some Stratford craftsmen, the Newtown joiner nailed side drawer supports to a piece of scrap yellow poplar that had been nailed to the inside of the sideboards.18

Furniture made in a second Newtown shop also manifests technical proficiency and understated ornament. Typical is a flat-topped case of drawers (see fig. 18) that belonged to the Walter Johnson (1802-1889) family of Newtown's Huntingtown district.19 The joiner limited decorative work to round feet, beading on the edge of the knees, and a simple carved fan on the lower central drawer front. He devoted considerable time and energy instead to the finish and fit of the different parts of the chest, even those interior parts that would not be visible. The dovetailed corners lack the long, deep kerf marks (usually seen on the inside front corner of a drawer) of rushed production, and the interior structural members were planed to even dimensions and smooth surfaces. The joiner even ran a smoothing plane on both sides of the backboards. Various constructional features, none of them indicative by themselves, can be found on a number of similarly chaste but well-constructed flat-topped cases of drawers (some with histories of ownership in the Newtown area) and together represent the signature of this Newtown shop.20
Dressing tables, whose values were generally between one-quarter and two-fifths the cost of a case of drawers, were often listed just before or just after cases of drawers in inventories. This pattern suggests that they were used in the same room or that they shared similar designs. Constructional and decorative features link the dressing table in figure 19, which descended in the Curtiss family of Newtown, with the Johnson case of drawers. It has the same drawer construction, drawer support systems, dished front skirt, and tenoning techniques. However, two minor visible differences distinguish it: the fan on the dressing table contains four additional ribs for a total of fifteen and its knees lack beaded scrolls. The joiner laid out the design of a slightly larger fan in order to alter the decoration slightly, but the odd number of ribs points out the consistency in his workmanship of habit. He eliminated the beaded knees either on his own accord or at his customer’s specification, given that he possessed the techniques, tools, and stock leg patterns to produce the beaded effect. Distinctive features of this Newtown type of dressing table include its large size, particularly its height and width, and the lack of a rail above the top drawer.

Diagnostic constructional features observed in figures 18 and 19 can be found in two other pieces of furniture, one of which has an early Newtown history of ownership. The case of drawers in figure 20 was made for Hannah Grant of Newtown on the occasion of her marriage in 1769. A similar form was referred to in 1801 as a “crown case of drawers” because of its broken pediment. The aesthetic similarities with furniture from many regions, competent workmanship, and amount of decorative detailing have caused great confusion about the origin of this case of drawers. Similarly carved rosettes are found on furniture from Norwich and Glastonbury, the finial design resembles examples on Woodbury and Stratford cases of drawers, and the carving on the knees suggests the influence of New York furniture. The good workmanship evident in the interior of figure 20 has always been attributed to an urban origin. Furthermore, the ornamental exuberance seems greatly out of place in Newtown.

Analysis of proportions, construction, and workmanship in this piece of furniture document its origin. It was made in the same way as figure 18 and is therefore the product of the same Newtown shop. Biographical facts about Hannah Grant help to explain how such an elaborately decorated case of drawers came to be made in Newtown. Hannah was the daughter of Donald Grant, a successful Newtown storekeeper born in Scotland, and she married Stephen Mitchell of Wethersfield, a thriving community at the time. Her lack of Newtown roots, her father’s status as one of the only shopkeepers in Newtown, and her Wethersfield connections may have in-
fluenced her demands for the unusual quality and quantity of decoration on this piece of furniture. Many flat-topped Newtown cases of drawers with simple fan carving in the lower section have survived, but few of the more complex crown-topped ones have been identified. The Hannah Grant example was the exception rather than the rule in Newtown, but does document the upper limits of the craftsman's skills.²³

A dressing table with no documented history of ownership (see fig. 21) shares many decorative and structural features with the Grant case of drawers. The sharply articulated knuckles, softened fingers, and distinctly sloped ankles of the feet; the carved floral motif on the knees; and the fan's design link the dressing table to the case of drawers. The consistent workmanship of this shop is also evident in the drawer construction, double-thickness skirt, placement of pegs in tenoning, and drawer supports. Like the Curtiss dressing table, this example lacks a rail between the full-width drawer and the top of the table.

