Making Furniture in Preindustrial America

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Workmanship of Competition:  
The Furniture of Woodbury

A survey of identifiable furniture from Woodbury and the study of several shops' products reveal a different pattern of material culture in Woodbury than in Newtown. Several early Woodbury joiners synthesized the same coastal traditions as their Newtown peers, but they also incorporated parts of other traditions. The presence in Woodbury of several joiners trained in the Farmington and New Haven areas contributed to this more extensive structural and decorative repertoire. Continued mobility and increased involvement in the external market around the time of the Revolution combined to expand this repertoire further. Newly arrived mature joiners from several geographically and culturally diverse regions introduced new techniques, forms, and decoration. The changing composition of the Woodbury population eased the acceptance of these new stylistic options. Since many townspeople lacked a common value system achieved through longevity or continuity in Woodbury, they were less likely to be guided by precedent and more willing to purchase different types of furniture. Greater involvement with the market provided Woodbury craftsmen with additional knowledge of technical and decorative options and Woodbury inhabitants with additional knowledge of fashion systems. The emergence of a proprietary gentry class eager to use material trappings to affirm status also created a receptive environment for the extensive use of new or elaborated forms and ornament. The qualitative differences in Woodbury furniture production after 1770 become striking through analysis of surviving examples.
Chairs and Case Furniture, 1750–1770

Painted, turned, flag-seated chairs represented the bulk of common seating forms in eighteenth-century Woodbury. Only in the nineteenth century did Windsor chairs, first found in the households of the wealthier inhabitants in the 1790s, begin to compete with these traditional black or red chairs as the favored sturdy, inexpensive turned chair. A great black chair (see fig. 28), which descended in the Minor family of Woodbury, is a good example of a mid eighteenth century turned chair rooted firmly in the banister-back chair tradition of the early eighteenth century rather than the more fashionable round-top form of the 1750s or fiddleback forms of the 1770s. However, the Woodbury chair does not resemble the Boston version of such a turned chair, which is characterized by tall, thin proportions, turned banisters between the rear posts, and complexly sawn out and carved crests. Instead the broader proportions, scooped crest rail, reeded banisters, and downward-sloping arms link the Minor chair to a broader Anglo-Dutch tradition characteristic of the New York and Long Island region. The turned vocabulary of the rear posts and configuration of the reeded back with scooped crest rail demonstrates the persistence of Milford joiners’ traditions farther up the Housatonic River and thus confirms the demographic pattern of such joiners as David Miles.¹

A New York rather than Boston orientation is also found in the second type of turned chair popular in Woodbury during the 1760s—the round-top, or York, chair. Throughout the greater New York cultural region, the York chair was a local turnery interpretation of the early Georgian joined chair. The great round-top chair in figure 29, originally owned by the Reverend Noah Benedict of Woodbury (1737–1813), shows that the town leaders in the third quarter of the century still found a turned chair to be satisfactory, with some concession to new fashion, even for more prestigious armed great chairs. The distinguishing features of a Woodbury round-top chair—the high arch of the crest rail, wide expanse of the banister, horizontal sweeping movement of the flat arms, and large central disk between the flanking bulbous balusters on the front round—resemble the same features on examples from Stratford and further document the coastal foundations of Woodbury furnituremaking.²

Several Woodbury cases of drawers from the third quarter of the eighteenth century (see figs. 30–32) document additional traditions that influenced furnituremaking in Woodbury and demonstrate how these various strains were blended to form a coherent Woodbury look before the Revolu-
tion. The case of drawers, referred to as a high case of drawers in a 1768 inventory, was the most popular large storage form in Woodbury during most of the last half of the eighteenth century. Analysis of such a complex form sheds valuable light on the nature of furniture production and consumption at that time.\(^3\)

Two Woodbury cases of drawers of this period (see figs. 30–31), linked primarily by structural and stylistic features, illustrate how one joiner’s shop drew upon the conventions of several different regions to offer options within a consistent approach to design.\(^4\) Like Newtown case furniture, these Woodbury cases of drawers share many structural and decorative features with examples made in the Stratford area. For example, the upper carved fan and the squarish knees in figures 30 and 31 resemble corresponding aspects of furniture made by Brewster Dayton (worked 1755–97) and other Stratford joiners; and the vertical orientation of the backboards and inclusion of a horizontal tie bar behind the upper tier of drawers can be found on a case of drawers made in 1784 by Eli Lewis (1738–1818) of Stratford. The square pediment on figure 31 may have been suggested by the cornice molding on a scroll-pedimented chest-on-chest made by a joiner who trained in England and then worked in Stratford during the second quarter of the eighteenth century.\(^5\)

However, the Woodbury joiner did not depend as heavily on Stratford aesthetic or structural traditions as his Newtown counterparts. Instead his work attests to the vitality of traditions other than those of Milford and Stratford. For example, the heavy three-drawer arrangement along the upper tier of drawers in figure 30 can be seen on earlier New Haven cases of drawers and differs from the favored Stratford convention of a large central drawer flanked by a smaller drawer on each side (as seen in fig. 24). The use of two fans and of fans with concave ribs can also be found on case furniture from the greater Hartford area. The Hartford and New Haven traditions may have provided the Woodbury joiner with certain construction conventions, such as the lack of a concealed joint where the drawer blade fits into the carcass sides in the upper section, the simple single-piece midmolding, and nailed drawer supports. Newtown craftsmen, like Dayton and his Stratford contemporaries, glued vertical cherry strips along the front edges of the sides to conceal the joints of the drawer blades, glued drawer supports into grooves run in the sides, used more complex midmoldings, and limited carved fans to the lower central drawer. In comparison to his Newtown and Stratford counterparts, the Woodbury joiner was more willing to reduce time in the construction stages in order to devote additional time to decora-
tion. By nailing in drawer supports and not concealing drawer blades, the craftsman could carve an extra fan on a case of drawers without increasing the price.\textsuperscript{6}

Eastern Connecticut traditions may have influenced the Woodbury shop. An architectonic handling of the cornice molding and an elaborately decorated pediment, often found on case furniture from New London County, are seen on the case of drawers (see fig. 32) made in Woodbury in 1755 by Silas Butler, who trained in eastern Connecticut and worked briefly in Woodbury from 1755 to about 1760. Other aspects of the Butler example that may have influenced Woodbury aesthetics include wide midmolding around the top edge of the lower section, use of double fans (one in the upper section and one in the lower), deeply modeled concave ribs of the fan, and upwardly angled framing ribs in the fans. Similar shells can be seen on the bottom cases of figures 30 and 31 and are different than the coastal shells seen on the top sections.\textsuperscript{7}

