

EARLY FURNITURE OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

or the Avocation of an Internist

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ONE of the joys of collecting is to tell others about it, or better still to show your collection to a sympathetic fellow collector or friend. So it is with great pleasure that I undertake this talk tonight. I do not profess to be an expert but simply an amateur collector who has long ago learned that the only way to collect is to know a little more about your subject than the man with whom you are dealing. The only real experts in antique furniture are the dealers who have been buying and selling antique furniture for thirty-forty-fifty years and in this time have had the chance to examine many thousands of examples, and even they can be wrong about the origin or age of a piece of furniture.

I have been collecting early American furniture for about twenty years, starting out like most furniture collectors with a few Victorian pieces, and then after becoming acquainted with the handcrafted work of the cabinet maker, developing a great dislike for the machine-made Victorian and late Empire furniture, and an intense love and appreciation for the superbly-styled, simple yet elegant furniture of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

As you know, the power saw was introduced in this country around 1830, and this spelled the end of the great era of furniture making, for with the introduction of the power saw, not only was the art of the cabinet maker lost, but there was a great decline in the esthetic quality of furniture — a complete loss of taste, balance and proportion, resulting in the heavy, massive furniture of the Empire style, which Duncan Phyfe himself described as “butcher furniture,” and then later in the Victorian period, a fussy, heavily carved and poorly styled furniture.

This paper was the basis for an illustrated address delivered at a meeting of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, on the evening of Wednesday, December 3, 1969. Dr. McDermott, a graduate of the College and of the School of Medicine of the University of Pittsburgh, has served as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Medical Corps of the United States Army. He has contributed articles to *Antiques* and *Spinning Wheel*.—Editor

So when I speak of early furniture of Western Pennsylvania, I speak of the period 1760-1830. In 1760 Western Pennsylvania was little more than a wilderness. In July 1760, there were only 149 inhabitants of Pittsburgh, exclusive of the garrison of the Fort. However, settlement progressed rapidly. During the period 1760-1790 the southwestern part of Pennsylvania was settled, encompassing the counties of Fayette, Greene, Washington, Allegheny, Somerset, and Westmoreland. In 1767 the town of Uniontown was founded, 1781 Washington, 1785 Brownsville, 1787 Canonsburg, 1787 Greensburg. After 1790 the northwestern half of the state was opened and such towns as Erie, Waterford, Meadville and Butler were founded. By 1790 there were eighty thousand inhabitants of Western Pennsylvania. What were the furnishings of these people?

In order to have a better understanding of their furnishings it will be necessary to digress and discuss the various basic styles of furniture and their periods.

Early American furniture, like American architecture, mode of dress, and its legislative system, has an English ancestry. Most of the early cabinet makers were English, a few French and German, completing their apprentice work under a rigid system of training in England and Europe before migrating to America. Furniture design in America in the mid-seventeenth century was copied after the English Jacobean style and only a few signed American-made pieces are known in the museums. The next period was known as the William and Mary style which lasted about fourteen years (1689-1702) in England and a while longer in America. This style of antique furniture is more frequently found in America and can often be seen in most museums or private collections.

Furniture design in America from the period 1720-1750 closely followed the Queen Anne style popular in England during this time. Naturally there would be no examples of Queen Anne or earlier styled furniture made in Western Pennsylvania as this area was largely unexplored and was inhabited by Indians. From the years 1750-1820, American taste in furniture was based on the designs of three great cabinet makers and designers, all English. The designs of Thomas Chippendale were fashionable during the years 1750-1780. He published a manual of furniture design entitled *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Makers Director*, which was widely circulated in America and set the style of this period. The Chippendale style was first imitated in America in the eastern seaboard, and after a period of years gradually extended to the west and became fashionable there. From

1780-1800 George Hepplewhite's designs were popular. His manual, the *Cabinet Maker and Upholsterer's Guide*, again influenced furniture design in America. And finally from 1793-1820 Thomas Sheraton, as depicted in his guidebook, *The Cabinet Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing-Book*, became the fashion in England and America. Thus for a century American tastes in furniture were dictated in London. It must be remembered, however, that the furniture styles did not begin and end at exact dates. There was a gradual change or transition from one period to the other with frequent overlapping of the styles.

But the American cabinet makers were imaginative, had an unlimited supply of woods, and because of the growing wealth of America, had a great market for fine furniture. The English designs were altered, the lines made more simple and graceful, with more restraint in the use of carving and inlay. In addition, much furniture was made in cherry or curly maple, woods particularly beautiful and largely American. Besides this refinement of furniture design, American cabinet makers innovated some outstanding furniture designs. The great cabinet makers of Philadelphia produced superlatively designed and carved highboys and lowboys of a type never developed in England. The Rhode Island group of furniture-makers developed the beautiful and much-sought-after block-front furniture, a design seen only in American furniture. Baltimore became a center for restrained but elegant inlaid furniture that surpassed any known previously.

American furniture then has an English ancestry, but with the skills and imagination of its cabinet makers, arrived at a beauty of design that quickly surpassed the English.

