Making Furniture in Preindustrial America

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For the most part, decorative arts scholars have abstained from the historical dialogue, remaining content to publish genealogical information on individual craftsmen and compile lists of a town’s or region’s craftsmen. Only within the past decade have material culture scholars begun to develop more rigorous analytical

The importance of contextual analysis in exploring and explaining changes in experiences or patterns of behavior underscores the need for more sophisticated documentary and artifactual linkage in the study of preindustrial craftsmen. Even though it is not possible to interview the artisans directly or to look at documentary photographs of their shops or of the homes of their patrons, one can reconstruct the craftsmen’s world through careful, integrated use of a wide variety of primary documents and artifacts. For a thorough guide to the vast and varied sources used to analyze the Newtown and Woodbury joiners, their products, and their communities, see the chapter notes. Here follows a brief review of the major primary sources this study employs.

The most valuable manuscript sources were probate inventories of the period. The itemization of a person’s real and personal estate offers quantitative and qualitative data about household possessions. By grouping together similar artifacts into larger categories, we can compare patterns of choice. People from different times or economic groups may have allocated different proportions of their estate to furniture, personal goods, household goods, and eating and drinking equipment. These choices often reflect the influence of social values or economic exchange systems. On the other hand, the language used in the inventories also deserves close attention. Types of ceramics or textiles often reflect the aspirations or wealth of their owner. Furthermore, contemporary terminology and classification systems reflected commonly held notions. Important items received more elaborate or more specific names and classification. For example, tea equipment gained more precise terms and descriptions as tea drinking assumed greater importance and popularity in the eighteenth century. Although inventories principally represent the older or wealthier members of society, such inherent shortcomings do not invalidate probate analysis. In the discussion of furnituremaking and fashion, it is appropriate to study this section of society through analysis of probate inventories.

Works that make effective use of inventory analysis to address household consumption include Susan Prendergast Schoelwer, “Form, Function, and Meaning in

Probate inventories provide further information about some of the craftsmen in the community. Appraisers of a craftsman's estate often listed a shop and its contents or an assemblage of tools that indicated artisanal activity. From these records the scholar can get explicit data on the identity of craftsmen, type of tools used, and type of work undertaken. Additional indirect information can be garnered about seasonal rhythms from the date of the appraisal and about artisanal traditions based on the bequest of tools, as well as about identities of additional craftsmen, since the appraisers of a craftsman's estate were often other craftsmen. Microfilms of the probate court record books from all Connecticut counties are on deposit at the Connecticut State Library in Hartford, Connecticut, as are individual estate dockets listed by name. Woodbury remained in the Woodbury Probate District throughout the period covered in this book, but Newtown began in the Danbury Probate District and then became part of its own Newtown Probate District in 1820. For this study all Newtown and Woodbury probate inventories filed between 1760 and 1825 were surveyed to establish a core list of joiners and woodworkers and to understand long-term or broad patterns of consumer behavior. Intense, systematic analysis that focused on seven five-year groups spaced ten years apart provided data about specific trends over time and between wealth groups.

Account books, many of which are in the collections of local historical societies, were the second most valuable documentary source for this study. Even if a farmer or nonjoiner kept the accounts, the double-entry accounting system of these books offers detailed information about production and exchange within that community. Therefore all available account books from Newtown, Woodbury, and neighboring towns were examined to gain familiarity with exchange patterns in the specie-poor economy, identify joiners and other craftsmen, document the types of furniture and their values, and examine the methods and time frame of payment. Notations in the account books often indicated the apprentices or journeymen who picked up or delivered items for their masters. The best public collections of account books from western Connecticut are those at the Connecticut Historical Society and those in the Manuscript and Archives Room, Sterling Library, Yale University. Many account books remain in private hands.