Although the Woodbury craftsman picked from many traditions to introduce variations into his designs, he limited these changes to a restricted area of the form or to a small decorative detail. Within the constant formal parameters of a case of drawers, the Woodbury joiner achieved visual diversity by altering the cornice and uppermost tier of drawers, the most visible part of the object. On one example (see fig. 30), he repeated the same configuration that he used on the lowermost tier, resulting in a line of three very substantial drawers that stretched full-width across the top. In the other example (see fig. 31), the same craftsman experimented and produced a more successful, vertically oriented case of drawers by emphasizing the large central drawer of the upper section with its own pediment and by flanking this drawer with single short drawers and a stepped cornice. Through all these changes, the joiner preserved the same basic proportioning system for the overall form, for the lower and upper section, and even for the full-width drawer fronts.\textsuperscript{8}

\textit{Chairs and Tables, 1770–1800}

In about 1770, production of furniture in Woodbury began to change more dramatically. Joiners started to make chairs that more closely resembled joiner’s chairs than turned ones, function-specific tables, and more varied and elaborate case furniture. The chairs in figures 33 through 37 represent the full line of chairs produced during the last quarter of the eighteenth
century by a single Woodbury shop, whose master worked comfortably in both the turned and the joined furniture traditions. The Woodbury fiddleback (see fig. 33) bears a general resemblance to its Newtown counterpart. Certain features, however, establish it as a Woodbury fiddleback: the lack of termini on the back posts, a convex-bowed central portion of the crest rail, and a front round with heavier, more pronounced baluster-and-ring turnings. Yet fiddlebacks like figure 33 never achieved widespread ownership in Woodbury, according to inventory references. Instead the estates indicate that the more expensive, more fashion-laden crookedback chair began to encroach upon the dominance of chairs with completely turned frames.9

The same Woodbury shop provided its patrons with two different versions of the crookedback chair (see figs. 34–35) that were differentiated by style rather than by cost. Figure 34 is a crookedback with a mixture of old and new fashion. Vestiges of the older turned chair tradition include the flag seat, the turned decoration on the front stiles, and the decoratively turned rounds. However, the frame was noticeably different from the fiddleback in figure 33. Sawn-out, or hewn, front and rear stiles replaced the turned posts, and carved claw feet replaced turned ball feet. Even the woods of the crookedback frame were different. The joiner used cherry rather than painted maple and ash for the crest rail, stiles, and rounds of the crookedback. For the banister and shoe rail, he continued to use yellow poplar, whose grain closely approximates cherry.

A second crookedback chair (see fig. 35) shows the evidence of even less work on the lathe. Rectangular side and rear stretchers that were tenoned and pegged into the rear legs and into the block elements of the front legs impart the look of a joiner's chair to this crookedback. Yet this chair was not necessarily a more expensive model than that shown in figure 34, which had expensive features such as a cherry frame, hewn stiles, carved feet, and decoratively turned side and rear rounds. The work evident in these features made the chair comparable in price to figure 35. The chair in that figure represents the craftsman's desire to make, or a client's to own, a more stylish chair.

Woodbury crookedback chairs such as figure 35, in which turned construction accounts only for the flag seat, the front round, and some ornamentation on the front legs, offer a sharp contrast to Newtown fiddlebacks. Whereas the Newtown craftsman who made a fiddleback emphasized the older turned chair tradition while incorporating just a bit of the new fashion, the Woodbury craftsman who made a crookedback chair emphasized the
newer fashion while preserving only a vestige of the older turned tradition. Apparently, Woodbury joiners favored sawn-out frames over turned frames, a preference that may reflect both clients’ demands and the technological orientation of the joiners. The limiting of turned work to the low-end chairs as well as the widespread use of sawn-and-dressed members suggest a different artisanal value system in Woodbury. Unlike their counterparts in Newtown, the Woodbury joiners did not fit craftwork in among other tasks and thus were not dependent on turning as the appropriate technology for efficiency. Woodbury craftsmen relied solely on their trade and often had to give greater weight to fashion than to traditional rhythms. Thus they sawed up stock throughout the year and offered more crookedback chairs than fiddlebacks.

The most stylish flag-seated crookedback chair made in this shop was a great chair (see fig. 36). In this case the joiner totally eliminated the decorative turning on the front legs and round. To replace the visual vitality of turned decoration, the artisan employed other decorative techniques more consistent with joined construction. He incorporated a hewn front stretcher and front legs, sawed out parts of the banister to produce a pierced pattern identical to one favored in Boston, ran decorative quarter-round moldings along the outer edges of the front legs and along the upper edge of the stretchers, and shaped the upper part of the arm supports with a drawknife instead of a lathe in order to give them an octagonal cross section rather than a circular one. Yet the conceptualization of the chair form remained rooted in the turned chair tradition. The flag seat, arrangement of the stretchers, and set-back arms mounted on uprights mortised into the upper edge of the side stretchers and notched into the seat list link this chair with turned great chairs of the late eighteenth century. The Woodbury joiner thought turnerly, but executed joinerly.

Stylishness reached a climax with a fifth chair made in the same shop (see fig. 37). This seating form, referred to in the inventories as a joiner’s chair or a cherry chair, contained neither turned elements nor turned arrangement of parts. Every part was hewn cherry, joined by mortises and tenons, and pegged. In this example, originally owned by the Hinman family of Southbury, the joiner not only hewed the stretchers but also used a medial stretcher running between the two side stretchers rather than a front stretcher running between the two front posts. This H-shaped bracing system was common on Boston joiner’s chairs made in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and thus more appropriate for a joiner’s chair than the front stretchers or rounds of turned chairs. In addition to running a molding
along the edges of the front stiles and sawing out a pierced Gothic pattern in the banister, the joiner carved an incised line along the upper edge of the crest rail and along the outer edge of the rear stiles and continued the quarter-round molding along the upper outside edges of the seat rails. Most important, he made a cushion bottom to fit into rabbets cut into the inside upper edges of the seat rails.¹¹

Joiner's chairs first appeared in the 1770 inventory of Timothy Hinman, but other seating forms listed only as cherry chairs were probably joiner's chairs rather than crookedback chairs, even though both types were made from cherry. This distinction is based on valuation. Crookedback chairs tended to be valued between four and six shillings each, whereas joiner's chairs commanded twice that amount. Such a variation in price can be attributed to the different sorts of seat construction. It was easier, less time consuming, and therefore less expensive to construct a flag seat than to hew seat rails, cut tenons on the rails and mortises in the stiles, glue and peg the joints, and then construct a joined seat frame and upholster it. Imported upholstery materials such as webbing, sackcloth, and worsted cover fabrics also increased the price of a joiner's chair. Such distinctions in the values of cherry chairs remain applicable as the term cherry chair gave way to dining chair in the early nineteenth century. Dining chairs appraised between four and six shillings apiece were more likely flag-seated crookedback chairs, and chairs appraised at double that value were more likely cherry joiner's chairs with cushion bottoms.¹²