The scrolled knees, crooked legs, and claw feet in figures 20 and 21 can also be seen on several fall leaf tables found in the Newtown area (see fig. 22). The method of fastening the top to the frame of these cherry tables denotes the maker's sophisticated understanding of the properties of wood. On the underside of the top board, he cut two wedge-shaped dados, or grooves, which then slid over the end boards of the frame. The upper edges of the end boards had been cut as dovetail keys that corresponded to the dado. This housed dovetail groove permitted movement across the grain in the top board and thereby prevented the splitting that is caused by directly screwing or pinning a top to the frame.²⁴

A third, related Newtown shop produced conservative case furniture that can be distinguished from figures 18–21 through subtle differences. At first glance the dressing table in figure 23, which descended in the Johnson family of Newtown, seems to be the work of the joiner who made the preceding five pieces of furniture. Its appearance closely resembles that of figures 18 and 19: its scale is larger than Massachusetts dressing tables; there is no upper rail; its similarly conceived and carved fan contains an odd number of ribs; and the knees feature beaded scrolls. Certain aspects of its carcass and drawer construction seem similar as well. Even the method of attaching the top to the frame resembles that on the table in figure 22. The joiner nailed a piece of scrap oak near the upper edge of the side between the legs, cut a dovetail key along its protruding upper edge, and cut a wedge-shaped dado on the underside of the top. He then slid the top on from the front side.²⁵

However, closer examination of figure 23 reveals differences in both
appearance and construction: the feet lack the same articulation along their backs; the drops on the lower edge of the skirt resemble inverted nozzles rather than acorns; the front corners of the drawer dovetails lack a half pin at the bottom; the skirt is only a single cherry board; and the joiner used a rabbeting plane instead of a panel plane along the edges of the drawer bottoms. Such changes indicate a different shop tradition, not just the drift in technique from master to apprentice within a single shop. The shop tradition also may be a slightly later one, since rabbeted drawer bottoms tend to appear around the turn of the century, but such small differences between two shops over time also provide strong evidence of the strength of local forms and traditions. That a joiner with a different set of tools and construction practices made dressing tables so close in appearance to those of another, possibly slightly earlier, shop underscores the coherence of Newtown’s furniture trade and the closely intertwined performance of its different shops.26

Identical drawer construction, leg shapes, and drops can be seen on the case of drawers in figure 24. The profiles and construction of the moldings in particular point out the distinction between this third shop and the second one: the midmolding on the lower section of figure 24 has a long cove that pinches the width of the upper section, and the cornice molding has only a projecting quarter-round along its upper edge rather than a cyma recta and astragal detail found on the Johnson and Grant cases of drawers. The joiner who made figure 24 used a different series of molding planes. He favored a more pronounced series of fascia moldings and an extra ovolo molding along the top of cornices and substituted a flat cove for a cyma recta on the upper part of the midmolding attached to the lower section. The joiner who made figures 18 and 20 ran a cavetto, astragal, large cove, and fascia molding on one piece of cherry and nailed it to the upper edge of the carcass. He then decorated a smaller piece of cherry with a cyma recta and astragal molding and nailed this second cherry piece to the upper edge of the first. The maker of figure 24 used a two-piece cornice molding in which the molding was cut on a single thin cherry board. The joiner nailed this cherry molding to a piece of secondary wood, triangular in cross section, which had been attached to the carcass. This sort of construction can also be found on Woodbury furniture in figures 42 and 46–50. A third point of distinction in figure 24 is the full-depth dustboard below the third drawer from the top; figures 17 and 19 lacked this structural feature. Similar dustboards were found in the upper sections of two other flat-topped cases of drawers made in the same shop as figure 24.27
The decorative detail seen on the exterior of figure 24 also suggests Woodbury furniture's influence at the turn of the century. The mismatched shells of the upper and lower sections, four-channel fluting in the upper section, and flame-twist finials are features found on case furniture from the neighboring town, as will be shown in the next chapter. However, the joiner applied this Woodbury aesthetic to a distinctively Newtown carcass, for its interior construction firmly links it to a body of documented Newtown case furniture. Even the proportional system suggests a Newtown origin: Newtown crown cases featured broad bases and tall upper sections, while Woodbury cases were thinner with shorter upper sections. The proportions of the Newtown cases more closely resemble New York and Long Island examples, and the Woodbury cases more closely follow Boston and Massachusetts types.