Tax lists for Newtown and Woodbury, some of which are located in their respective town halls and some at the Connecticut Historical Society in Hartford, supplied a third manuscript source. The assessments for faculties, or shops, provide the identity of some of the master craftsmen and the relative complexity of artisanal activities. The tax lists from the 1790s, which itemize the various types of lands,
animals, grains, and so on (see table 12) are particularly useful in reconstructing the economy of that time period. Land deeds, census records, and wills also provided details about joiners active in the towns. Once the pool of craftsmen was established and fleshed out through these various means, the inventories, account books, and tax lists were used in a more rigorous and interconnected manner as the source material for a reconstruction of the joiners' social economy. For a detailed explanation of this approach, see Edward S. Cooke Jr., “The Study of American Furniture from the Perspective of the Maker,” in Ward, Perspectives on American Furniture, 113–26.

A craftsman's products as such provide the most important source material for craft scholars, yet one cannot “read” three-dimensional records easily. Given the importance of habit, patterns, and certain jigged tools in preindustrial furnituremaking, it follows that each joiner's products will demonstrate certain consistencies in design and workmanship. Common diagnostic traits attributable to composition and technique thus become a means of identifying shop traditions and authorship. Many studies have drawn upon such reasoning to identify regional traditions or individual hands based on aesthetic or formal links, but few have sought to explore the whys or hows of these correlations. It is a truism among decorative arts scholars that craft organizations and practices determined similarities among artifacts from the same region. See Charles Montgomery, “Regional Preferences and Characteristics in American Decorative Arts, 1750–1800,” in Charles Montgomery and Patricia Kane, eds., American Art, 1750–1800: Towards Independence (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976); John Kirk, American Chairs: Queen Anne and Chippendale (New York: Knopf, 1970); and Michael Moses, Master Craftsmen of Newport: The Townsends and Goddards (Tenafly, N.J.: MMI Americana Press, 1984).

It is essential to examine a large-enough quantity of similar surviving forms or regional examples in order to distinguish regional characteristics, individual shop conventions, the gradual variation over a shop’s career (also known as drift), the slow, selective accommodation of new techniques or decoration, and the distinction between occasional or anticipated deviation and significant deviation. Such scientific analysis separates common traits from rare ones, identifies significant characteristics and reveals the slight variations over time, and permits the recognition of a shop signature based on either certain exclusive traits or a particular combination of weaker traits that are insufficient or ambiguous alone. George Kubler first drew attention to the importance of drift in The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962). Scholars analyzing turned chairs have made particular use of Kubler’s work on seriation, invention, and replication. See Robert Trent, Hearts and Crowns (New Haven: New Haven Colony Historical Society, 1977); and Benno Forman, “Delaware Valley ‘Crookt Foot’ and Slat-back Chairs: The Fussell-Savery Connection,” Winterthur Portfolio 15, no. 1 (1980): 41–64. For the importance of a large object pool, see Frederick Wiseman’s review of Walter Backhofen’s Some Queen Anne Furniture from New Hampshire’s Federal Period, in Maine Antique Digest 18, no. 1 (1990): 10E–11E.

One must use the classification schemes produced by correlation analysis to generate additional questions or hypotheses about the behavior or performance of the makers. See Bernard Cotton, “Regional Furniture Studies in the Late 18th- and

Furnituremakers building case furniture relied on proportional relationships among height, width, and depth of the overall form as well as geometric relationships between parts such as drawer openings and finial heights. Reliance on certain units of measurement and geometric relationships simplified the cutting of parts and subsequent assembly. Chairmakers also used certain given units of measurement to generate the lengths of legs, stretchers, and lists, and the size and placement of slats and positioning of stretchers. To make the compositional process more comprehensible and practical, furnituremakers used templates for bracket feet, crooked legs, crest rails, chair splats, and for shaped tops for chests or tables, or used jigged tools such as planes for moldings and strike poles to lay out turned elements and assembly marks on chairs. See Walter Backofen, *Some Queen Anne Furniture from New Hampshire’s Federal Period* (East Plainfield, N.H.: Lord Timothy Dexter Press, 1988); John Bivins, *The Furniture of Coastal North Carolina, 1700–1820* (Winston-Salem: Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, 1988), esp. 185–206, 244–322; Bernard Cotton, *The English Regional Chair* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors’ Club, 1990), esp. 241–58; Benjamin Hewitt, “Regional Characteristics of American Federal-Period Card Tables,” in *The Work of Many Hands: Card Tables in Federal America, 1790–1820* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1982), 55–106; and Zimmerman, “Workmanship as Evidence.”