The exclusive use of cherry and a completely joined frame make the joiner's chair in figure 37 one of the most cosmopolitan seating forms in Woodbury, but it still retained close visual ties with the slightly less expensive and less stylish crookedback chairs and with even the less common fiddleback of the same shop. Use of a single crest rail pattern facilitated the joiner's work. He did not need to lay out each crest rail freehand, and he could entrust the tracing of the pattern and the cutting out of the part to an apprentice or less-skilled member of his shop. As a result, his work became efficient without losing quality or consistency. Patterns for hewn legs and for three different sorts of banisters—a solid banister, a pierced interlaced scroll, and a pierced Gothic pattern—also link the more stylish products of this particular shop. Just as these patterns assisted in the production process, so they played a major role in the purchasing process. Affluent Woodbury patrons were better able to purchase matching sets of seating furniture to furnish the various social spaces of their homes. The familiar legs and crest rail of the joiner's chair also made that form less imposing or made
Another chair form rare in Newtown but made and owned in Woodbury was the Windsor chair. The first reference to a Windsor chair in Woodbury inventories occurred in the 1784 estate of Thomas Tousey, who owned “2 green Windsor chairs 16/.” Windsors appeared frequently in inventories after 1795 and became the predominant middle-value, inexpensive chair in all estates after 1805. They were appraised at approximately four shillings apiece, the price of a fiddleback. Although most Windsors were painted green, others were painted black, white, or yellow. The continued use of the generic term *black chair* precluded any conclusions that there were black-painted Windsors in Woodbury, but black was a popular color for Windsors in all other parts of New England. White Windsors, which first appeared in 1807, were colored rather than unpainted chairs. References to specific types of Windsors remained infrequent and identified only “green fan chairs,” beginning in 1804, and “armed chairs green,” as early as 1803.\(^\text{13}\)

The bow-back Windsor (see fig. 38), stamped on the underside of the seat with the initials “I.M.” for Josiah Minor (1789–1820), was probably made by Nicholas Jebine of Woodbury (worked 1794–1819), a New Haven–trained cabinetmaker, who settled in Woodbury by 1794.\(^\text{14}\) The Minor example displays a combination of several different regional Windsor chairmaking characteristics. Its swelled spindles are usually associated with Windsors made in eastern Connecticut or by craftsmen trained there. But the Minor bow-back has many other attributes atypical of eastern Connecticut work, including the incised line that delimits the spindle area of the seat, tenoning of the legs through the seat, shape of the turnings, and decorative molding along the face of the bow. The tapered column, crisp urn, and large-bellied baluster of each leg resemble New York examples, and the triple-bead molding on the bow is seen most frequently on Windsors from the Connecticut River Valley.\(^\text{15}\) The blending of features from eastern Connecticut, New York, and the Connecticut River Valley reflects Jebine’s training in New Haven. Because that growing commercial center had ties to all three regions, Jebine would have been exposed to craftsmen or furniture from those areas or to craftsmen who had been trained in those traditions.

The armed high-back Windsor (see fig. 39), formerly owned in the Munson family of Southbury, has a base similar to the one used for the bow-back, but substituted a new back-support system. This was a popular Windsor type for the Woodbury region: the Masonic Lodge in Waterbury, Harmony
Lodge 42, purchased similar chairs in the late 1790s, and the Reverend Joseph Bellamy of Bethlehem, the renowned New Divinity leader, owned a writing-arm version. Patronage by these members of the region’s leadership attests to the high status of the Windsor chair and the prestige of this particular Woodbury shop.\textsuperscript{16}

The Woodbury furniture illustrated in figures 40 and 41 are some of the various function-specific cherry tables that inventories first listed in the 1790s. Earlier estates tended to list multifunctional tables, whose price indicates that most featured turned frames and were made of maple, yellow poplar, and white pine that had been painted. By the end of the century, increasing numbers of Woodbury inventories listed specialized forms made from woods with decorative grains, especially stands, tea tables, and fall leaf tables of cherry. Stands with a turned central pedestal supported by three legs dovetailed into it became the favored surface for candlesticks and other artificial-lighting devices, while tea tables with large tilting tops were designed to display the silver and ceramic equipage for tea drinking and other genteel pursuits. A single Woodbury shop made a number of such forms, including the large stand and tea table in figure 40. On the tea table the turned vocabulary of the pedestal and use of the box (the “birdcage” mechanism that revolved on the central shaft and held the pintels on the underside of the top, thereby allowing the top to rotate and tilt up) reveal the influence of New York tea tables and suggest that the maker or his clients were familiar with the fashionable tables of that city and their uses in polite society. The change to the elaborated, specialized forms seen in figure 40 and a specific language to describe them shows the significant new attention Woodbury’s leaders devoted to the increasing number of domestic comforts and social rituals.\textsuperscript{17}

Cherry fall leaf tables (or tables with hinged leaves) were first listed in the 1793 inventory of Sherman Hinman and appeared frequently and regularly in the inventories of the next fifteen years. References to fall leaf tables became less common in the teens, when the term \textit{dining table} gained favor. All dining tables were not necessarily fall leaf tables, but the newer functional term apparently subsumed the older descriptive one.\textsuperscript{18} The cherry fall leaf table in figure 41, whose straight or Marlborough legs reflect stylish features that became fashionable in urban centers in the 1770s, exemplifies the most common type that has survived and, with the tables in figure 40, illustrates the ability of Woodbury joiners to keep up with current fashion and client demand for such forms. The legs’ simplicity is somewhat deceiving and needs to be understood in terms of fashion rather than technique.
Although such legs were relatively easy to make in comparison to the crooked legs seen on the Newtown table in figure 22, the latter actually represent an older style. The Newtown joiner relied on the template he used for case furniture legs to make the more traditional elaborate crooked leg for fall leaf tables, but his Woodbury counterpart followed the latest trends of the 1770s to make a simple leg that he then embellished with fluting, a decorative feature popular in late eighteenth-century Woodbury (see figs. 46, 51–52). Such legs linked his products more with the current work of shops in New York City or Newport, Rhode Island, than with the past work of local shops.  