The artifactual evidence of the three Newtown shops thus shows that an Anglo-Dutch furniture tradition derived from coastal Connecticut and Long Island formed the basis of the Newtown furniture trade and that the Woodbury tradition, derived from a different synthesis, began to have a more pronounced influence on Newtown ornament at the turn of the century. Certainly the mobility of joiners like Abner Judson and David Fabrique account for such accommodations of Woodbury decoration.28

Several other pieces of furniture possess strong histories of ownership in Newtown but have less certain connections to the three shops already discussed. Nevertheless they can be attributed to the Newtown area and provide additional insight into Newtown's furniture production and consumption. Tables with turned legs, such as the example in figure 25, were the logical table forms made by joiners working according to the craft rhythms of Newtown's mixed agriculture: legs could be turned in quantity when the lathe was set up; stretchers, sides, and top could be roughed out at the sawmill and required little finishing; and decoration consisted largely of turned elements and sawn profiles. The most common table form in Newtown probate inventories—the turned frame table—represents a timeless design, which remained popular throughout the period of this study. Owned by a descendent of the Johnson family, this particular table was an expensive version of a conservative table form. The joiner used cherry throughout, rather than maple for the legs and yellow poplar for the frame and top, and spent time cutting, assembling, and fitting a drawer. Yet many of the Newtown turned tables featured drawers, an extra detail consistent with the fastidious interior finish of other case furniture in the community.29

Two desks with local histories of ownership provide additional evidence
of the local aesthetic. A cherry desk (see fig. 26) purchased from a family that lived in the Sandy Hook section of Newtown features the distinctive Newtown drawer construction found on figures 16 through 21 and the wide quarter-round and shallow fillet edge molding on the drawer fronts (see fig. 5) so typical of Newtown drawers. Even though the joiner possessed sufficient skill to fasten the bracket feet with half-blind dovetails, he did not use his skills fully in making this very simple desk with understated bracket feet, simple cove molding along the base, and plain interior, in which the main decorative feature is two different arch profiles above the pigeonholes. It is one of the simplest forms of desks, without any sort of carved or time-consuming decoration.

A second desk (see fig. 27), originally owned by a branch of the Beers family from the Palestine district of town, retains many aspects of older furniture types, but several structural features indicate that it can be dated to the early nineteenth century. Features such as the cusped return of the bracket foot and the serpentine curve of the pigeonhole brackets recall the fashionable elements of furniture from the third quarter of the eighteenth century. The edges of the drawer fronts reveal the use of old techniques to produce new stylish features. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, some furnituremakers ceased to use molding planes along the edges of their drawer fronts, instead applying a protruding strip around the edge of each drawer to produce a cock-bead molding. On the desk in figure 27, the joiner chose not to use the old quarter-round-and-fillet molding, but he did use a molding plane to achieve a fashionable result. Along the drawer blades and the inner edges of the carcass sides, he used a molding plane to produce the appearance of cock-bead molding. Early nineteenth-century structural and decorative practices include the use of cut rather than wrought nails and an integral base molding. The combination of old forms, old motifs or approaches updated, and new conventions parallels the same sort of blend seen in figure 14 and attests to the continued strength of tradition in the Newtown joiner’s trade.30

**Compatibility and Continuity**

The artifactual evidence of figures 7 through 27 confirms the conclusions drawn from the craftsmen’s biographies and the analysis of probate inventories. Most of the joiners active in Newtown at the beginning of this period of study had been trained in one of several coastal Connecticut traditions. As
Robert Trent’s *Hearts and Crowns* implies, the furniture traditions of the various coastal communities that contributed craftsmen to Newtown were relatively compatible. When earlier craftsmen began to train local youths, they found it easy to merge these traditions. Joiners active in the last quarter of the eighteenth century assimilated one another’s regulating habits and tools through local recruitment and the handing down of shops, sets of tools, and customers. Consequently, similar techniques and workmanship predominated in most Newtown shops.