Now, what about Western Pennsylvania furniture? Much has been written about the early American furniture of the eastern seaboard, where great cabinet makers worked in such cities as Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Newport, Salem, Baltimore, Annapolis and Charleston. Even some of the lesser areas within their particular regional characteristics, such as Lancaster, have been widely publicized. However, little has been written about the furniture of Western Pennsylvania. Perhaps this stems from the failure of the cabinet makers of this area to label their work, and from the fact that the quality of the work in the east greatly overshadowed that of Western Pennsylvania. Some fine cabinet work was done in this area, nevertheless, and closer examination reveals some regional characteristics unique to this region.

Western Pennsylvania furniture of the eighteenth and early nine-

teenth centuries followed closely the styles set in the great furniture centers of the east, principally Philadelphia. In fact, among the wealthy settlers of Pittsburgh and its environs, it was common to have furniture carted over the long land route from Philadelphia, making this furniture very expensive.

The early cabinet makers of Western Pennsylvania settled in Pittsburgh, Brownsville, Washington, Uniontown and many of the smaller towns, catering to merchants and tradesmen in the towns and farmers in the outlying areas. They printed handbills and advertised in such newspapers as the *Pittsburgh Gazette*. On occasions they openly complained about the practice of ordering furniture from Philadelphia, stating that they "made furniture the equal of that of the cabinet-makers of Philadelphia."

Unfortunately, as we have said, few of the cabinet makers of Western Pennsylvania labelled their furniture. *The Pittsburgh Directory, For 1815* lists eight cabinet makers, five chair makers and three clock makers. Only two of these have left labelled examples of their work: Charles Rosenbaum, listed as residing on Front Street between Wood and Smithfield on the North Side, a maker of fine pianofortes in the Hepplewhite style; and the clock maker, Samuel Davis, located on Market Street between Diamond and Fifth, a capable artisan with a number of his signed clocks known in Pittsburgh. There is a Hepplewhite desk in the collection of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania with the name of the maker, J. Hughey, Washington County, in one of the smaller drawers and dated 1808. An attempt is under way to identify some of the cabinet makers of Fayette County where fine inlaid Hepplewhite and Sheraton furniture was made. Beyond this, little is known of the furniture craftsmen of this region.

Furniture styles lagged in Western Pennsylvania, the fashions proceeding slowly from the east to the west. It was not uncommon for a furniture style to be continued ten or fifteen years after it had lost favor in the east. Few, if any, Queen Anne examples of furniture can be definitely attributed to Western Pennsylvania. Chippendale styled furniture was made up until 1800, while Hepplewhite and Sheraton styles continued as late as 1840. Consequently most collectors in this area, when they acquire a piece of Western Pennsylvania furniture, are well aware that it might have been made ten or more years later than the style indicates.

Among the characteristics of Western Pennsylvania furniture, it is, perhaps, the structural integrity that stands out most. This struc-

tural integrity was second to none in the United States. Furniture made in this area was solid, heavy, superbly dovetailed and tightly joined, making the Western Pennsylvania piece outlast several times the furniture of the east. Wood was plentiful and was used extravagantly. Among the most commonly used woods were walnut and cherry. The use of mahogany was not nearly so great as in the eastern cities. Attesting to this is a letter written by John Thaw concerning furniture in Pittsburgh in 1804. It reads: "We have no mahogany here, but a cherry wood that looks nearly as well and plenty of walnut. We have no difficulty in procuring furniture of this at about the Philadelphia prices and about double for crockery and glassware with which and for the second time in so short a course of house keeping, am I now providing myself." However, by 1819 James Liggett, a Pittsburgh cabinet maker, was advertising mahogany furniture.

The secondary woods used in the interior construction of a chest were poplar, a green type peculiar to this area, pine and chestnut. Occasionally oak or beech was used, depending on which wood was available at the time. It was common for the case alone of a Western Pennsylvania chest to weigh more than a chest with all its drawers from the east. The frontier people of Western Pennsylvania were sturdy and rugged, and they built their furniture along the same lines.

Styling, as indicated, followed closely the usual Chippendale, Hepplewhite and Sheraton designs, with innovations common among the imaginative cabinet makers of this region. An unusual leg, unique top, and extra scalloping of the apron are frequently seen. Some fine Chippendale furniture was made in Washington County. This furniture tends to be large, heavy, most often with the characteristic quarter-column, often with fine carving or heavy banding. The carving is restrained, never approaching the rococo of Philadelphia.

The most distinctive furniture of Western Pennsylvania was made in Fayette County. Here the furniture of the Hepplewhite and Sheraton periods is outstanding. There is an extravagant use of inlay, with intertwining leaves, tendrils, pots, triangles, crescents, rectangles, almost psychedelic in its concept, reflecting the resourcefulness of the unrecorded cabinet makers. The inlay, although lavishly used, remains tasteful and eye-catching. Characteristically this inlay is extremely thin and great care must be used in refinishing since sanding quickly erases it.

Much fine furniture was made in Western Pennsylvania and research needs to be done to identify the imaginative artisans.