Two Cosmopolitan Shops

Woodbury case furniture built before 1780 was characterized by the retention of old-fashioned forms, with a limited amount of decorative variety derived from the traditions in which the town’s joiners were trained. After the Revolution, the emergence of a fashion-conscious gentry class of proprietors and the continued influx of mature joiners, especially from urban areas such as New Haven, greatly altered the furnituremaking trade in Woodbury. Although a few earlier structural and decorative conventions persisted, locally made furniture became increasingly diverse in form and decoration. The work of two identifiable Woodbury shops from that period documents the proliferation of different forms and the competitive mixing and matching of decoration. The great variety of forms suggests that these joiners were trained in a cosmopolitan or similar environment where they gained experience in or exposure to a number of different traditions. The masters of these shops derived decorative details from many different regions and from one another, but each continued to use this decoration on forms distinctive to his shop.

For the Hurlbut family of Woodbury, one Woodbury shop made a case of drawers (see fig. 42). At first glance, this conservative form resembles the Newtown examples in figures 18 and 24, especially the latter. The shape of the legs, the scrolled knees, lower fan, two-piece midmolding, vertical strips along the front edges of the upper sides to cover the joints for the drawer blades, and use of a wedge-shaped piece of tulip inside the single-piece cherry cornice molding recall similar features on figure 24. These similarities may be attributed to the training of several Newtown joiners in Woodbury during the late eighteenth century. Craftsmen such as Abner
Judson and Timothy Jordan may have retained certain constructional conventions when they returned to Newtown but altered their decoration in accordance with their Newtown clientele.

However, several important aesthetic and technical features distinguish the Woodbury case of drawers in figure 42 from its Newtown relatives, including layout of the fan, edge moldings on the drawer fronts, drawer construction, and orientation of the backboards. Most revealingly, the Woodbury example displays a different standard of workmanship. Unlike the well-finished surfaces and tight joints of Newtown case furniture, figure 42 demonstrates a greater concern for cost-efficient production. The joiner did not completely finish the backboards with a smoothing plane. The long, deep kerf marks on the inside corner of the drawer fronts indicate that the joiner cut out his dovetails in the fastest way possible. By cutting with his dovetail saw more, he used his chisel less to shape and trim the pins. An emphasis on sawing rather than paring saved time but did not produce as clean or as tight a joint. Additional evidence of technical shortcuts can be seen on the central drawer supports. Rather than dovetail them to the back of the drawer blade or skirt, the joiner simply bevel-tenoned them. Other time-saving conventions include nailing drawer supports to the sides and use of an unfinished upper rail in the lower section. The joiner left the rear edge and underside of this slab-cut board in an unsmoothed state. Similar features appear on all the furniture made in this shop. On many of the shop’s products, one can even find bark left on the inside edges of rough slab-cut boards used for rails or drawer blades.

A desk owned in the Stiles family of Southbury (see fig. 43) is another conservative form made in the same shop. Identical drawer construction, drawer side and back dimensions, and drawer front moldings link this desk to the case of drawers in figure 42. Features of this desk found on other work of the shop also include the distinctive carved feet, bulbous rounded knees with a delicate scroll on the knee, and a framed base structure (rather than carved feet tenoned into the bottom board or bracket feet and corner blocks attached to the corners of the bottom boards). For this desk, the joiner tenoned thin skirt boards into the legs, sat the carcass on top of this frame, and fastened it with nails driven from the underside of the frame. He then pinned the base molding to the upper edge of the protruding frame. In designing this desk, the craftsman focused his decorative effort on the desk interior, running a coved molding along the front of the upper tier of drawers and a reeded facade along the document drawers flanking the central drawer. The great number of examples from Woodbury with this type of
interior suggests that the craftsmen must have planed long boards with this cove molding, cutting them up as needed, and used a special scratch plane to produce the reeding.\textsuperscript{22}

A chest of drawers (see fig. 44) made in the same Woodbury shop demonstrates an indebtedness to local ornamental features and more distant regional constructional traditions. The squarish central toe and two flanking thinner toes are identical to the carved feet of the desk in figure 43, both echoing the carved feet executed in Stratford by Brewster Dayton and his English-trained master. Such carved feet, often called Spanish feet by antique collectors, are frequently viewed as old-fashioned, \textit{retardataire} features on a piece of furniture made after the Revolution. However, as in Stratford, the use of such a foot was not a restricted act based on limited knowledge of fashion or technique, but rather the deliberate choice of a decorative foot associated with the English Georgian style and produced with less-intricate carving than a ball-and-claw foot. While the layout and carving of the latter could be very labor intensive, the joiner making a carved foot like that on figure 44 relied on a template to derive the basic shape of the leg and foot, then used a spokeshave or drawknife, file, and veining gouge to articulate an animated foot in less than half the time it took to make a ball-and-claw foot.\textsuperscript{23} The rope-twist turnings of the quarter-columns in the front corners of figure 44 were another common form of decoration found on case furniture made in western Connecticut. The design and workmanship of the rope-twist columns on this Woodbury chest of drawers bear close resemblance to those on a slightly earlier chest-on-chest from the Glastonbury area and on later examples from Kent and Canaan.\textsuperscript{24}

In figure 44, these locally popular decorative details were grafted onto a form whose construction linked it to more distant regions, particularly Hartford and New London Counties. The method of securing the top to the carcass resembles that used in furniture from those two areas. A joiner fastened the sides to the top with half-blind dovetails and then pinned a mitred cornice molding along the front and sides to conceal this joint. The competent workmanship and delicacy of the molding suggest that the craftsman was trained in a sophisticated shop, where he had many opportunities to observe and perfect these techniques. The execution of the refined rope-twist quarter-columns reflects the joiner's familiarity with making and fitting quarter-columns and provides additional evidence that he received skilled training, perhaps in an urban area, before moving to Woodbury. The competent resolution of this complex technical problem
Fig. 28. Great black chair, Woodbury, 1750–1770. Maple, yellow poplar, ash; measurements unavailable. In the third quarter of the eighteenth century, painted turned chairs remained the most popular seating furniture in Woodbury. This great chair closely resembles Milford prototypes and is firmly rooted in the Anglo-Dutch tradition of the Long Island Basin. Privately owned.