Quantitative analysis of workmanship permits another level of insight. Workmanship can be broken down into large-scale features, which are closely related to compositional logic and often have a more regional coherence, and finer details, which often permit the identification of shop traditions (my own discussion of the choices evident in the workmanship is derived from the work of Zimmerman, Backofen, Hewitt, and Cotton). Large-scale features include formal type (chest with drawers, chest of four drawers, tall chest of six drawers, case for drawers, or chest-on-chest, to name a few storage examples); wood choice; placement of drawers in case furniture; the writing height and interior layout of desks; fasteners (nails, wooden pins, etc.); and finishes. Another level of workmanship consists of drawer construction (sequence, angle, and spacing of dovetails; the finish of the upper edge of the
Sources and Methods

drawer sides; thickness of the linings; and the means of constructing and fastening the drawer bottom); carcass construction (sequence, spacing, and fastening of the joints used to frame the storage unit; finishes of the inner surfaces; indications of indexing marks; means of constructing and fastening the back and bottom; and the joints used to fit in drawer blades, columns, or pilasters); the sequence of turned vocabularies on the legs, stretchers, and arm supports of turned chairs; and the preparation and fitting of nonvisible structural elements such as drawer supports.

One should also assess the joints used to construct the furniture, both their appropriateness given possible choices of the period and the level of execution. Turning and cutting joints such as dovetails or mortise and tenons were two activities in which the joiner relied on habit and dexterity to save time and to ensure precision and uniformity. For chair parts, finials, and other turned elements, a craftsman consistently used the same vocabulary or combination of turned features since practice, a particular set of turning gouges, and repetition made certain turning techniques easier and more rhythmic. Similarly, a joiner laid out and cut joints in the same manner; he did not have to focus intently while cutting multiple series of pins and tails or mortises and tenons. The time and concentration required by an unfamiliar action would have made his work too time-consuming to produce given his time and his clients’ expectations.

The techniques and workmanship of decoration offer slightly different information and should be examined carefully. Many decorative features represent the decision of the buyer rather than the training or habit of the joiner. The customer often chose the type and amount of decoration in relation to his aspirations and willingness to pay for extra work. Nevertheless the joiner executed the work with techniques he found familiar or comprehensible. For example, the customer might request a carved fan or fluted pilasters on a case of drawers. The joiner would then execute the desired ornament in his own manner of work. On the importance of consumer preference on decoration, see Zimmerman, “Workmanship as Evidence,” 291, 293–95; and Hewitt, “Regional Characteristics,” 99–101.

For this study, data was gathered on overall measurements, dimensions of individual parts, layout, evidence of patterns, wood usage, surface preparation, carcass construction, types of joints, workmanship evident at the joints, indexing marks such as awl lines or chalk marks, placement of pegs or nails, turned vocabulary, and drawer construction. The existence of only two pieces of furniture signed or labeled by joiners who worked in each of the two towns would seem to place certain restrictions upon this analysis. The paucity of such documented furniture precludes a sound foundation on which to base attributions to certain makers and thereby link a certain joiner’s career with his production.

But a preoccupation with individual authorship can often be misleading if it is pursued as an end unto itself. Instead of building up attributions to known craftsmen, I found it necessary to establish regional characteristics and to distinguish between several anonymous shops in each town. First, all furniture with any specific or attributed association with Newtown or Woodbury was examined. This included objects with documented histories of ownership in local families, those still owned by descendants of eighteenth-century Newtown or Woodbury families, and those that antique dealers have attributed to the area. Related examples were then culled.
from books, periodicals, museum catalogues, and similar published sources. From a preliminary object pool of approximately three hundred objects, it was possible to winnow out certain objects and to group others by histories of ownership, constructional conventions, and stylistic similarities. The 1982 exhibition on the towns' furniture for which I was guest curator and several of my subsequent articles have helped to locate other related works.