Homogeneity of the shops contributed to a recognizable Newtown style. Sturdy, long-lasting turned chairs, with fashionable elements confined to the most visible areas—the backs and crest rails—characterize Newtown seating forms; traditional cases of drawers, dressing tables, desks, and chests with flat, taut facades, broken only by a single carved fan or a scrolled knee, its case furniture; and turned frame tables, its tables. Yet economical conservatism implies not a static state but rather an emphasis on slow evolution rooted in precedence. The trained, fully competent Newtown joiners viewed new fashion through a lens shaped by their training and cultural climate. They borrowed a few new details, reordered existing motifs, or used older techniques in new ways to introduce limited decorative innovation into old forms. The result was slight variation within appropriate and acceptable norms determined by past products. Although the forms were traditional and the decoration plain, Newtown furniture was not a watered-down interpretation or misunderstood copy of urban styles.

In addition to documenting the roots of the local homogeneous traditions and the existence of a dominant local style, surviving Newtown furniture provides insight into the values of the community’s joiners. Workmanship reveals that the joiners shared the traditional attitudes of the inwardly focused town. Many pieces of Newtown case furniture demonstrate a greater concern for time-consuming, quality workmanship and the properties of wood than do examples from more competitive urban areas of New England such as Boston. Whereas the latter tend to be elaborately decorated but shoddily built with an unspoken concern for ease and cheapness of carcass and drawer construction, the former tend to be sturdily built with techniques that accounted for the movement of wood across the grain. Newtown joiners took time to saw and pare tight-fitting dovetails. The carcass construction shown in figure 16, the drawer support systems and double skirts in figures 18–21, and the rabbeted drawer bottoms and dovetailed top of figure 23 provide evidence of the overengineered quality of Newtown case furniture. The joiners even finished off structural members.
that would not be visible in normal use and used secondary woods in a consistent fashion. They were not apt to utilize any scrap wood indiscriminately. If one drawer of a case piece had red oak sides, a yellow poplar back, and a yellow poplar bottom, then so did the other drawers.33

Customer demand and craft structure explain this labor-intensive approach to furniture construction and indifference to ostentatious decoration. As the patterns of consumption indicate, high rates of persistence in the eighteenth century meant that many Newtown families passed along furniture to the succeeding generations. Continuity and cultural cohesion ensured that these traditional forms would remain acceptable and appropriate. Newtowners put a premium on construction rather than ephemeral decoration. They wanted furniture that would last, yet not be outdated. The preference for traditional products rather than ever-changing popular ones allowed the local joiners to turn legs or rounds, saw out crooked legs or crest rails, and dress structural timbers in quantity when it was convenient. Craftsmen could then use these parts at any time. Predictable demand enabled the joiners to perfect the workmanship of habit necessary for these few forms.

The lack of external market challenges also influenced the production of traditional furniture in Newtown. The dominance of native craftsmen and their role as yeomen-joiners resulted in a lack of competition. Different conventions introduced by craftsmen trained outside the community did not challenge the dominant local traditions. Since yeoman-joiners derived much of their livelihood from their farm and could be assured of requests for some supplemental craftwork from their kin and neighbors, they did not have to rely entirely on craftwork or compete with one another.

The joiners' embedded and secure roles within Newtown society and economy made them very aware of their responsibility to their customers. They did not organize their work to distinguish themselves, increase production, or maximize profits. Instead they made furniture to provide needed material goods for their relatives and neighbors and to complement their agricultural work. As in all aspects of life in Newtown, continuity and stability guided the joiners' values and actions.