Fig. 29. Great round-top chair, Woodbury, 1750–1770. Maple, yellow poplar, ash; OH: 42¼", SH: 15½", SW: 22¼", SD: 15". In the middle of the eighteenth century, a great round-top chair was a fashionable seating form in Woodbury in spite of its turned frame. The Reverend Noah Benedict, one of the town’s more prominent citizens, owned this example. Courtesy of the First Congregational Church, Woodbury.
Fig. 30. Case of drawers, Woodbury, 1760–1780. Cherry, red oak, white pine, and yellow poplar; H:80”, W:39¾”, D:19¾”. Although its general proportions, squarish knees, and blocky legs link this case of drawers to examples made in Stratford and neighboring coastal communities on Long Island Sound, its mismatched carved fans and construction features reveal ties to the Connecticut River Valley. Collection of New Haven Colony Historical Society.
Fig. 31. Case of drawers, Woodbury, 1760–1780. Cherry, yellow poplar, and white pine; H:80½", W:40", D:19¾". The square pediment, perhaps derived from the cornice molding treatment seen in figure 32 or that on a Stratford example, reveals the joiner’s ingenuity in developing a more architectonic vertical thrust to the case of drawers. This example was originally owned in the Sherman family. Privately owned; photograph courtesy of Mattatuck Museum.
Fig. 32. Case of drawers, signed by Silas Butler, Woodbury, 1755. Cherry and white pine; H: 86", W: 40", D: 20". One of only two signed examples of furniture made in Woodbury, this case of drawers illustrates the leg shape, skirt profile, fan carving, and midmoldings of the Connecticut River Valley and eastern Connecticut. Butler was from Lebanon, in the eastern part of Connecticut. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, the Evelyn Bonan Starrs Trust Fund and the gift of Henry and Walter Keney and the American Decorative Arts Purchase Fund; photograph by Joseph Szaszfai.
Fig. 33. Fiddleback chair, Woodbury, 1770–1790. Maple, yellow poplar, ash; OH:42½", SH:17", SW:20½", SD:14". Although over several decades Newtown joiners made many fiddlebacks, their Woodbury counterparts made very few. The heavier turnings of the front round, softness of the turned elements, lack of termini at the top of the back posts, and convex-bowed central portion of the crest rail distinguish this Woodbury example from Newtown examples such as figures 10–12. Collection of New Haven Colony Historical Society.

Fig. 34. Crookedback chair, Woodbury, 1780–1800. Cherry, yellow poplar, ash; OH:40¼", SH:17", SW:20¼", SD:13½" (feet have been cut down). This Woodbury chair seems to resemble the Newtown example in figure 15 (both even have two side rounds), but the use of cherry for the frame and rounds, more pronounced ogee profile of the back posts, more extensive shaping of the back sides of the rear posts, decorative molding on the lower edge of the shoe rail, and more up-to-date triple-bowed crest rail make the Woodbury chair a more stylish example. Privately owned; photograph courtesy of Mattatuck Museum.

Fig. 35. Crookedback chair, Woodbury, 1780–1800. Cherry, yellow poplar, ash; OH:41½", SH:17¾", SW:20½", SD:13¼". The hewn, or sawn-out, stretchers on this example identify it as a more joinerly crookedback than that in figure 34. Privately owned; photograph courtesy of Mattatuck Museum.

Fig. 36. Great crookedback chair, Woodbury, 1780–1800. Cherry, yellow poplar, ash; OH:39", SW:23", SD:19". The basic form of this great chair is a turned great chair, but the straight legs with molded edges, sawn-out stretchers, pierced banister, and triple-bowed crest rail make this a very fashionable Woodbury crookedback. Privately owned.
Fig. 37. Joiner’s chair, Woodbury, 1780–1800. Cherry and yellow poplar; OH: 38”, SH: 16 ¼”, SW: 19 ¾”, SD: 15 ¾”. This chair belongs to one of several sets of Woodbury joiner’s chairs that have survived. The degree of finish evident in the molding along the edges of the crest rail and back posts and in the molding along the edge of the front legs and seat rails, the number of mortise and tenon joints, the intricate piercing of the banister, and the cost of upholstery materials make this chair the most expensive model offered by the shop that made the chairs in figures 33–37. Privately owned; photograph courtesy of Mattatuck Museum.
Fig. 38. Bow-back Windsor chair, attributed to Nicholas Jebine, Woodbury, 1795-1810. Maple, yellow poplar, and ash; OH: 35½", SH: 15", SW: 15½", SD: 17¼". The turned vocabulary of the legs and rounds of this Windsor and of the one in figure 39 resemble that found on New Haven examples. Nicholas Jebine, who made chairs for the Minor family, was trained in New Haven. Privately owned; photograph courtesy of Mattatuck Museum.

Fig. 39. Armed high-back Windsor chair, Woodbury, 1790–1810. Maple, white pine, and red oak; OH: 36¼", SH: 16¾", SW: 16¼", SD: 16¾". This Woodbury Windsor descended in the Munson family. Yale University Art Gallery, Mabel Brady Garvan Collection.
Fig. 40. Tea table (left), Woodbury, 1790–1810. Cherry; H:27", D(top):33". Battens are replacements. Stand (right), Woodbury, 1780–1800. Cherry and yellow poplar; H:27", D(top):21 7/8". Several other stands and tea tables that descended in Woodbury families have similar legs, pillars, and, on the tea tables only, columnar spindles in the box that supports the tilting table surface. Such features suggest that the maker was familiar with New York City examples and may have received some training there or in a shop with New York ties. Privately owned; photographs courtesy of Chipstone Foundation (tea table) and of Mattatuck Museum (stand).
Fig. 41. Fall leaf table, Woodbury, 1780–1800. Cherry, red oak, and yellow poplar; H:28", L:53¼", W(closed):18½", W(one leaf up):36", W(both leaves up):53½". Many Woodbury fall leaf tables survive; all of them feature straight fluted legs, the latest fashion for New York and Newport tables of the period. Privately owned; photograph courtesy of Mattatuck Museum.
Fig. 42. Case of drawers, Woodbury, 1770–1800. Cherry and yellow poplar; H:79¼", W:39½", D:19¾". Cases of drawers with long crooked legs, a dressing table configuration of drawers in the lower section (a small full-width drawer above a line of three small drawers), and a fairly short upper section were common throughout southwestern Connecticut. This particular case of drawers from the Hurlbut family is the only surviving example of such a form made in the Woodbury shop the works of which are illustrated in figures 42–50. Privately owned.
Fig. 43. Desk, Woodbury, 1770–1800. Cherry, yellow poplar, and red oak; H:41\(\frac{3}{4}\)\", W:37\(\frac{7}{8}\)\", D:22\(\frac{7}{8}\)\". This desk’s writing interior was a stock design for the Woodbury shop that produced it. Of the various feet offered by the shop, the carved foot shown here was the most popular for chests of drawers and desks. Either Woodbury patrons preferred such feet for substantial forms or the joiners favored them, because these feet, in comparison to ball-and-claw feet, provided the most decorative effect for the least amount of work. Photograph courtesy of Mattatuck Museum.
Fig. 44. Chest of drawers, Woodbury, 1770–1800. Cherry, red oak, yellow poplar, and white pine; H:33¼”, W:34¾”, D:20½”. The carved feet and scrolled bulbous knees link the chest of drawers to the desk in figure 43 and to many other pieces of Woodbury case furniture. The intricate handling of the rope-twist quarter-columns and use of a cornice molding to conceal a blind-dovetailed joint suggest the sophisticated training of the shop’s master. Such workmanship further reinforces the notion that the carved feet were used intentionally by the maker. Privately owned; photograph courtesy of Mattatuck Museum.

Fig. 45. Bureau, Woodbury, 1790–1800. Cherry and yellow poplar; H:37”, W:44”, D:18¾”. The Woodbury shop that produced the chest of drawers in figure 44 revealed its flexibility and ability to follow fashion changes by making this plain bureau. Privately owned.
Fig. 46. Crown case of drawers, Woodbury, 1770–1800. Cherry, red oak, yellow poplar, and white pine; H:90", W:44", D:22¾". The crown top, fluted pilasters, carved fans, and carved ball-and-claw feet made this case of drawers an expensive piece of furniture in the late eighteenth century. Its basic form and many of its decorative features have close ties with work from the Norwich-Colchester region of eastern Connecticut. Ball-and-claw feet were the most common feet on large case furniture; only a few examples with simple pad feet have survived. Collection of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
Fig. 47. Case of drawers, Woodbury, 1770–1800. Cherry, yellow poplar, red oak, and white pine; H:82", W:42 7/8", D:21 1/4". Even the flat-top versions of the preferred Woodbury case of drawers form—characterized by mid-length crooked legs and two deep drawers in the lower section—featured elaborate ornament and must have served as powerful social props. Consistent use of ball-and-claw feet is also unusual and indicates the availability of good carvers, the shop’s ability to set up efficient production of the feet, and consistent demand for the period’s most complicated foot design. Photograph courtesy of Mattatuck Museum.
Fig. 48. Desk-and-bookcase, Woodbury, 1770–1800. Cherry, yellow poplar, and red oak; measurements unavailable. The distinctive Woodbury desk interior, bulbous knees, and carved feet are readily apparent. The fall front on the desk features an inlaid mariner's compass, and the panels set into the door frames in the upper section are fielded, or chamfered, along their edges. Both of these decorative conventions had been fashionable in the second quarter of the century. Privately owned.
Fig. 49. Desk-and-bookcase, Woodbury, 1778. Cherry, yellow poplar, white pine, and red oak; H:83¾", W:39¾", D:22". Many of the same features on figure 48 are found here, especially the shape of the dividers in the upper section and the desk interior, but the joiner has updated certain other aspects. He substituted flush panels for fielded panels, used inlay to compose neoclassical motifs rather than traditional motifs like the compass, and offered bracket feet rather than carved feet. Privately owned; photograph courtesy of Mattatuck Museum.
Fig. 50. Chest-on-chest, Woodbury, 1780–1800. Cherry, yellow poplar, and red oak; H:82 ½", W:40 ¾", D:19 ¾". As in figure 49, the joiner substituted inlaid decoration for modeled, or carved, decoration, chevron inlay instead of carved rope-twist moldings just under the cornice molding, interlaced stringing instead of fluted pilasters along the front edges of the carcass, and stringing and cock beading along the edges of drawer fronts instead of thumbnail moldings. Privately owned.
Fig. 51. Crown case of drawers, Woodbury, 1780–1800. Cherry and yellow poplar; H:91", W:43\(\frac{3}{8}\)”, D:20". Wooden pulls are replacements. Although this case of drawers seems decoratively linked to the work of the shop that made figures 42–50, its composition displays a very different tradition, one based more in Philadelphia than in Boston or Newport. Constructional differences also distinguish this example from the previous group. Privately owned.
Fig. 52. Desk-and-bookcase, Woodbury, 1780–1800. Cherry, yellow poplar, and white pine; H:84", W:38", D:20¾". A Pennsylvania basis of this Woodbury shop's traditions is clear in this form of a desk-and-bookcase and contrasts with the examples in figures 48 and 49. Privately owned.
resulted from specific skills learned and refined during apprenticeship. It is unlikely that it represents a mature craftsman’s experimentation with new features. The Woodbury joiner’s use of a framed base to support a chest of drawers also links figure 44 to case furniture traditions in New London and Hartford Counties. To relieve the monotony of the skirt, the joiner added a special decorative touch along the front by sawing out a central drop, a motif also seen on chests of drawers from Norwich, Connecticut, and on cases of drawers from Salem, Massachusetts.

At the end of the century this Woodbury shop offered a second type of chest of drawers, one more likely to be referred to as a bureau (see fig. 45). The thin, outward-flaring bracket feet, simple cove base molding, applied cock-bead drawer edging, neoclassical brasses, and slightly overhanging plain-edged top all link this example to the bureaus characteristic of the Federal style. The joiner secured the top in a different manner than in the previous example: he blind-dovetailed three thin, horizontal members to the sides and then ran screws through these boards to secure the top. Nevertheless he relied on other familiar structural conventions: the carcass sits on a three-piece frame whose edges are run with cove molding, the dimensions of the drawer stock are consistent with other work from the shop, and the joiner chalked half circles on the inside surfaces of the drawer backs.

From surviving evidence we have determined that the case of drawers in figure 42 was not the most common large storage form produced in this particular shop; rather, the most common form was a case of drawers with ball-and-claw feet, mid-length crooked legs, and two deep drawers in the lower section. Many examples have survived and manifest a variety of options: crown top or flat top; fluted pilasters, quarter-columns, or plain edges on the upper section; various skirt profiles on the lower section; and a wide assortment of carved decoration. The most exuberant example of this type (probably also called a case of drawers since Woodbury inventories before 1825 did not distinguish between cases of drawers and chests-on-chests) was owned by a member of the Stiles family (see fig. 46). Several characteristics link this piece of furniture with pieces shown in figures 42–44: the bulbous knees with scrolls, which are slightly longer versions of those in figures 43 and 44; the fastening of drawer supports and drawer blades; layout and execution of the carved fan; the cornice molding construction; and the deep, unfinished upper rail in the lower section.

On this particular case of drawers (fig. 46), the joiner used decorative ornamentation from a variety of regional traditions. The stop-fluted pilas-
ters, the uppermost drawer’s resemblance to a fielded panel, and the full-depth cornice molding on the inside of its crown echo characteristics of Rhode Island and New London County furniture. Stop-fluted pilasters with carved half-shell termination and a distinctively carved drawer-front fan link this case of drawers even more specifically with furniture from the Colchester-Norwich area of New London County. Structural evidence provides additional documentation of a connection with that part of eastern Connecticut. Several chests of drawers from the Colchester-Norwich area have the same medium-length crooked legs and tall, carved claw feet with very rounded balls. A case of drawers with these feet and a deep drawer in its lower section has been attributed to the same area. Such structural and stylistic evidence suggests that the master of this particular Woodbury shop trained in the Norwich-Colchester area or in an area that sent mature joiners to both Norwich-Colchester and Woodbury. A flat-top version of the same form (see fig. 47) illustrates some of the other decorative options offered by this shop: a different skirt profile, unadorned lower section, elimination of carved fans, addition of fluted quarter-columns on the front corners of the upper section, and use of rope-twist quarter-round molding at the base of the cornice.

Widespread use of such varied decoration distinguishes these two cases of drawers and others made in the same shop from the Newtown case of drawers in figure 18. The Newtown joiner could draw on many of the same decorative traditions as his Woodbury counterparts but very rarely was encouraged to do so by his customers. Newtown inhabitants preferred to have a very limited amount of decoration and the same conservative forms. The environment in Woodbury encouraged joiners to alter their decoration continually and to offer multiple variations of the same basic forms. The cases of drawers made in this one shop document the competitive atmosphere.

The effect of competitive performance can also be seen in two different types of desk-and-bookcases offered by the same Woodbury shop for aspiring genteel customers. The carved feet, scrolled bulbous knees, mortise-and-tenoned base frame, desk interior, and four-channel fluted pilasters surmounted by carved rosettes identify figure 48 as an example of this shop’s desk-and-bookcase form. While the carved feet and fielded panels in the upper section bestow this example with a somewhat conservative look more typical of the first half of the century, in figure 49 (which has traditionally been identified as a dowry present for Sarah Curtiss, who married Joel Hinman in 1778) the bracket feet and reliance on inlaid neoclassical decoration seem to indicate a different hand at work in a later style.
However, the desk interior and the shape of the vertical compartment dividers in the upper section match the corresponding features in figure 48, and the base construction relates to that on the bureau in figure 45. The drawer construction, drawer support systems, and drawer edge moldings provide corroborative structural proof of its shop of origin. The base and splayed bracket feet—the third type of foot made in this Woodbury shop—constitute the most up-to-date structural elements of this desk-and-bookcase.34

In figure 49, the inlaid decoration on the upper section and on the exterior of the fall-front writing surface represented the latest decorative fashion. The string inlay seen on the pilasters was used commonly throughout America to provide accents or to create contrasting geometric shapes. The Woodbury joiner also strung together two-tone ovals to form a large oval on each door of the upper section and a swag on the fall front. Such pattern inlay was most commonly used in Providence furniture after the Revolution. The string inlay and berry pictorial inlay at each corner of the fall front reveals more distant connections. Although it is usually associated with the Chester County, Pennsylvania, region, it is hard to pinpoint exactly the direct influences on the Woodbury joiner because string and pictorial inlays more often were shared by several furniture production centers than were indigenous to certain regions. The inlaid decoration on figure 49 provides little help in the positive identification of the maker’s origins, but it does manifest the sophistication of his decoration, his ties with inlay producers, and the customer’s progressive taste.35

The same shop also made the chest-on-chest in figure 50, whose base construction and foot profile duplicate those same features on figure 49. Originally owned by Newton and Ruth Pearce Tuttle of Southbury, who were married in 1786, this chest-on-chest demonstrates several new conventions and provides additional evidence of the joiner’s competence and creativity. The type of chevron inlay that runs horizontally between the cornice molding and upper drawer often can be found on furniture made in Hartford, Providence, or the Connecticut River Valley in the late eighteenth century; yet the Woodbury joiner used it in a different way. Instead of using it to outline doors or drawers or to create geometric patterns on bookcase doors, the Woodbury craftsman used a single line of the chevron inlay, as he had used the quarter-round rope-twist molding on figure 47, to provide some horizontality to the piece and to balance the vertical mass. Such distinctions suggest that the Woodbury joiner did not train in the same tradition; rather, he must have purchased his string and pattern inlays from
the same sources as his Hartford, Providence, and Connecticut River Valley counterparts.

A second distinguishing feature of this chest-on-chest is the decoration of the drawer front edges. Rather than use a molding plane to run a quarter-round-and-fillet molding along the edge, the joiner applied a cock-bead molding around the edges of the drawer fronts, as he had on the bureau in figure 45. This technique was favored in urban shops during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In short, figure 50 documents the Woodbury joiner’s ability to produce another large storage form in a fashionable style with fashionable decoration.36

Compilation of all the artifactual evidence in figures 42–50 suggests that the master of that shop was trained in a sophisticated shop that had extremely strong ties with the Norwich-Colchester furnituremaking traditions and slightly weaker connections with the Hartford area traditions. When this craftsman moved to Woodbury, he took advantage of the open craft structure. He satisfied requests for plain or familiarly decorated furniture (figs. 42–43); grafted elements of the local decorative vocabulary onto his own forms (figs. 44, 48); and introduced totally distinctive forms with distinctive ornament (figs. 45–47, 49–50). His products also demonstrate a diverse assortment of options in regard to legs, feet, carved ornament, or inlaid decoration. Variations were not limited to a few forms, a restricted area of each form, or small decorative detail. Some of the fashionable decorative elements were soon embraced by Woodbury inhabitants eager to increase their ties with the world of fashion. Motifs like carved plinths, fluting, and quarter-columns then became part of the local style as competing craftsmen sought to appeal to Woodbury’s developing sense of fashion.

A second cosmopolitan joiner in Woodbury used some of the same decorative motifs but executed them in his own manner on his own forms. A case of drawers (see fig. 51) made for Anna Curtiss Sherman of Southbury (1771–1847) shares several features with figure 49: full-depth cornice molding on the inside of the crown, scroll base for the central finial, stop-fluted pilasters on the upper section, and central profile of the skirt. In spite of these decorative parallels, figure 51 was made in a different shop. Differences in drawer dovetailing, molding profiles and construction, securing of drawer supports, orientation of backboards, and layout of decoration suggest the work of another joiner.37 Compositionally, the case of drawers in figure 50 also reveals a different hand at work. In proportions it more closely resembles examples from the Philadelphia area, whereas the joiner who made figure 42 used proportions more typical of Boston-influenced New England
examples. Philadelphia cases of drawers are characterized by deep skirts, wide and heavy lower sections, and vertically oriented upper sections. New England examples, on the other hand, tend to have long legs, lighter lower sections, and shorter upper sections. Within the basic Philadelphia form, the Woodbury craftsman used a drawer arrangement and knee shape more typical of New England.38

The use of similar ornamentation on different forms and the increased specialization within the woodworking trades in Woodbury raise the possibility that a specialized carver worked for several different shops in Woodbury. However, inconsistencies between carved features on figures 46 and 51 discredit such a hypothesis. Although some of the decoration looks similar, there are noticeable differences in the execution of this ornament, especially in the fans and the feet.39 The small claw feet on figure 46 feature very full and round balls and thin, well-articulated claws. Such a combination endows the feet with a feeling of height. In contrast, the larger, flatter balls and more broadly articulated talons on the feet of figure 51 are more similar to Philadelphia work. If a specialized carver worked in both of these shops, one would expect to see some consistency in all aspects of the carved elements rather than in just a few general ones. Consistent layout and execution is of critical importance to the carving of fans and claw feet.40 A more credible explanation for similar decoration on furniture from two different Woodbury shops is the joiners' willingness to borrow motifs from competing shops and to graft them onto their own forms.

The competent workmanship of the craftsman who made figure 51 can also be found on a desk-and-bookcase (see fig. 52), originally owned by Nathaniel Smith of Woodbury (1762–1822). The case of drawers and the desk-and-bookcase feature similar drawer construction; large, somewhat flattened balls in the ball-and-claw feet; distinctly fluted talons; and stop-fluted pilasters. The possibility that the maker trained in a Philadelphia tradition is suggested by the specific form of desk-and-bookcase, which substitutes doored shelves for drawers below the writing surface, as well as by the reeded decoration of the prospect and its flanking columns. These features are usually associated with examples from the Philadelphia area and suggest that the Woodbury craftsman hailed from Philadelphia or trained with a master from that area.41 Benjamin Burnham of Colchester and Eliphalet Chapin of East Windsor are the best-known Philadelphia-trained furnituremakers who worked in Connecticut, but there likely were others. Ephraim Munson, who lived with his family in Pennsylvania for
eight years, was one Woodbury joiner who may have been familiar with Philadelphia furniture.  

The desk-and-bookcase in figure 52 was a very fashionable and decorative form, but structurally it was easier to produce than the desk-and-bookcases in figures 48 and 49. The substitution of doored shelves for a series of drawers saved significant time and energy. Similarly the deletion of a sliding candle tray below the bookcase reduced the amount of time needed to make the object. A set of four drawers required a great deal of sawing and dovetailing, and the joiner had to be sure that the drawers and the trays fit and slid properly in the carcass. The second Woodbury shop also simplified the structure of the desk-and-bookcase by eliminating any sort of a framed base. Instead the craftsman merely tenoned the claw feet through the bottom board and fastened the upper posts of the feet to the sides with screws. These conventions demonstrate that economic considerations guided some of the structural choices of Woodbury joiners. The availability of many technical and decorative options and the demand for reasonably priced, fashionable furniture reinforced each other.

**Diversity and Competition**

Like their Newtown counterparts, the illustrated examples of Woodbury furniture shed invaluable light upon the joiner’s world. Most obviously the variety of forms and decoration reflect the origins of the community’s craftsmen. Woodbury joiners hailed from more varied and more geographically diverse regions than their Newtown contemporaries. Furthermore, these artisans arrived in Woodbury as fully trained, mature craftsmen. Whereas compatible traditions and subsequent local recruitment nurtured a selectively conservative furniture tradition in Newtown, more diverse traditions and constant in-migration fostered a more progressive tradition in Woodbury. The new arrivals brought new techniques and tools to Woodbury and therefore prevented the establishment of a single appropriate solution or method for each act of furniture construction. For example, joiners affixed feet to large case furniture in a variety of ways: they could tenon the front skirt, sideboards, and backboards into the legs (see figs. 46–47); build a frame on which the carcass sat (see figs. 43–44); build up a series of corner blocks behind bracket feet (see figs. 45, 49–50); or tenon the tops of the feet through the bottom boards and secure the upper tenons to the carcass sides.
(see fig. 52). Different tools also permitted technical variety. The master of the shop that made the furniture illustrated in figures 42–50 introduced a small skew rabbet plane and the knowledge of when and how to use it. In Woodbury, the joiners constantly had choices.43

The availability of a far greater range of techniques and decoration pressured existing conventions in Woodbury and contributed to a very dynamic regional style. The changing composition of the craftsmen’s customers and stronger ties to the external market in the last quarter of the century added to this dynamism. A continued influx of people with slightly different tastes and expectations greatly influenced the joiners, who could not anticipate what forms or decorative motifs would be popular. As a result they constantly had to be prepared to alter their techniques to meet their clients’ demands and to distinguish their own shops from those of their competition. Imported household goods and greater awareness of fashion’s short swings of popularity also forced the local joiner to be more competitive. Precedence and consumption by habit played a smaller role in Woodbury than in Newtown. Instead, nascent self-conscious gentility and a concern with social distinction led to competitive consumption, in which the Woodbury furnituremakers were forced to participate because of their economic reliance on their craft and the highly visible role of the objects they created in sustaining domestic refinement. Woodbury crookedback and joiner’s chairs seemed to follow Boston fashion; the stands, tea tables, and fall leaf tables seemed more closely linked to New York fashion; and the case furniture of one shop resembled work from New London County, while that of another featured ties to Pennsylvania. The Woodbury craftsmen’s need and ability to select forms and decoration from a variety of local and distant sources bespeaks a state of cultural flux in Woodbury.44

Competition among the joiners affected not only their design and decoration but also their workmanship. Furniture made in Woodbury at the end of the eighteenth century manifests a concern for quick, easy construction and extensive, time-consuming decoration. Such values were the opposite of those in Newtown. Woodbury joiners did not spend the extra time to dress completely the interior structural timbers. Backboards, drawer bottoms, drawer blades, and even the inside surfaces of stretchers in crookedback or joiner’s chairs were often left rough or with evidence of saw marks. The craftsmen also relied on dovetail saws rather than chisels to cut dovetails. Many of the resulting joints have subsequently lost their tightness. In other joints, the joiners replaced dovetails with lap joints, which were more easily made. Central drawer supports were simply bevel-tenoned and
nailed to the front skirt. Inconsistent use of available wood, often of inferior grade, characterizes much of Woodbury furniture made in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The joiner used yellow poplar, red oak, or white pine in no apparent pattern. The evidence reveals that the Woodbury craftsmen favored the easiest and least time-consuming method, in which they relied more on saws and nails than planes and chisels.

Woodbury joiners devoted a greater proportion of time to visible and ornamental features. Each shop offered a great variety of forms, legs, banisters, and other parts. Much of the furniture featured widespread use of expensive decoration like fluted pilasters, fluted or rope-twist quarter-columns, carving in several locations, and inlay. This concentration on the most stylistically sensitive areas resulted from the unpredictable demands of customers who became increasingly fashion-conscious and consumption-oriented at the end of the eighteenth century. Unlike their Newtown peers, the Woodbury joiners competed with one another for customers and sought to maximize profits. They therefore organized their shops to make the most ostentatious or fashionable furniture for the least price.